RETURN-TO-OFFICE (RTO): ADJUSTING TO THE 'OLD NORM'?

## HUMAN CAPITAL INSIGHTS REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The work-from-home (WFH) setup was a durable strategy in the world's early standoff with COVID-19. After two years of remote and some hybrid work, many people may push back against being told to return to their workplace. Workers have become accustomed to the routine at home and thrived by having self-autonomy over the structure of their day.

Nevertheless, as with every pandemic-induced trend, the model is fleeting. Malaysia has set its sights on an endemic transition, thereby proclaiming the end of the need for the virtual labour roll call.

Many found that they prefer to either start working earlier or later in the day. They have woven their life around work by including more errands, family duties, recreational activities, hobbies, and other special important events in their day-to-day.

AT A GLANCE

Hybrid mode is in demand

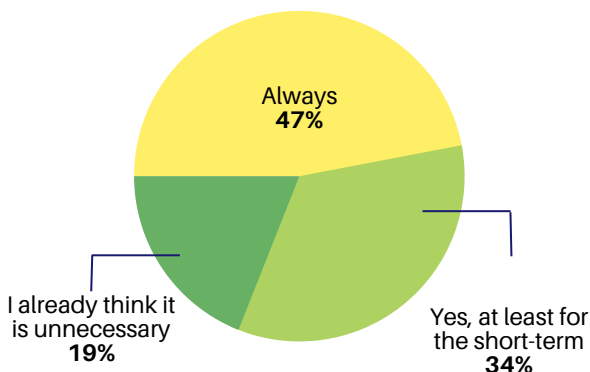| Face-to-face		Hybrid
16%	**28%**	**55%**

Remote working
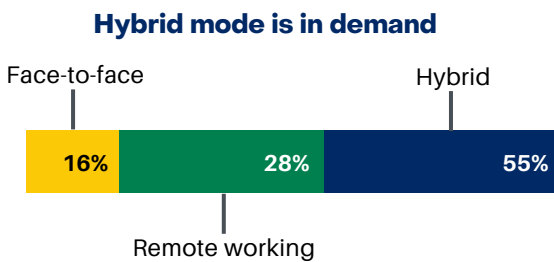
Source: Hopes and Fears, PwC Malaysia 2021

As managers begin to usher people back into the office, many people are experiencing mixed feelings. While people want to get out of their homes and see colleagues and friends, the prospect of working in the office full-time can be daunting.

According to PwC Malaysia's Hopes and Fears report, the desire to shift permanently to a hybrid model is understandable, as WFH allows employees to save time on commuting, or even the flexibility to attend family obligations at home. Concurrently, employees may come to the office as and when necessary.

With the labour market inclined to a more hybrid mode, a key question from the What Workers Want report shows that a majority of the respondents still see the office as important either 'always' or 'at least for the short term' at 81%.

Do you think physical office space is still a necessity for a company to operate successfully?

- Always **47%**
- Yes, at least for the short-term **34%**
- I already think it is unnecessary **19%**

Source: What Workers Want, Savills Malaysia 2021

Meanwhile, only a small percentage of the 19% perceived the office space as unnecessary.

This implicitly tells us that collaboration and socialising are the top reasons why employees want to go to a physical workplace, while also alleviating the mental health burden arising from continued isolation.

Would you take an RTO once it is possible to do so?

85%

70%

92%

85%
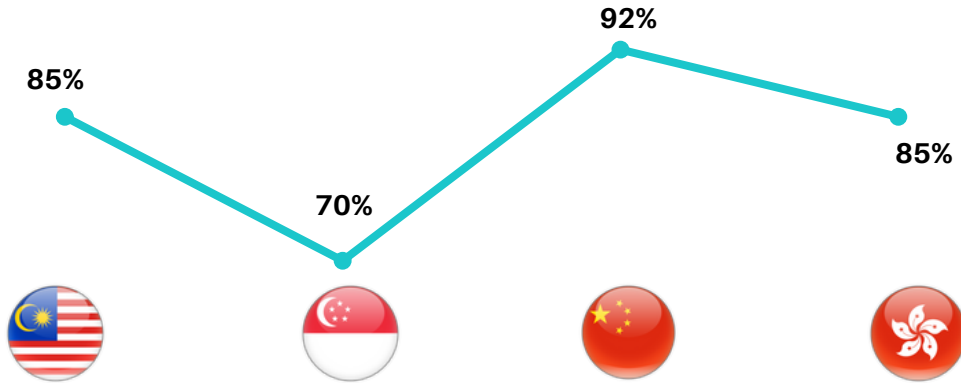
Source: Workmonitor 2021 1H report, Randstad Malaysia 2021

Based on Randstad's Workmonitor survey, when asked about the possibility of RTO, 85% of respondents in both **Malaysia** and **Hong Kong** are mostly positive about the approach. This is slightly higher than **Singapore** (70%) but relatively lower than **China** (92%).

Companies that want all their employees back at the workplace must ensure that their staff have a conducive working environment. Business leaders and human resources experts have warned that companies should not rush to return to the workplace, as employees would have to readjust after two years at home.

If RTO is a possible option at a workplace, the below checklist will assist to evaluate both employer and employee preparedness ahead of the process.

✅ RTO Checklist

Employer

- When is the right time for employees to return?

- As an employer, what are the key challenges you are having (or anticipate having) regarding RTO?

- Can the job be efficiently performed remotely?

- Who should return to the workplace?

- How can employers protect employees who come to work?

Source:
Questions Employers Should Ask About Reopening, Harvard Business Review 2020

Employee

- Are you looking forward to RTO?

- On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your communication with your manager while working from home?

- Do you have concerns about commuting to work?

- Are you healthy enough?

- Have your HR sent out detailed RTO guidelines?

Source:
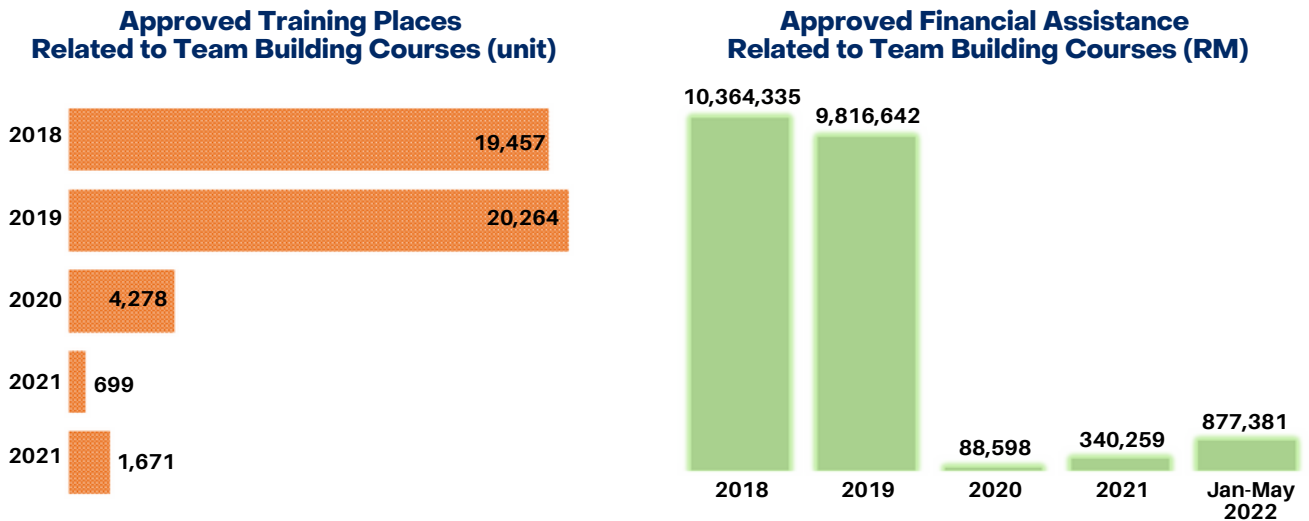*Questions for your Covid-19 Returning to Work Survey, Snap Surveys*

RTO STRENGTHENS TEAM COOPERATION

While there are benefits to WFH as it saves daily commuting time, allows workers to work at the most productive time and better control of environmental factor, numerous negative aspects of full time WFH have also been described.

Employees who are at home do not have the opportunity to socialise with colleagues and may have decreased physical movements. Extended hours of screen exposure due to full time computer work can lead to fatigue, headaches and eye-related symptoms. This could also contribute to mental issues such as social isolation and depression.

Team building is an integral part of any organisation and it brings people together through mutual support and collaboration. Activities that encourage team building are fun and provide opportunities for people to connect in a different way. The activities are designed to help teams get results. They involve planning and organising events that are fun and motivate those taking part. A close-knit team is one of the best ways to boost productivity and improve the work environment.

HRD CORP STATISTICS

Approved Training Places Related to Team Building Courses (unit)

Year	Value
2018	19,457
2019	20,264
2020	4,278
2021	699
2021	1,671

Approved Financial Assistance Related to Team Building Courses (RM)

Year	Value
2018	10,364,335
2019	9,816,642
2020	88,598
2021	340,259
Jan-May 2022	877,381

Source: HRD Corp Internal Database as of May 2022

According to the HRD Corp internal database, team building courses garnered the highest traction in 2019 and 2018 with 20,264 and 19,457 approved training places, respectively. On another note, about RM10.4 million of approved financial assistance was channelled towards the category for 2018 (2019: RM9.8 million).

Nonetheless, the reason for the slump in team building courses was the COVID-19 Movement Control Order which limits gathering activities, including physical trainings.

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Before requiring any employee to return to the workplace, managers should speak to individual team members to understand any concerns they may have. It is important to understand whether they want to return to the office full-time or how any longer-term home working arrangement could work, taking into consideration any health impacts that may require adjustments.

Challenges

Health and safety concerns

Personal commitments and responsibilities

Re-Entry Syndrome

Mobility
(e.g. commuting or relocation)

Possible Solutions

Managing health and safety

Encouraging empathy

Re-evaluating policies and procedures

Have a clear roadmap

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there isn't a one-size-fits-all model for every organisation. The workplace model should also depend on factors such as the nature of work, work culture and its contribution to making the organisation a more attractive place to work.

The pandemic has dominated the news and our thoughts for over two years and changed how people live and work globally. Whilst the impact has been devastating in many respects, it has also stimulated positive change in the employment world; refocusing the spotlight on propelling businesses forward, embracing flexibility and reinventing the future of work.

It is also important to remember that employees may request work flexibility if it is stipulated in the company policy. This can range from a request for a change to full-time or part-time work, job-share, WFH, or a change of working days or hours. Employers are legally obliged to consider flexible working requests in a 'reasonable' manner. However, it is down to employers how, where and when their employees work, subject to guidance from the government over COVID-19 restrictions.

References:
1. Hopes and Fears, PwC Malaysia 2021.
2. What Workers Want, Savills Malaysia 2021.
3. Workmonitor 2021 1H report, Randstad Malaysia 2021.
4. Workplace Survey, Gensler 2021.
5. Questions Employers Should Ask About Reopening, Harvard Business Review 2020.
6. Questions for your Covid-19 Returning to Work Survey, Snap Surveys.