

# Working from home arrangement in delivering public service during the COVID-19 pandemic: innovation or irritation?

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### ***Working from home arrangement in delivering public service during the COVID-19 pandemic: innovation or irritation?***

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 outbreak forced the government to impose lockdown and change working arrangements. As a result, government employees must work from home (WFH) - a task they were hardly prepared for. While WFH arrangement has been typical in many developed countries, it is not for some Asian countries, including Indonesia, where leadership and organizational culture emphasizing strict supervision and punishment are still preferable. This paper examines determinant factors influencing public servants' productivity in performing public service while working on home arrangements during the covid-19 pandemic. A survey of 551 public servants' from the big cities of Kalimantan, the island where the new Indonesian state capital will be located, was conducted as the data collection method. The completed questionnaires were analysed using Path Analysis. The result indicates that WFH is problematic for Indonesian public servants as from variables of digital orientation, management support, IT training, technology infrastructure, and collectivist culture, only digital orientation was found to significantly impact the individual's productivity. The findings suggest that the government uses digital orientation as a selection criterion for government employees who will be transferred to the new state capital.

**Keywords:** WFH, Asian, digital orientation, productivity.

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## Introduction

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Working from Home (WFH) is used under different terminologies like virtual meetings, virtual desks, online software, e-learning (Li et al., 2020) and e-government (Grinin et al., 2022; Androniceanu and Georgescu, 2021; Androniceanu et al. 2021) in fact, is a government mandate in response to the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Amosun et al., 2021). This topic has shifted the debate on survival of the business sector (Sharma et al., 2022) and public sector (Mousa and Abdelgaffar, 2021; Androniceanu and Marton, 2019). WFH arrangements, previously under the flexible work policy applied to attract talents, are part of organisations' work balance (WLB) program. The WLB policy improves employee performance (Harikaran and Thevanes, 2018). Nevertheless, if WFH is not the preference for those with an awful experience, this shift presents a substantial contest (Fukumara et al., 2021). Thus, WFH might not apply to some people, but unexpectedly, people must engage in online activities to conduct work-based responsibilities from home.

In Asia, flexible working arrangements are not commonly practiced (Rani and Furrer, 2021). Some countries, for example, China (Wang et al., 2021), Thailand (Tanpipat et al., 2021), India (Aggarwal et al., 2022), the Philippines (Tudy, 2021) and Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2022) still prefer high traditional managerial approach and believe WFH as a less favorable practice. This perspective implies the existence of a cultural imperative in defining WFH appropriateness (Azar et al., 2018). Therefore, implementing compulsory WFH arrangements due to the pandemic will present specific challenges for Asians.

When declaring the first case of COVID-19 in early March 2020, the Indonesian government imposed compulsory social distancing, enforced partial lockdown in several cities, and executed WFH arrangements. Applying this mandatory work arrangement might cause specific instabilities as obstacles like the Indonesian collectivist culture, lack of dedicated workforce and equipment, and a slow internet connection may decrease the productivity of WFH (Sutarto et al., 2022).

After the change of regime in 1998, Indonesia witnessed new cultural norms resulting in much improved public service. For instance, there is a growing emphasis in Indonesia's public sector on reducing the layer of bureaucracies by launching a program called *Layanan Prima* (Service Excellence) to improve the public sector's services, converting public hospitals and universities into corporate type organization, and decentralizing the budget to operational units (Roziqin et al., 2022). However, the transition to WFH may reduce the service quality, and Indonesia may not achieve its declared goal of creating a "world-class" public service by 2025 (Turner et al., 2022). Thus, this research aims to examine the factors that impacted the ability of Indonesian public servants to complete their tasks and responsibilities through WFH arrangements in response to COVID-19. Since the research was conducted in the emerging economic context of Indonesia, whose social, religious, and cultural conditions differ from those in Western economies, the research contributes to the study's novelty.

## 1. Literature review

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Working from Home (WFH) is a periodic work at home for one or more days a week (De Klerk et al., 2021). It is regarded as an alternative way of managing work to provide flexibility for employers in terms of hours, and balancing work and non-work responsibilities (Choudhury et al., 2021). However, the outbreak of Covid-19 makes WFH arrangements become government policies imposed universally to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and to secure productivity and work during a period of closed offices and restricted travel (Marinoni and van't Land., 2020).

Individual and organisational factors determine employees' productivity during WFH (Afrianty et al., 2022). Digital orientation - an individual's commitment toward mastery of digital technology to accomplish a job - is a crucial individual factor influencing employee productivity during WFH (Chang et al., 2021), besides organizational factors like Information Technology and Communication (ITC) training (McAllister et al., 2022), management support (Lysavy and Michalak, 2020), and technology infrastructure (Chu et al., 2021). The stronger the digital orientation of an individual, the more open the individual is to the application of digital technologies. Lorentz et al. (2021) emphasize that digital orientation is coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure driven. Coercive pressure is related to state intervention and excess reliance on external resources. Mimetic pressure relates to duplicating other successful organisations. Normative pressures are, however, more elusive as they initiate from the profession and scholars. Thus, employees will respond to pressures to adjust to technological developments (Sukoco et al., 2021). WFH is applicable with the availability of a well-developed ITC infrastructure in terms of a secure network, high-speed device hardware, well-developed software, and a safe server and database (Satpathy et al., 2021). The low speed of the internet connection may hamper the effectiveness of WFH. According to World Population Review (2022), the internet connection in Indonesia is relatively low (20.22 Mbps) compared to some Asian neighboring countries, such as Singapore (255.83 Mbps), Thailand (225.17 Mbps), and Malaysia (114.08 Mbps). Finally, as many Asian countries score high on collectivism, including Indonesia (Rajiani and Kot, 2020), implementing WFH, where social interaction is lacking, may lead to social isolation among employees (Yu et al., 2022).

Studies on Indonesian employees reported that 55% experienced a productivity increase compared with working from the office (Himawan et al., 2022). However, the Indonesian Workers Organisation believes that many Indonesian organisations are reluctant to apply WFH for productivity reasons (Saragih et al., 2021). Such a conflicting perception is highly related to management support reflected in organisational culture and leadership established by the corporates (Kohont and Ignjatović, 2022). Management support is the challenge for adopting WFH in Asia because organisational culture and company policy usually demand physical observance for salary and incentives (Timms et al., 2015). In Indonesia, employee

evaluation systems emphasize the length of time spent in the office instead of output as an indicator of productivity (Himawan, 2022). The previous studies' inconsistent results need to investigate whether WFH is a management innovation (Rajiani and Ismail, 2019) or a barrier to performing (irritation) for Indonesian public servants. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Due to coercive pressure, digital orientation significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

H2: Due to coercive pressure, management support significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

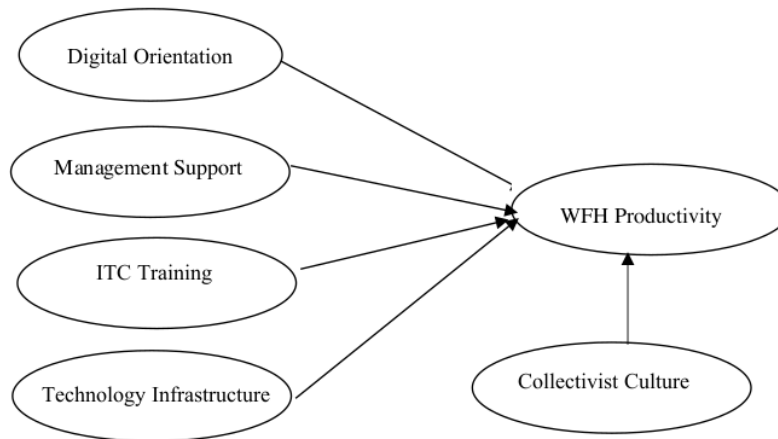
H3: Due to coercive pressure, ITC training significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

H4: Due to coercive pressure, technological infrastructure significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

H5: Due to coercive pressure, collectivist culture significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

The theoretical framework of the study is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Interrelationship among Variables Determining WFH Effectiveness



(Source: Afrianty et al., 2022., 2021; Rajiani, Kot, 2020)

## 2. Research methodology

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This exploratory study employed a cross-sectional design. The data were collected by snowball sampling strategy through the authors' networks and social media platforms from January 15 to July 14, 2022, by disseminating a web-based

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questionnaire. Such a sampling strategy is commonly adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic due to social distancing (Awada et al., 2021; Srinok and Zana, 2021; Sutarto et al., 2022). A convenient sample of 600 Indonesian public servants working from home during the COVID-19 crisis completed our questionnaires, resulting in 551 valid responses with no missing values (91.83% completion rate). Respondents resided in the capital's province of South, Central, East, West, and North Kalimantan, which are Banjarmasin, Palangka Raya, Samarinda, Pontianak, and Tarakan. Kalimantan has been selected as the state capital and will be moved from Jakarta to this island sometime in 2024.

Employee productivity was defined as performance in completing tasks and responsibilities by carrying out work from home with digital technology. Thus, the employee productivity measurement used five items of self-perceived work performance from Koopmans (2016). The measurement of digital orientation employed 4 items adapted from Khin and Ho (2018). Management support is defined as all attitudes, behaviours and HR policies to support the use of technology in implementing work-from-home arrangements. We measured management support with four items adapted from Knies and van de Schoot (2020) labelled as general management practices, tailor-made arrangements, support of employees' commitment and career development. The four training reaction components: enjoyment, perceived usefulness, perceived difficulty, and knowledge gain (Ritzmann et al., 2014), were used to measure the effectiveness of training in supporting work from home.

Technology infrastructure is hardware and software facilities that enable the operation of information and communication systems that facilitate public servants to implement work from home. Adopting DeLone and McLean's model (2003), Wang (2008) validated information quality, system quality, service quality, perceived value, user satisfaction and intention to reuse as determinants of technology success. Hence, we apply this as a model for assessing the quality of technology infrastructure. Collectivist culture refers to the acceptance that the group's self-interest is prioritized over the concern of the individual. The measurement was adopted by Minkov et al. (2017). All items are assessed on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item. Hypothesis testing was carried out by examining the t-statistics on each path of direct and indirect effects. The criteria for a significant effect require that the t-statistics of each path coefficient > t-table (N = 551) (1.96). Factors loading in Factor Analysis are calculated to determine validity by retaining factors loading of 0.50 or higher (Knekta et al., 2019). The coefficient alpha with values of 0.60 or higher (Bonett and Wright, 2015) was examined to determine reliability.

### 3. Research results and discussions

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Respondent's demographic profiles analysed are related to gender, age, education, length of current employment and residence. Most respondents were male (82.5%), with the majority (62.1%) of respondents above 35 years old. Further, most of the respondents had undergone higher education, with the majority at the college level (45.7%), followed by some college (26.3%), and even 10 respondents (1.8%) have a graduate degree. Most of the respondents are not newbies, as a majority of respondents (56.6%) have become government employees for less than 10 years, followed by those who have been in organisations for 5 years (25.8%). Only 5 respondents (0.9%) have served the organisation for less than 5 years. Most respondents reside in the capital province of South Kalimantan (40%), followed by Central Kalimantan (30%), East Kalimantan (20%), West Kalimantan (7%) and North Kalimantan (3%).

The mean of each variable is presented in Table 1.

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Table 1. Variable Means

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error
Digital Orientation	551	10.00	30.00	20	0.803
Management Support	551	12.00	28.00	20.00	0.213
ITC Training	551	15	25	20	0.217
Technology Infrastructure	551	10	15	12.5	0.452
Collectivist Culture	551	30	35	32.5	0.312
Productivity	551	6	24	15	0.735

Observing the mean score of respondents' digital orientation = 20 (out of 10 – 30), the respondents for this research are considered as a mixture of highly digital-oriented and those who are low. The mean score of management support: 20 (out of 12 – 28) indicates the management does not fully support the WFH arrangement. The mean score of ITC training: 20 (out of 15 – 25) demonstrates that training is sufficiently perceived as effective by respondents. The mean score of technology infrastructure: 12.5 (out of 10 – 15) denotes that technology owned by the organisation is of medium quality. The mean score of collectivist culture: 32.5 (out of 30 – 35), blatantly indicates the high spirit of togetherness, implying the tendency of the respondents to set the business in connectedness tones. The mean score for productivity: 15 (out of 6 – 24) denotes the low productivity of these Indonesian public servants.

The operationalisation and validation of the instrument are displayed in Table 2. Factor and loadings for most items are close to 0.80, which means that the variability explained in the item by the theorized factor is around 80% exceeding the borderline of 0.60 (Knekta et al., 2019). Also, the Cronbach  $\alpha$  of each construct 0.871, 0.865, 0.852, 0.798, 0.891 and 0.889 respectively exceeds the threshold values. Therefore, we conclude that validity and reliability have been fulfilled.

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**Table 2. Validity and Reliability measurement**

Construct and Cronbach $\alpha$	Items	Loading Factors
Digital Orientation ( $\alpha = 0.871$ )	1. We are committed to using digital technologies in all aspects of our jobs.	0.843
	2. solutions to problems always involve superior digital technology.	0.821
	3. New digital technology is readily accepted in our office.	0.792
	4. We always look out for opportunities to use digital technology as innovation.	0.787
Management Support ( $\alpha = 0.865$ )	1. Our leaders implement flexible hours to support us working from home.	0.831
	2. Our leaders tailor working conditions to individual needs so we can do better jobs.	0.815
	3. Our leaders show an interest in how we do our job.	0.802
	4. Our leaders inform us about opportunities for training and development.	0.794
ITC Training ( $\alpha = 0.852$ )	1. The learning was fun.	0.812
	2. I found digital technology valuable training for my job.	0.811
	3. The contents of digital technology training were comprehensible.	0.782
	4. After attending the training, my knowledge expanded.	0.765
Technology Infrastructure ( $\alpha = 0.798$ )	1. The technology provides the precise information I need to work from home.	0.875
	2. The technology facilitates me to work from home.	0.863
	3. When we have a problem with the software, the system service provider shows a sincere interest in solving it.	0.832
	4. When my organisation no longer subscribes to this system, I am okay with paying the subscription myself.	0.827
	5. The technology has met my expectation.	0.812
	6. Assuming that WFH has ended, I will reuse the system in the future.	0.807
Collectivist Culture ( $\alpha = 0.891$ )	1. Group welfare is more important than individual rewards.	0.814
	2. Group success is more important than individual success.	0.807
	3. Group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer.	0.802



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Construct and Cronbach $\alpha$	Items	Loading Factors
Productivity ( $\alpha = 0.889$ )	1. I could plan the working load, so I finished it on time.	0.851
	2. I kept in mind the outcome I needed to achieve.	0.842
	3. I was able to set priorities in determining which to do first.	0.821
	4. I was able to work from home effectively and efficiently.	0.815
	5. I managed my time well.	0.782

With particular reference to Table 3, Management Support, ITC Training, Technology Infrastructure, and Collectivist Culture did not have a significant effect on productivity. This is observable from the  $t$  – statistics values that were less than the  $t$ -table (1.960). Thus, Hypotheses 2, 3, 4, and 5 were not supported. Only hypothesis 1 is supported that due to coercive pressure, digital orientation significantly impacts public servants' productivity in the WFH setting.

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**Table 3. Path analysis for hypothesis testing**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	$t$	T-table.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	-.295	.458		-.643	1.960
Digital Orientation	.467	.098	.494	3.269	1.960
Management Support	.438	.125	.363	1.502	1.960
ITC Training	.332	.201	.321	1.325	1.960
Technology Infrastructure	.126	.245	.123	0.234	1.960
Collectivist Culture	.023	.401	.020	0.112	1.960

Dependent Variable: Productivity

This concludes that work from home arrangement is not favorable for Indonesian employees, supporting previous findings from the Indonesian sample (Himawan, 2022; Afrianty et al., 2022; Suarlan, 2018). Also, the result supports the findings from other Asian countries of China (Wang et al., 2021), Thailand (Tanpipat et al., 2021), India (Aggarwal et al., 2022), the Philippines (Tudy, 2021) and Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2022) that for Asian, WFH is not innovation; instead, it is irritation. This may be because workers may involuntarily perform WFH arrangements under this pandemic circumstance. Research suggests that involuntary WFH is associated with tremendous stress and burnout (Fukumara et al., 2021), affecting work performance.

Besides, employees with high collectivism scores may also find adapting to the WFH arrangement challenging. The need to belong is plausibly a more potent motivating force to work for individuals in a collectivist society (Rajiani and Kot, 2020). In this sense, working alone at home provokes a sense of social isolation (Yu et al., 2022). Furthermore, loneliness was cited as the number one reason WFH became less

attractive and made employees feel less motivated at work (Wang et al.,2021). Although technology may provide social connection, many Asian studies have indicated the vain use of online-based communication to lessen lonesomeness (Chu et al., 2021).

External influences and pressures of an organisation when implementing WFH may appear in different forms: coercive to mimetic to normative (Lorentz et al.,2021). The dissemination of government policy in developing countries related to technology development is usually connected to coercive pressure (Sukoco et al., 2021) since they prefer to work in traditional ways. Among Indonesian public servants, nobody at a lower level dares to make decisions openly without referring the decisions to their respective superiors. They prefer to embrace a cautious demeanor which could best be portrayed as hanging tight for the "surat keputusan" (letter containing a decision made by top management). Consequently, implementing innovation like WFH is connected to the interests of top executives because of their ability to affect participation. Thus, in the case of Indonesia, the adoption is due to coercive pressure, while the implementation is reckoned to safeguard sound governance, accountability and sustainable economic development. The dissatisfaction of many developing Asian countries toward the implementation and outcome of WFH must be considered by the Indonesian government in obtaining the required capacity and competence to undertake a transition from traditional workspace to WFH. Turner (2002) applies the metaphor of three diners attending to a menu to specify southeast Asian states; enthusiastic diners, cautious diners, and those diners unfamiliar with the menu. The enthusiastic diners are Singapore and Malaysia where long-term experiences have shaped public bureaucracies proficient in learning and adapting. The cautious diners are in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. In these countries, some decentralization and privatization are apparent, in the capital cities. The unfamiliar menu consists of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for they still build capacity and systemic processes to support public management reforms. Since Indonesia is placed in cautious diners, pragmatic and contextual application and adaptations of WFH are required. Recent studies among employees in Indonesia suggest a preference for more participative leadership (Passakonjaras et al., 2019; Widyanti et al., 2020). As such, a more participative leadership approach in WFH practices can be created if top management nurtures a favorable workplace climate by not rewarding employees based on physical presence and the hours, they spend at work but instead on the quality of work outcome. Working at home is more stressful because of increased risk due to poorer workspace. It is related to raised electricity bills and, on top of it, expensive but slow internet connectivity. Thus, there is no point in reducing employees' daily incentive called 'uang bensin' or 'uang makan' - literally means transport allowance or meal allowance' - for they do not have their fingerprint recorded in the office.

#### 4. Conclusions

Traditional work settings where both employees and employers gather in an authorised space continue to be an auspicious tradition in Asia, for it acclimates the needs of both parties personally and organizationally. Regardless, the disturbance of COVID-19 has created a severe nuisance to the sustainability of that conventional work arrangement. Asian employers and employees have to adjust a WFH arrangement in this challenging time so people may question the future of WFH in Asia. Our research has confirmed the structural and personal factors impeding WFH arrangement, particularly government employees performing public service. However, Indonesia can still absorb western administrative models, comprehensive examine their potential benefits and negative impacts, and apply only elements of such models that are appropriate to its own cultural contexts and people's preference. One limitation of this study is that sample of this research is drawn from regional government agencies that adhered to those staying on one island of Indonesia, making the generalizability of the results to another part of Indonesia still being determined. This research was conducted in Kalimantan, which is classified as outer Indonesia (Geertz, 1984), where the people's status depended on skill and capability, not on heredity. As such, this research offers meta-analysis for different local governments in inner Indonesia - where the society tends to be stratified based on age and social status- to investigate the readiness of human resources and technology toward the WFH when performing public service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 11 Conflict of interest

The authors affirm that the study was completed without any commercial or financial relationships that could cause a potential conflict of interest.

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