

## **WORKING FROM HOME CONCEPT FOR QUANTITY SURVEYING EMPLOYMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The existence of technologies like the internet, video conferencing and now, cloud computing have made it possible for workers to work from the comfort of their homes. In Asian countries like Japan, Hong Kong and India, working from home (WFH) has been growing in popularity as most occupations can suitably adopt this concept. Traditional nine to five work is gradually becoming a thing of the past. However, in Malaysia, WFH is still in its infancy especially for the construction industry and was first implemented in 2010 by the nation's service provider Public Work Department (PWD) towards its thirty five draftsmen, piloted with a three-month trial period. This was based on their observation that draftsmen spend most of their time and work on computers, which could be carried out at home. This paper provides a medium for exploring the WFH concept and to encourage and heighten our understanding with regards to WFH acceptability and application in Malaysia, specifically within the field of quantity surveying. A platform from which to formulate strategies, stimulate action, and promotion of the WFH concept in quantity surveying employment is the main thrust of this paper.

### **KEYWORDS**

Working From Home (WFH), Quantity Surveying (QS)

### **INTRODUCTION**

As employees are becoming more sophisticated and global socio-economic patterns change in today's modern society, the way they work is also changing. Latest trends in the workplace show that the Working From Home (WFH) – work practices that allow employees to have more variable schedules beyond the eight-hour workday is gaining popularity in Asian countries. It is not uncommon that employees are always searching for a quality life; better household income, more family time and lower stress levels which are benefits obtained when one subscribes to WFH.

The question on the suitability of WFH concept in QS employment operating in the built environment will underpin this research. The Oxford University Press Dictionary (2005) defines "employment" as the state of having paid work, while QS employment refers to paid employees working with QS organizations.

Brandon (1990, p.6) describes "quantity surveying as an amalgam of several other disciplines (such as economics, law, accountancy, management, measurement, information technology and construction technology) within a unique context of the built environment." The increasing number of QS organizations in the nation

shows that they play a significant role in the Malaysian construction industry as they provide towards a growing share of total industry output and employment. According to CIDB (2005), the surveying consultancy sector contributed RM535 million in terms of value added to the construction industry during 1999. In understanding their significant roles in an increasingly changing environment of the construction industry, QS organizations will have to be more vigilant and forward-looking in order to survive given the fact that the majority of Malaysian QS firms are profiled as small and medium set ups (Hasnanywati, 2010). Langford and Male, (2001) suggested that QS organizations have to embrace the organization's operating business culture. WFH is seen as one aspect of the new business culture for QS organizations to implement to survive in the construction industry in terms of tangible and intangible benefits.

## **DEFINITION OF WORKING FROM HOME**

There is no single, internationally recognized definition of "Working From Home" (WFH). Accordingly, this study has formulated its own version of WFH definition based on the definitions of other congruous terms like "Teleworking", "Telecommuting", "Homeworking", "Working at Home" and "Working from Home" from other research papers, journals, books and articles, which have similar concept or characteristics with WFH in this study.

According to Sayers et al. (2005), WFH is meant by much of the working day spent in the home environment. The WFH concept has some similarities with the term "teleworking" defined by Wright (2008). She stated that teleworking means working from home or another location, specifically using communication technology such as phone, email, video conferencing and private networks to maintain contact with colleagues and clients. The employees will work from home for several days a week or on a more occasional basis.

The definition of the term "telecommuting" used in the research carried out by Noorliza and Hasmi (2000) is similar to WFH in this study. They quoted the definition from several researchers, i.e. Knight, et al. (1999), which referred to telecommuting as employees working predominantly outside of their office, but is associated with a traditional office and may be using a traditional office for some administrative support and to hold physical meetings. Kurland and Bailey (1999) defined home-based telecommuting as employees' working at home on a regular basis, though not necessarily (and, in fact, rarely) every day. However, Fortier (1998), which stated that "teleworking" (telecommuting), occurs when employees carry out all, or part of, their jobs at remote locations, usually from home by computer.

For the purpose of this study, WFH will be defined as a working environment where paid work is carried out from home or anywhere outside the office, and is linked with a conventional office and may be using a traditional office for administrative support and to hold physical meetings.

## **REQUIREMENTS OF WFH**

Kowalski et al. (2005) in their "telecommuting" research stated that there are requirements that need to be fulfilled for WFH to be implemented. They are employees need for support from family and organization; employees need to stay in connection with organization and employers need to have trust in their employees. Whilst Read (2004) identified the WFH requirements to have employees handle some or most of their jobs at

home; the tasks do not require other individuals to complete in-person and employers manage by performance. These requirements appear consistent with WFH and will be used with the WFH concept outlined for this study.

#### ***Employees need support from family and organization***

The support includes organization support such as equipments and emotional support; and family support such as understanding the unique challenges the employee who work from home might face (Fritz et al., 1998; Mann et al., 2000; Haines et al., 2002). Organizations must provide adequate funding in order for the employee to have the appropriate tools including effective office equipments (i.e. phone, fax, computer, etc.) and to work in an environment at least as good as their office-based colleagues (Ward and Shabha, 2001). In a study by Hartman et al. (1991), a positive relationship was found between supervisor emotional support and telecommuting satisfaction. The employee who works from home receives supervisor support and family support also reported a higher level of work/life quality, higher job performance outcomes and a better relationship with the organization (Haines et al., 2002).

#### ***Employees need to stay connected with organization***

When employer and employee are working together from different locations, communication becomes more complicated. According to Cascio (2000), new communication skills are necessary to prevent WFH employee from feeling detached. Formal and informal communication skills are necessary for employer and WFH employees (Cascio, 2000). Informal communication is important so that WFH employees can develop relationships and feel they are part of the organization, while formal communication is necessary to inform employees of work related issues. Potter (2003) suggested that face to face communication is substituted with the use of telephone and conference calls, teleconferencing and meeting on the internet.

#### ***Employers need to have trust in their employees***

Staples (2001) had shown that in remote work situations trust is positively related to perceptions of good performance and job satisfaction and negatively related to job stress. A culture based on trust requires a rethinking of what it means to be “working” and how we value and reward work. A critical component of a culture based on trust is the result only work environment (ROWE). Productivity should be measured based on performance on assignments and projects rather than hours spent on-site at the office (Grensing-Pophal, 1999).

Employers need to trust employees even though they cannot see them, to “trust people working outside their field of vision” (Potter, 2003). They need to trust that employees will fulfill their obligations and behave predictably; that they will have self-direction and self-control (Cascio, 2000). Trust needs to be built through employee empowerment.

#### ***Employees handle some or most of their jobs at home***

Employees have adapted their homes to become workplaces; the latest apartments and houses are designed for ‘live/work’ scenarios where a certain space is set aside for work purposes. In other abodes, the spare desk or the spare bedroom becomes the office.

#### ***The tasks do not require other individuals to complete in-person***

WFH, practically by definition, is working alone, almost always without another person in the same work area. There are many tasks that can be handled without face-to-face interaction with colleagues or with clients and customers. WFH can entail employees directly interacting with colleagues, clients and customers by communication i.e. wire-line, wireless, telegraph, telefax, email, instant messaging (IM), or video/audio conferencing.

### ***Employers manage by performance***

Managing by performance entails examining how well employees meet the goals that are lined up with organization objectives. These managers trust their employees to do what they are supposed to do. However and in the event the need arises, they still can check up on workers by calling, emailing, instant messaging or in specialized cases, utilize call centers, for monitoring calls and emails – the same as they do in office premises.

## **INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS REQUIRED IN WFH**

Besides the six requirements mentioned above, Jacowski (2010) highlighted that the individual characteristics needed for employees to work effectively from home are: self-discipline and time management skill. Another opinion from Human Resources Management of England (2009) suggested the individual characteristics required to be effective WFH employees are: self-motivation, self-sufficiency, initiatives and have the ability to work alone; good communication skill and be technology-literate.

### ***Self-discipline***

One of the most important individual characteristics needed to work from home is self-discipline. Basically this is because employees have more freedom when they work from home compared with working at the office. There will be no people supervising over their shoulders and no need to report to anyone during working time. As simple as it sounds, it needs initiative to start work oneself.

Procrastination is detrimental to work from home since there will be no one watching over to make sure a certain job is done, WFH employees should therefore be inherently self-disciplined to be successful. Many people allow this freedom to freefall into procrastination and finally end up not doing their work efficiently. There are many distractions that can interfere with work such as television, ringing door bells and temptations to surf the internet and do other things at home. Since WFH require them to answer the telephone, checking the email and work online, the employee needs to be disciplined to use these tools for working only during the working period they set for themselves.

Every employee who works from home needs to have rest time just like their counterparts in the office. In adopting WFH, employees need to determine when and how long their break is. Without self-discipline, employees may end up doing something else that is not related to their work. As it is, many people make the assumption that WFH is not really working. To combat this myth therefore, employees sometimes need to work extra hard to prove to their peers and superiors that they are actually working. By setting clear working hours and explaining clearly to friends and family that they are not to be disturbed about trivial issues during those hours is crucially important in making WFH successful. The employees themselves need to realise the value and importance of being disciplined. Sometimes it takes a lot of discipline to be disciplined and require much sacrifice but the rewards from WFH are well worth it (Hinds, 2010).

### ***Time management skill***

Another characteristic needed is a good set of time management skills (Jacowski, 2010). This skill is required so that one is able to resist the urge to stop and do errands or house chores during the day. Sometimes WFH employees have a tendency to forget that because they are working in daily, non-office clothing. Also, WFH employees must be able to fight off all the distractions associated with being at home, and being focused is the key in order to be successful. The element of distraction at home is numerous such as children, television, pets, house chores and others. WFH employees will be extremely burdened from effective work when the element of distraction is pervasive (Mitchell, 2010).

According to Luna (2006), a proper scheduling on work and sticking to the schedule are important for someone working from home. This is important to accomplish the task on time and with quality. As mentioned by Mitchell (2010) before, working from home gives rise to a lot of distractions especially from the family. Having the family around, the person has to properly manage the time to ensure that the work is not compromised. Moreover, having a schedule allows employees to manage their working time effectively. Better time management is necessary to make working from home successful. Working from home now is considered to be a professional choice that takes a lot of dedication and persistence. According to Naidu (2008), employees have to learn to say 'No' so that they will be able to work with less distractions.

### ***Self-motivation, self-sufficiency, initiatives and independence***

WFH employees must enjoy the challenge of working on their own and be confident to work away from the office environment. WFH can be tough to employees as it may be extremely difficult to preserve and maintain a 'balanced' lifestyle. According to Burrow (2008), the biggest challenges when working from home is to maintain self motivation to keep on track and to keep going when things get difficult. WFH employees need to set their goals by setting their own self-compelling objectives. The goals will then provide the direction and focus on their work. When implementing WFH, employees are easily caught up in a world of their own, and they might face distraction from children and a range of other domestic issues, causing them to lose focus on the job at hand. To maintain self-motivation, WFH employees must have self-regulation on what is acceptable and what is not. While it is a real privilege in terms of flexibility, it can also turn badly unless WFH employees have the diligence and self-motivation, to want to make it beneficial.

### ***Good communication skill***

Apart from being able to work on their own without day to day social interaction with colleagues, WFH employees must have the ability to get on with new people too. WFH employees should always be courteous and polite while speaking to the phone with their superior or other colleagues. Good communication is when one speaks what is necessary, concisely but packed with information needed. WFH employees must avoid using any slang while working from home, to avoid the pitfalls of sounding unprofessional and to steer clear the eventuality of misunderstanding. Business communication, even from home, should be crisp and clear so that anyone understands what we are trying to say. It is even more important to ensure that messages has been completely understood, hence the requirement that WFH employees should speak extremely clearly.

### ***Technology-literate***

The WFH employees must have the technical competence to cope with information technology and telecommunications equipment and be able to deal with minor technical problems. The consequences might be serious due to interruptions of services and WFH employees should be competent enough to restore connectivity with the office, and attend to interruptions in internet connection or virus infection in the computer. In an office setting, these problems might be solved by the technicians, but at home, WFH employees should take the responsibility to make sure this does not affect the work progress. In overcoming such problems, it becomes a necessity for WFH employees to not just learn how to cope, but to be prepared for all eventualities, so it goes that a deep understanding of the technology he is equipped with is a huge pre-requisite.

### **CONCLUSION**

The issues discussed above will be researched in the context of quantity surveying practices and the implications towards the individual as well as the suitability of the organization to partake in its implementation. It is suggested also that gender issues be investigated regarding the WFH phenomena to unravel the reasons behind its acceptance and widespread potential.

It is clear from the literature that in order to work from home effectively and efficiently, individual QSs need to have the necessary characteristics as well as exhibit traits of self-discipline, time management skill and self motivation. Other characteristics such as good communication skill and technology literacy are significant as well. It is evident however, that employees generally need to be imbued with these individual characteristics, regardless of the work situation.

It is suggested that QS organizations should be more than accommodative to this trend as the work outline can be reconciled with the criteria of WFH. Generally, the WFH program is considered doable and practical for QSs. However it will not necessarily work for everyone since WFH poses different challenges than working from the traditional office. Whilst acknowledging that certain traits are necessary for WFH to be successful, it would certainly represent a real step forward for the profession's enhancement, given the enormous benefits WFH offer.

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