

Navigating Through Work Post-Pandemic - Experiences of Middle-Income Employees in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the transition to the post-pandemic period in the workplace, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. As restrictions eased, many experienced reliefs, but significant changes persisted, particularly in the workplace. Organisations adopted hybrid work models to balance personal and professional responsibilities. In this study, qualitative research was adopted and semi-structured interviews with 17 individuals in Malaysia were conducted. Participants were recruited utilising purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods, with the eligibility criteria of their location of work being in Malaysia and income classification of M40. The study revealed five key themes that are discussed in chronological order: during the pandemic (1) Organisational Intervention, and post pandemic (2) Adverse Mental and Emotional Wellbeing, (3) Financial Challenges, (4) Work and Lifestyle Adjustment, and (5) Personal Well-Being. Participants expressed relief at leaving the pandemic behind but continued to face financial uncertainty and exhaustion, particularly in volatile industries. Many struggled with social reintegration due to lingering anxieties. To navigate these challenges, organisations focused on creating inclusive environments, implementing flexible work schedules, and prioritizing mental health. The hybrid work model proved beneficial, offering flexibility while maintaining essential in-person interactions. However, it also presented challenges in communication and collaboration, requiring ongoing adjustment. The study found that organisations increasingly emphasised employee well-being, with measures such as pay adjustments, financial aid, and remote work arrangements. Participants reported that workplaces had become more supportive and understanding, particularly regarding health and family issues. These changes reflected a broader shift towards more inclusive and employee-focused organisational cultures in Malaysia. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of workplace support in fostering resilience and well-being. As the world continues to navigate the post-pandemic landscape, the findings suggested that ongoing focus on mental health, flexibility, and inclusive practices will be crucial for both employees and organisations.

Keyword: Employees well-being, hybrid work, organisational psychology, post-pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Transitioning to the post-pandemic period can be seen as a challenge as well as a chance for opportunity for many. When returning to the pre-pandemic lifestyle, adaptability is key, specifically in adjusting personal mindset, managing mental and physical health, and adapting navigation to all changes (Makhbul and Rawshdeh, 2021). As pandemic restrictions were lifted, it brought a sense of relief amongst all. The shift brought normalcy back in many aspects, but clear changes were being adopted. Many organisations decided to embrace a hybrid work model (Miroslavov, 2023) to make adjustments far simpler and in the hope of the flexibility to bring balance to personal and work-related responsibilities (Tsipursky, 2023).

That being said, coming out of a difficult pandemic crisis comes with its own set of challenges and complexities. There was a converse perspective of hybrid work, including a significant increase in workload and unequal work allocation, which inevitably affected individual stress levels, burnout levels, and mental pressures (Smite et al, 2023; Mamaysky, 2020). In addition to this, the economy was facing supply disequilibrium (Stiglitz and Guzman, 2020; Khan et al, 2022) where the pandemic had interrupted the supply and demand balance in many industries.

Hence, alongside increasing work pressure, people were then faced with financial burdens and stress (Makhbul and Rawshdeh, 2021).

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Occupational Health and COVID-19

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had severe effects on individual health. The pandemic has had a significant psychological impact on many individuals, where fear of infection appeared to be one of the stressors involved (Spatafora et al., 2022). The fear is a direct consequence of the characteristics of the disease itself (Brooks et al., 2020). The disease consumed and altered the lives of many, with its ravaging infection rates and equally consequential death rates. Many feared the possibility of coming in contact with a person with COVID (Spatafora et al., 2022). Many reported fears about their health or fears of infecting others and were more likely to fear infecting family members than those not quarantined (Bai et al., 2004), especially with the elderly population at higher risk of the mortality impact of the disease, as they may have pre-existing conditions or low chances of fighting against the disease (Huang et al., 2020). Workplaces had to shift to an online working environment in order to reduce human contact and contraction rates. Overall, this heightened the levels of individual anxiety and depression as a result of the constant fear of this (Penninx et al., 2022).

Workers have been severely impacted by the pandemic with physical impacts such as burnout, exhaustion, and tiredness. In addition, during that period, the need to form new routines, adjust to the lifestyle and accept the changes was burdening not only people's mental health but also their physical health (Burrowes et al., 2023). According to Green (2020), employee health was also impacted by job insecurity for psychological reasons. Fear of losing one's work led to lowered income, unemployment in the future, and harmed one's long-term health. Stress resulting from this psychological toll of uncertainty had a major negative impact on one's physical and mental health (Green, 2020).

Post-pandemic Malaysia

In Malaysia, many businesses suffered an unprecedented blow during the pandemic, facing a downturn in economic and financial results, in addition to the demand declines and supply chain disruptions. This trend affected the country's economy even after the pandemic where Malaysian unemployment rate reached 3.5% in the first quarter of 2023 and 17% of Malaysians claimed to have either lost their jobs, with more than a third of the population taking a leave of absence from work (Malay Mail, 2023; Abd Rahman et al, 2020).

From 2020 to 2022, consumer price developments shifted from being disinflationary to inflationary as a result of the changes in demand and supply dynamics during the pandemic (Bank Negara, 2022) and rapidly boosted the inflation rate. As a result of these, the Malaysian government unveiled stimulus packages with the aim of aiding severely impacted stakeholders and businesses and curbing the rising unemployment (Ho and Sia, 2020). Tax incentives and loan restructuring and postponement were among those implemented to ease the cash flow of Malaysian businesses (Foo et al., 2020). The government also introduced wage subsidy programs where each retained employee of a firm would be granted a RM600 subsidy for up to three months (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

However, despite the government efforts, most Malaysian population were found to have increased anxiety around job security and were stressed over the overlap between work routines and caretaking responsibilities (IPSOS, 2021). It was also found that 64.5% of jobs in Malaysia could not be performed at home, especially with challenges such as unequal access to the internet or other necessities to work from home, where the vulnerable population was greatly impacted (World Bank Group, 2021).

According to Zurich (2022), the pandemic raised rates of depression and anxiety because of isolation, many felt that their difficulties were overwhelming them, which made it difficult for them to be motivated and productive. Many also seemed to experience more mental health issues, such as greater stress, anxiety, and depression (Ren and Guo, 2020; Bil et al, 2021), adding more to the difficulties of navigating life post-pandemic. Workplace support becomes important where supportive leaders and colleagues play big roles in boosting employees' resilience and well-being, particularly in high-pressure situations (Hauff et al, 2020; Smollan, 2017).

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The impacts of job insecurity extended further than just financial struggles; it was a known common link to various health issues for many individuals (Ke et al, 2022; Green, 2020). This emphasised how important it was to raise awareness of the effects that job uncertainty had that go beyond financial difficulties. This study aimed to expand further on the existing research on the links between economic decline, job insecurities, health and coping behaviours. Menéndez-Espina et al (2019) did a study on the impact of coping strategies on mental health amidst employees facing job insecurity, where they found that future research has to be more specific and narrowed down to more controlled variables such as salary. Hence, this study focused on the middle-income population of Malaysia and their situation during this recent period of economic decline.

Common studies had been done in Malaysia that found a similar link between job security and health impacts (Yusoff et al, 2014; Daud, 2017). However, they lacked research in the current economic decline context. Hence, the purpose of this study was to provide insights into how workers impacted by the present economic downturn. It was conducted in the midst of a worldwide economic crisis and aimed to provide light on the trends in post-pandemic job insecurity and its consequences. The results would contribute to the understanding and literacy of coping strategies, well-being, and employment instability in Malaysia. The study also aimed to give business leaders and policy makers recognition of the problem and it hoped to contribute to the development of potentially better workplace interventions and policies that appreciate employees as individuals.

METHOD

Research Design

The pandemic and post-pandemic period has had a multifaceted impact on individuals and communities. It created complex emotional, behavioural, and societal effects that warrant in-depth exploration (Feroz et al., 2020). Hence, adopting a qualitative research approach was regarded as the most appropriate in facilitating a deeper understanding of this topic as it promotes a comprehensive investigation to delve deeper into the 'whys' and 'hows' of a scenario (Cleland, 2017). Additionally, that era was highly unprecedented with constant novelties and adjustments further testing individuals (Sheng, 2024), making qualitative applicable as it is characterised by its flexibility. Allowing, as a researcher, to navigate through different environments, interact with various populations, and explore an extensive array of subjects. This study employed a cross-sectional approach to gain in-depth insights at a single point in time from a specific targeted sample (Wang & Cheng, 2020). This method is suitable for the study due to its strengths: efficient data collection across multiple variables at one point in time, and the ability to gather detailed findings. This is particularly ideal for examining the personal experiences of workers (Wang & Cheng, 2020). This study then adopted a descriptive phenomenological research design, in which semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, and thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring patterns in participants' lived experiences.

Data Sampling

Participants were recruited utilising purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. Using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where participants are chosen based on particular traits or eligibility criteria (Wang, 2024). Participants were selected on the eligibility criteria of their location of work being in Malaysia, having an income classification of M40, and if they had worked throughout the pandemic timeline of focus. In addition to this, snowball sampling was used, which refers to sampling through requests to participants to aid researchers in finding more possible candidates. This method was ideal for this study, making it easier to reach the targeted income classified populations and it was highly time-efficient (Isaías et al., 2013). Participants were contacted to participate in the study via various social networking platforms, as well as WhatsApp and Outlook. The final sample consisted of a total of 17 participants. 75% of the participants did not change their jobs throughout the pandemic, whilst 25% changed jobs in that period. 7 participants were recruited from the same place of work. However, to ensure a widespread and well-rounded perspective of the impacts of the pandemic era, these 7 participants held varying positions.

Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews, which are in-depth interviews where participants are required to respond to predetermined, open-ended questions as defined by Jamshed (2014). This style of interviews was preferred for this study due to their depth and flexibility, offering control over conversation direction (Ruslin et al., 2022). An interview protocol was developed with this flexibility and research questions in mind. Some of the questions prepared for the beginning of the interview included things pertaining to how the pandemic affected their livelihood, jobs, and mental health, while other questions touched on their

experiences after COVID (e.g., the way work was being done, their overall wellbeing, or challenges they were facing if any). Questions prepared went through a multiple-investigator triangulation process and a pilot interview to ensure validity.

All data was collected within a time span of a month, from February 2024 to March 2024. The interviews had a duration of approximately 30 minutes to an hour. It was conducted both face-to-face and via online video conferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. It was based on the convenience of the participant's needs and availability. The participants were provided with a consent form, which had to be completed before the interview. The form highlighted that if participants wished to withdraw at any point of time in the interview, they were allowed to. In addition, they were told that the interview would be recorded. Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and Zoom's transcription function and were later manually corrected to ensure accuracy.

In terms of the details of the interview, it began with an introduction to the basis of the topic. They were reminded of their autonomy to withdraw at any point in the interview and that the interview would be recorded. It continued with asking participants introductory questions in order to make them more comfortable with the interview process.

DATA ANALYSIS

All 17 of the recorded interviews were transcribed. The data was then analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, a method to identify, analyse and interpret from the given qualitative data. The process began with individually interpreting the interviews through the means of developing codes and refers to niche aspects that capture intriguing aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was followed by going through each transcript thoroughly to extract meaningful codes and themes. The codes were then grouped into broader categories, which are then put into themes, which are highly general to the research topic (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The codes and themes went through multiple investigators' triangulation to ensure validity and credibility of the findings.

Ethical Consideration

Before conducting the research, this study was approved by the University of Nottingham Malaysia's Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology Ethical Committee on 30 January 2024. All ethical considerations placed by the committee were addressed and taken into consideration strictly throughout the course of the study. The well-being and privacy of all participants involved were prioritised. As the previous protocol mentioned, prior to all interviews being conducted, the participants were given a participant consent form, which they all had to sign before the interview took place. Participants were briefed on the data being secured and only accessible to the researcher and supervisor of the study. Additionally, they were guaranteed their anonymity would be assured throughout and after the duration of the study.

FINDINGS

The study found five major themes in participants' experiences in navigating work post-pandemic: (1) Organisational Intervention, (2) Adverse Mental and Emotional Wellbeing, (3) Financial Challenges, (4) Work and Lifestyle Adjustment, and (5) Personal Well-Being. The themes are listed in chronological order to fit the planned phenomenological research design.

During COVID-19 Pandemic

To provide some background context to participants' experience post-pandemic, this study looked at participants' working experience during the pandemic. One theme emerged from the interviews, (1.1: Organisational Intervention), where participants highlighted the many different initiatives that their companies did to help them cope with the pandemic.

Theme 1: Organisational Intervention

This theme elaborates on the findings of how organisations responded to their employees' challenges and needs during the pandemic. The two main aspects that organisations intervene in are the financial and mental health concerns of employees. Although not all organisations provided financial aid, a lot of other companies provided aid in the form of employee loans, WFH set up funding, bill coverage funding and salary adjustments.

“So, for this company, they offer to employees with lower you know, am interested or could be fee free of interest.” (Participant I)

“...It was nice enough to give us like an allocation of 900 ringgit to set up our workplace to yeah ...we can also get Wi-Fi reimbursement of 150 ringgit per month”. (Participant K)

“I know the university has tried to alleviate these kinds of things by adjusting our salaries”. (Participant B)

In terms of mental health and employee engagement, it was found that numerous organisations provided counselling services for their employees. Many heard their employees out to understand their needs through town halls where they were allowed to clear queries and concerns. From them, managers were there to provide motivation and even take financial hits.

“There is always a mental support hotline and services that employees can always contact”. (Participant Y)

“So, during the town hall, we will drop messages like a Slido... You can ask questions to your leadership so they will take the question during the town hall” (Participant K)

“I would say they give a good concern towards staff wellbeing at that time, especially for those that still need to be on duty during the COVID time, during the lockdown.” (Participant MS)

From these quotes, the study was able to identify various organisational initiatives that participants personally expressed gratitude for. This suggests that organisational interventions likely played a significant role in supporting their overall well-being and resilience during this challenging period.

Post COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants appeared to still face some challenges post-pandemic (Theme 2.1: Adverse Mental and Emotional Challenges). However, since many seemed to have gone through several organisational interventions during the pandemic, a similar organisational approach was highlighted post-pandemic (Theme 2.2: Work and Life Adjustment) while having to deal with post-pandemic challenges (Theme 2.3: Financial Challenges). Through the adjustments made at work and in their personal life, it appeared that the participants were able to notice some improvement in their overall well-being (Theme 2.4: Personal Well-being) as they slowly got back to some normalcy in their lives.

Theme 2.1: Adverse Mental and Emotional Well-Being

This theme is concerning participants dealing with mental and emotional difficulties due to the post-pandemic impacts. Participants grappled with mental exhaustion and demotivation because of the stress of returning to work. Especially considering the increase in workload, for example, Participant D, who worked in the medical industry and found it more stressful to catch up on work after the pandemic.

“After the pandemic there is like certainly a high patient load la in the hospital other than that also the workload is equally high I work in a tertiary hospital which is a state hospital as well so it like it like carries a lot of patient load for the state terms of like the patient that’s coming so that that is a bit stressful”. (Participant D)

“I think emotionally it's very exhausting to not have the drive to do anything” (Participant K)

Reintegrating into a social space after the pandemic proved to be challenging as participants struggled to push themselves out of being introverted and socialize. They faced fear with even the thought of facing people again, such as the workplace, pushing them to reduce interactions with colleagues and increase their feeling of isolation.

"I don't think I was very much of an extrovert before the pandemic, but I definitely feel even more of an introvert now ... Like actually even more socially awkward". (Participant E)

"You know, people are going to ask you and, you know, to a certain point, sometimes I avoid going to functions... I don't want to explain that I'm going to see everybody and everybody's going to be there and you know, there's going to be reminding me of stuff." (Participant S)

In conclusion, the post-pandemic transition period brought significant mental and emotional challenges for participants, underscoring the lasting impacts of the pandemic on workplace dynamics and personal well-being. The combination of increased workloads, social reintegration struggles, and the lingering stress of returning to pre-pandemic routines amplified feelings of isolation and exhaustion. These findings highlight the critical need for organizations to provide targeted support, such as mental health resources and flexible reintegration strategies, to help employees navigate these challenges and foster a healthier, more inclusive work environment.

Theme 2.2: Work and Lifestyle Adjustment

Following the pandemic, many had to cope with the sudden surge in workload, but were able to manage well. The way people work has shifted completely. There is now a rise in hybrid work arrangements, which combine in-person and remote work styles, throughout all forms of industries and is one significant change in the way people work. This method is flexible and values in-person communication at the same time. Participants noted that hybrid work allows for balance and an improved work experience.

"Now it's physically and mentally, I would say it's no longer much of a problem because now it's in hybrid, so I get the best of both worlds." (Participant Y).

"I do have some flexibility with my staff for example you know if you have a child who's not well I allow them to work from home if you have a parent who is not well and you're taking care of the parent you want to leave early I allow that as long as you go back and continue with your work." (Participant P):

"The relief of having to see the clients face-to-face again. Yes, that is much better". (Participant N)

The post-pandemic shift to hybrid work appeared to have significantly transformed the way people work across industries. While many initially struggled to cope with increased workloads, participants emphasised the benefits of hybrid arrangements in adapting to these challenges. This work model offers a balance between the convenience of remote work and the value of in-person collaboration, providing employees with greater flexibility and control over their schedules. As a result, hybrid work has not only improved the overall work experience but also redefined workplace expectations, highlighting the importance of adaptability and employee well-being in the modern professional landscape.

Theme 2.3: Financial Challenges

The aftermath of the pandemic led to financial issues for a few of the participants as well as organisations, especially with the Malaysian Ringgit's value depreciating and prices of essential needs increasing, both due to inflation. This creates an imbalance for individuals as their salaries remain stagnant.

"We are going through a hard time only after the pandemic, I would say." (Participant K)

"And like in terms of Malaysia itself, I mean, we're looking at us economically, our currency is going down". (Participant S)

"Even like essentials have gone up because I do grocery ... I actually have observed prices going up and I'd be like this was not this expensive things are like way more expensive now". (Participant SC)

"If everything is more expensive and your salary doesn't grow in the same way, then yeah, life will get more expensive. So that's more on the financial side". (Participant Y)

As a result of the state of the economy, participants found themselves adjusting their personal habits in order to sustain themselves in the environment. For instance, participants expressed their change in spending through learning to manage expectations in order to ease strains. Amidst these adjustments, Participant E noted a personal change in that she had become a much more worrisome person.

“I have had to manage my expectations more carefully, more frequently after the pandemic”.
(Participant B)

“I think definitely like post pandemic has made me more of a very like, worrisome person”.
(Participant E)

The aftermath of the pandemic has placed significant financial strain on both individuals and organisations, exacerbated by the depreciation of the Malaysian Ringgit and rising inflation. With stagnant salaries, participants were compelled to adjust their personal habits to navigate the economic challenges. These adjustments included managing expectations and altering spending behaviours to reduce financial stress. However, the impact extended beyond finances, where it could also include personal worries. This highlights the broader emotional and psychological toll of economic instability in the post-pandemic landscape.

Theme 2.4: Personal Well-Being

After enduring an extensive period of uncertainties and difficulties during the pandemic, the transition to the post-pandemic period brought a great sense of relief and gratitude. A few participants noticed a significant improvement in their well-being during this period in comparison to how it had worsened during the pandemic.

“After COVID, mentally, it's actually a big relief that we're glad we can be back to normal ... It's a restart of our life... it's kind of refreshing when we're able to start a new life without COVID, without the stress, without the tension of sickness, illness”. (Participant MS)

“To be honest, it has improved compared to years before”. (Participant N)

This sense of relief was further amplified by the gradual return to normalcy, as participants were able to reconnect with loved ones, engage in social activities, and re-establish routines that had been disrupted. Many shared that these positive changes helped rebuild their confidence and stability, allowing them to approach life with a renewed perspective. Additionally, participants appreciated the increased focus on mental health and well-being, both at personal and organisational levels, which supported their recovery and adjustment to post-pandemic life.

DISCUSSION

This study broadened the understanding of the significant challenges and relief experienced by individuals as the world transitions to a post-pandemic period, focusing on financial uncertainty, mental health struggles, and social integration difficulties. Participants expressed a noticeable sense of relief at the possibility of overcoming the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic phase. This relief stemmed from the hope that life could return to a semblance of normalcy, with fewer health risks and the potential for social and economic activities to resume. However, this sense of relief was tempered by the ongoing struggle with significant financial uncertainty. Many individuals and businesses continued to face economic challenges, which dampened their optimism. For many industries, the conditions were highly volatile, as noted by Khairudin et al. (2023) and Khan and Hashim (2020). The pandemic had disrupted supply chains, altered consumer behaviour, and led to fluctuating demand, making it difficult for businesses to plan and operate effectively. Additionally, the Malaysian Ringgit was in depreciation, as highlighted by Mariadas and Murthy (2023), as well as Fakhrudin and Zaini (2024). This depreciation increased the cost of imports and contributed to inflationary pressures, further straining the financial stability of both businesses and consumers.

The economic condition of the countries was worsening, with the increase in the cost of necessities such as food, housing, and healthcare. Despite these rising costs, the average income remained unchanged, as reported by Birrunntha (2023). This stagnation in income meant that many households were struggling to make ends meet, leading to increased financial stress and uncertainty. As reflected in the findings, the combination of these factors created a challenging environment where the initial relief from the pandemic's health impacts was overshadowed by the persistent economic difficulties.

While participants generally felt relieved that they could put the pandemic behind them, returning to work came with its own set of difficulties. Participants reported feeling more emotionally and physically exhausted, especially those in the healthcare industry. Similarly, Hudson Psychiatric Associates (2021) found that it was difficult for many individuals to reintegrate into social settings due to persistent anxieties about viral transmission, combined with social anxiety and feelings of loneliness. Hence, through the navigation of the challenges of the post pandemic transition, cultivating inclusive social settings, putting in place flexible working schedules, and giving priority to mental health services, became essential in promoting resilience and well-being (Low et al, 2023; Abdul Aziz, 2023; Cooke et al, 2019).

This study showed that hybrid work model is beneficial to many individuals post pandemic as it provides flexibility without compromising the importance of in-person interactions and is sustainable and provide employees with greater flexibility to choose their work locations and schedules – this is in line with studies conducted by Krajcik et al (2023) and Tsipursky (2023). It has been discovered that this strategy promotes employee well-being and sustainability in work-life balance, both of which are essentials for long-term job satisfaction and productivity (Tsipursky, 2023; Vyas, 2022; Cheah and Sapuan, 2021). Participants noted that their workplaces had become more understanding compared to before the pandemic, permitting remote work for employees with health or family issues. Conversely, the hybrid work model has its challenges, such as difficulties in collaborating and communicating (Nuraini & Raharjo, 2023), but when continuously assessed and adjusted, it appeared to be beneficial in the post-pandemic era. This suggested that more focus had been given to employees' well-being and conversation around mental health had become more open in the workplace, which essentially would lead to a supportive working environment (Syasyila et al, 2023).

In their study, Abdul Aziz et al. (2023) found that organisations that put an emphasis on the welfare of their employees and provided flexible work schedules were more favourable, as it increases employee satisfaction, as evidenced in this study. Participant K described how their employer prioritised the well-being of its employees by offering financial help and promoting time off for family, leading them to feel fully supported throughout. This was also reflected by other participants experienced where they believed that the flexibility provided to them had helped them in their crisis management. This is in line with other studies that found similar results, especially in boosting resilience and morale within workers (Low et al, 2023; Sopelana, 2014) to help organisations retain talent by promoting supportive work cultures (Abdul Aziz, 2023; Cooke et al, 2019).

This study also found the different measures that were taken by organisations to address the financial and mental health issues of their employees during the pandemic and even extended to after the pandemic as well. Participants mentioned pay adjustments, direct financial aid, and remote work arrangements as part of initiatives taken in their companies. An organisation's approach to employee welfare ultimately reflects its culture and principles (Cooke et al, 2019; Vyas, 2022), and evidently, participants with good workplace support appeared to be engaging in more positive coping behaviour. Workplace support, from supportive leaders and colleagues, has been proven to boost employee resilience and well-being, particularly in high-pressure situations (Hauff et al, 2020; Smollan, 2017). A case study on a Malaysian SME post pandemic also showed similar findings where support from leaders and leaders' resilient level had become the most important factors to ensure their company's survival during and post pandemic (Arham et al, 2023). Notably, this study also found that organisations in Malaysia are rethinking their organisational culture and trying to be more inclusive in their practices.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

Upon review of the entire study, 2 limitations were found. The composition of the sample is the primary reason for the compromise in generalisability and creates a sample bias. The study has a sampling bias as it is using purposive sampling, which limits participants to only the criteria of being from a certain income classification. Though it can be useful to target participants of that certain criteria, it limits the contributions of the excluded population who may have valuable insights to add to the study's findings.

In terms of reducing generalisability, seven participants (41%) come from a single organisation within the education sector; the seven were recruited from the same organisation. Despite the diverse roles within the organisation, the shared professional environment diminishes the broader relevance of the findings. The company's global reach and affiliation with its more prominent branch abroad, highlights how distinctive the participant experiences are. As such, their viewpoints might not fully capture the wider work scene in Malaysia. This restriction makes it more difficult to generalise the study's findings outside of its particular organisational setting.

Reflexivity

This reflexivity aimed to show our personal biases, values and experiences that may have influenced the findings of this study or the interactions in order to show our stance in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, we recognise the possible impacts of conducting interviews that have seven participants from an organisation. Being familiar with one of the organisations, there might be a difference in the judgement of participants who were sampled from that organisation and the ones from different organisations. Furthermore, this might impact the types of additional questions that were asked in those interviews, where we might have unconsciously gone less in-depth due to having pre-existing notions of the organisation's environment.

Second, during the pandemic, we witnessed the struggles of family members and close ones. This could cause biases or hunches about possible reactions when conducting the study. Though the first-hand exposure was the main reason behind selecting to explore this topic, we had pre-notions of the type of responses we expected. To reflect, we had taken certain measures to attempt to reduce this bias through using snowball sampling to diversify the participant to other organisations. Through asking participants for external participants from diverse backgrounds and organisations, we worked towards reducing the potential for bias stemming from our familiarity with the organisation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the intricate challenges faced by employees in Malaysia as they navigate through the post-pandemic workplace. The transition brought a complex mix of relief and new struggles, particularly concerning financial uncertainty and mental health. While many participants expressed a sense of relief in moving beyond the pandemic's peak, the persistent economic instability and increased social anxieties had affected their optimism. Organisations that prioritised employee well-being through flexible work models, financial support, and a renewed focus on mental health appeared to positively impact the participants' resilience, job satisfaction, and retention. Ultimately, fostering a supportive work environment that values inclusivity, mental health, and employee welfare has been shown to be essential for long-term organisational success and individual well-being in the post-pandemic era. This study underscores the importance of sustained efforts to adapt and innovate in response to evolving workplace dynamics and societal challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research is required to enhance workplace interventions and future initiatives. Currently, there is no full, in-depth account of the specifics of how workers felt about their work experiences post-pandemic from a retrospective standpoint. For the purpose of fully comprehending the pandemic's long-term impacts on workers, future research should concentrate on obtaining this input, considering it has been around 4 years since the beginning. This realisation will be crucial in developing strategies that will increase resilience and workplace support in the face of impending difficulties.

Furthermore, even though hybrid work models are advantageous, the work model must be regularly reviewed and updated since new developments require adjustments to keep it functional. Technological progress is significantly transforming society, with emerging exponential technologies like AI, machine learning, and virtual reality altering many facets of our lives (Matthews, 2018). In the post-pandemic age, this strategy will help ensure the ongoing success of the recommendation.

IMPLICATION OF STUDY

The study showed that it is important for organisations to adopt comprehensive solutions and try a holistic approach that offers people and companies both financial and emotional support in order to promote a strong recovery from the pandemic. Since the effects on health and the economy are linked, a holistic health strategy that takes into account the various demands of all parties involved must be used. It can be defined as a perspective of health that takes into account the multidimensional well-being of people; their physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. Organisations could benefit a great deal by implementing a holistic approach to employee wellness, explored by the McKinsey Wellness Institute (2024). By combining elements of social, mental, spiritual, and physical health, it improves overall well-being and lowers expenses while increasing productivity. Positive holistic health affects an employee's creativity, performance, and work-life balance, which lowers burnout rates and increases engagement (McKinsey Health Institute, 2024).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

AK and RHH developed the underlying ideas. RHH and HMR refined the concepts and supervised the development of the research. AK collected and analysed the data, while RHH and HMR verified the analytical

methods and conceptualisation of data. AK wrote the first draft of the manuscript and RHH edited the manuscript to its final version.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

The authors confirm the manuscript's integrity, and that this manuscript is of our original work where, to the best of our knowledge, provides accurate and transparent account of the study. All authors have significantly contributed to the research and have given their consent for submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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