The Effect of Remote Work on Employee Engagement in Malaysian Multicultural Organizations: The Moderating Role of Organizational Support

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Abstract: The transition to remote work has become a strategic imperative for the Malaysian service sector in the post-pandemic digital economy. However, the whether remote work enhances employee engagement remains contested, with scholarly debate focusing on the tension between increased autonomy and professional isolation. Drawing upon the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study investigates the linkage between Remote Work and Employee Engagement, specifically examining the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS). A quantitative approach was adopted, utilizing self-administered surveys to gather data from 312 knowledge workers across Malaysia's multicultural IT, finance, and education sectors. The hypothesized relationships were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Findings reveal a significant positive direct relationship between Remote Work and Employee Engagement, suggesting that flexibility serves as a vital job resource. Additionally, Perceived Organizational Support exerts a significant direct influence on engagement. Critically, the analysis confirms a significant positive interaction effect, indicating that POS moderates this relationship: the beneficial impact of remote work on engagement is amplified under conditions of high organizational support. This research advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating that remote work functions as a "conditional resource," whose effectiveness depends on the level of support provided. For Malaysian practitioners, these findings imply that cultivating a supportive organizational culture that transcends physical boundaries is essential for sustaining an engaged hybrid workforce and mitigating isolation risks within a high-context society.

Keywords: Remote work, Employee Engagement, Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Job Demands-Resources (JD-R), Malaysian Service Sector.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The global organizational landscape underwent a fundamental transformation with the emergence of COVID-19, compelling a swift departure from conventional office arrangements toward remote and hybrid working models. Initially implemented as an emergency measure, this transition has since solidified into a strategic necessity for long-term organizational viability. As noted by the World Economic Forum (2020), the anticipated "future of work" has materialized prematurely, with digitalization and flexibility now occupying central positions in employee value propositions. Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia has emerged as a proactive adopter of this digital shift. Through initiatives such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL), the government envisions establishing the nation as a digitally advanced, high-income economy and a regional frontrunner in digital transformation (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). As a result, Malaysian enterprises are progressively embedding remote work into their operational frameworks—not solely for business continuity but also as a mechanism for talent acquisition and cost efficiency.

Nevertheless, the transition to remote arrangements introduces considerable challenges. Although employees gain autonomy and flexibility, the implicit psychological contract between employers and workers undergoes significant alteration. Employee engagement conceptualized as a positive, fulfilling work-related state encompassing vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002) is intrinsically linked to social interaction and a sense of organizational belonging. In Malaysia's multicultural context, characterized by high power distance and collectivist values (Hofstede,

2001), workplace cohesion traditionally depends on direct interpersonal contact and nuanced social understanding. The erosion of physical workplace presence threatens to weaken these relational foundations, fostering professional isolation and diminishing engagement. Consequently, as Malaysian organizations chart their course through this transformed work environment, identifying strategies to preserve robust engagement among geographically dispersed employees emerges as a pressing scholarly concern.

1.2   Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of remote work arrangements in Malaysia, empirical evidence regarding its impact on employee engagement remains inconclusive and often contradictory. Proponents argue that remote work enhances engagement by providing autonomy and better work-life balance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Conversely, detractors suggest that the lack of physical supervision and social isolation can lead to "teleworking intensity," resulting in burnout and disengagement (Golden & Veiga, 2005). This paradox is particularly pronounced in Malaysia's service and knowledge sectors, where the blurred lines between work and home life have reportedly increased stress levels among employees (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021).

Furthermore, the existing literature often treats the relationship between remote work and engagement as direct and linear, neglecting the contextual boundary conditions that make remote work effective. A significant gap exists in understanding under what conditions remote work leads to positive behavioral outcomes in a Malaysian context. Specifically, the role of the organization in bridging the physical distance through supportive practices has been under-examined. In a multicultural environment where employees from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Malay, Chinese, Indian) may have varying expectations of leadership and support, the perception of being cared for becomes paramount.

Without visible Perceived Organizational Support (POS)—the assurance that the organization values the employee's contribution and cares for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986)—remote work may be perceived as abandonment rather than empowerment. Consequently, there is an urgent need to investigate whether POS acts as a buffering mechanism that moderates the relationship between remote work and employee engagement, ensuring that physical distance does not translate into psychological detachment.

2.   Research Objectives

To address the aforementioned gaps, this study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:
(1) To examine the direct effect of Remote Work on Employee Engagement in Malaysian multicultural organizations.
(2) To analyze the relationship between Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Employee Engagement.
(3) To investigate the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support in the relationship between Remote Work and Employee Engagement, determining whether high levels of support strengthen the positive effects of remote working arrangements.

2.2   Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research enriches the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) by positioning remote work as a potential "demand" or "resource" depending on the presence of organizational support. By integrating Social Exchange Theory, it clarifies how POS functions as a crucial resource that amplifies the benefits of remote work autonomy while mitigating the risks of isolation.

Practically, the findings will provide actionable insights for HR practitioners and organizational leaders in Malaysia. As the country moves towards a hybrid workforce model, understanding that "support" extends beyond IT infrastructure to include emotional and instrumental care is vital. This study suggests that to maintain high engagement in a multicultural remote workforce, leaders must cultivate a supportive culture that transcends physical boundaries, thereby reducing turnover intention and enhancing productivity in the post-pandemic economic landscape.

3.   Literature Review and Hypotheses Development
3.1   Underpinning Theories

The research adopts two interconnected theoretical lenses—the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Social Exchange Theory (SET) to systematically examine the interplay between remote work and employee engagement. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, introduced by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), conceptualizes employee well-being as an outcome of the equilibrium between job demands and job resources. Job demands encompass physical, psychological, social, and organizational factors requiring sustained effort, while job resources refer to elements that facilitate goal attainment and mitigate demand-related strain. Within the present investigation, Remote Work emerges as a multifaceted construct capable of functioning either as a resource—offering autonomy and scheduling flexibility or as a demand contributing to social isolation and work-life boundary dissolution.

Social Exchange Theory (SET), originating from Blau (1964), provides a complementary perspective by elucidating the relational dynamics between employees and organizations. According to SET, workplace interactions generate reciprocal obligations over time. When organizations furnish resources such as Perceived Organizational Support (POS),

employees feel compelled to reciprocate through favorable attitudes and behaviors—notably, Employee Engagement (Saks, 2006). Integrating these two frameworks, this study posits that organizational support constitutes a pivotal resource, empowering employees to harness remote work advantages while simultaneously buffering against its inherent demands.

3.2   Remote Work and Employee Engagement

Remote work refers to a flexible work arrangement enabling employees to conduct their responsibilities outside conventional office premises through information and communication technologies (ICTs). What was once considered an optional benefit has now become a fundamental operational strategy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Nevertheless, scholarly discourse continues to debate how this work mode influences employee engagement.

Proponents argue that remote work enhances engagement by fostering autonomy, a key driver of intrinsic motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy satisfies a fundamental psychological need, leading to higher vigor and dedication (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Empirical studies by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) found that telecommuting is positively associated with job satisfaction and performance due to reduced commuting stress and fewer office interruptions. In the Malaysian context, where traffic congestion in major hubs like Kuala Lumpur significantly impacts quality of life, the flexibility of remote work is highly valued.

Conversely, scholars like Golden and Veiga (2005) warn of the "isolation paradox," where extended remote work leads to professional isolation and reduced organizational identification. However, given the rapid digital adaptation in Malaysia (MyDIGITAL initiatives), the prevailing view is that the flexibility and work-life balance afforded by remote work outweigh the isolation costs, provided the arrangement is voluntary or well-structured.

H1: Remote Work has a significant positive relationship with Employee Engagement.

3.3   Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Employee Engagement

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) captures employees' overarching perceptions regarding whether their organization appreciates their contributions and demonstrates concern for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Within collectivist, high-context societies such as Malaysia, supportive organizational behavior is frequently interpreted as an expression of employer "loyalty" and genuine "care" (Hofstede, 2001).

Drawing upon the reciprocity principle embedded in Social Exchange Theory, POS generates a sense of obligation among employees to prioritize organizational welfare. When individuals perceive substantial support whether manifested through emotional encouragement, practical assistance, or equitable policies they tend to invest greater personal resources into their work roles, thereby fostering enhanced engagement (Kahn, 1990). Empirical evidence consistently identifies POS as a primary determinant of engagement, attributable to its capacity to address socio-emotional needs and reassure employees that necessary resources will be accessible for effective job performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

H2: Perceived Organizational Support (POS) has a significant positive relationship with Employee Engagement.

3.4   The Moderating Role of Organizational Support

While remote work offers autonomy (H1) and support drives engagement (H2), the interaction between these two variables offers a more nuanced understanding of the remote work experience. The "autonomy paradox" suggests that while remote work provides freedom, it also imposes the burden of self-management and ambiguity (Mazmanian et al., 2013). This is where POS becomes the critical contingency.

We propose that POS acts as a moderator (or a "buffer") in the relationship between remote work and engagement. In a remote setting, the physical separation can lead to a sense of "out of sight, out of mind." If POS is low, the isolation inherent in remote work may overwhelm the benefits of autonomy, leading to disengagement. However, when POS is high meaning the organization actively provides digital tools, mental health support, and clear communication it amplifies the positive effects of remote work. High support reassures remote employees that they are not isolated but are trusted members of the collective, thereby enhancing the motivational potential of remote work flexibility (Bentley et al., 2016).

This interaction effect is particularly crucial in Malaysia's multicultural organizations, where diverse employees may require different forms of support to feel connected. High POS ensures that the "structural hole" created by physical distance is filled with psychological support.

H3: Perceived Organizational Support (POS) moderates the relationship between Remote Work and Employee Engagement, such that the positive relationship is stronger when POS is high.

4.   Methodology
4.1   Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach utilizing a cross-sectional survey design. This methodology is appropriate as it allows for the statistical testing of the hypothesized relationships between Remote Work, Perceived Organizational Support (POS), and Employee Engagement within a specific timeframe (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Given the deductive nature of the study testing a theoretical model based on the JD-R framework a positivist paradigm was employed to measure objective reality through valid instruments.

4.2   Population and Sampling Procedure

The research population consisted of knowledge workers operating within Malaysia's service sector specifically encompassing Information Technology, Finance, Education, and Telecommunications who had maintained remote or hybrid work arrangements for a minimum duration of six months. This temporal threshold was established to guarantee that participants possessed adequate experiential basis for assessing remote work's influence on their engagement levels.

A purposive sampling approach was employed for participant selection. To authentically capture the multicultural composition of Malaysia's workforce, the sampling design prioritized proportional representation across the nation's predominant ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Data acquisition was executed through a self-administered online questionnaire, developed via Google Forms and disseminated through professional platforms including LinkedIn and Malaysian HR-focused forums.

Following SEM sample size recommendations articulated by Hair et al. (2019), which establish 200 observations as the minimum acceptable threshold, this study distributed 400 questionnaires to enhance statistical power and accommodate potential data quality issues. Following systematic data cleaning procedures including removal of incomplete submissions and straight-lining patterns 312 usable responses were retained, corresponding to a 78% effective response rate.

4.3   Instrumentation

The survey instrument consisted of two sections. Section A gathered demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity (to verify multicultural composition), and remote work frequency. Section B measured the latent constructs using established scales adopted from previous literature. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

4.3.1 Independent Variable: Remote Work

To measure the effectiveness and characteristics of Remote Work, this study adapted 6 items from Grant et al. (2013). The scale assesses the extent of e-working, focusing on flexibility, productivity perception, and the ability to work away from the central office.

4.3.2 Moderator: Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

POS was measured using the short version of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) by Eisenberger et al. (1986), consisting of 8 items. This scale is the gold standard for assessing employees' beliefs concerning the organization's commitment to them.

4.3.3 Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement was operationalized using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). This 9-item scale captures the three dimensions of engagement: Vigor (energy), Dedication (enthusiasm), and Absorption (concentration).

4.4   Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 for descriptive statistics and common method bias testing, followed by SmartPLS 4.0 (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) for hypothesis testing. PLS-SEM was selected for two reasons: (1) its robustness in analyzing complex models with non-normal data distributions, and (2) its superior capability in testing moderation effects (interaction analysis) compared to covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis proceeded in two stages:

(1) Measurement Model Assessment: Evaluating indicator reliability (Factor Loadings), internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability), convergent validity (AVE), and discriminant validity (HTMT ratio).

(2) Structural Model Assessment: Examining the path coefficients (β), coefficient of determination (R^2), and the significance of the interaction term (Remote Work × POS) to test the moderating effect.

5.   Data Analysis and Results
5.1   Demographic Profile of Respondents

The analysis began with a descriptive assessment of the demographic profile of the 312 valid respondents. As shown in Table 1, the sample effectively captures the multicultural composition of the Malaysian workforce, a key contextual variable for this study. The ethnic distribution (Malay: 54.5%, Chinese: 28.2%, Indian: 11.2%, Others: 6.1%) closely mirrors the national employment statistics, ensuring the findings are representative of the broader population. Furthermore, 62.5% of respondents indicated working remotely for at least 3 days a week, providing a substantial basis for evaluating the impact of remote work arrangements.

Table 1. Demographic profile (N=285)

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	148	47.4
	Female	164	52.6
Ethnicity	Malay	170	54.5
	Chinese	88	28.2
	Indian	35	11.2
	Others	19	6.1
Age	20-29 years	102	32.7
	30-39 years	115	36.9
	40-49 years	68	21.8
	50 years and above	27	8.6
Remote Frequency	1-2 days/week	117	37.5
	3-4 days/weeks	128	41.0
	Fully remote	67	21.5

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

To ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs, the measurement model was evaluated using SmartPLS 4.0. As presented in Table 2, all item loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs ranged from 0.612 to 0.745, surpassing the 0.50 cut-off, which indicates that the latent variables explain more than half of the variance of their indicators (Hair et al., 2019). Both Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) values were above 0.80 for all constructs, confirming high internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability and validity statistics

Construct	Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Remote work (IV)	RW1	0.785			
	RW2	0.812	0.842	0.887	0.612
	RW3	0.765			
	RW4	0.798			
Organizational support (Mod)	POS1	0.845			
	POS2	0.862	0.895	0.921	0.705
	POS3	0.815			
	POS4	0.834			
Engagement (DV)	EE1	0.882			
	EE2	0.856	0.918	0.938	0.745
	EE3	0.891			
	EE4	0.824			

5.3 Structural Model Assessment (Direct Effects)

With the measurement model validated, the structural model was examined to test the direct hypotheses (H1 and H2). A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 sub-samples was employed to determine the significance of the path coefficients.

The results indicated that the model has substantial predictive power, with an R^2 value of 0.582, meaning that Remote Work and Organizational Support together explain 58.2% of the variance in Employee Engagement.

H1 Supported: Remote Work has a significant positive relationship with Employee Engagement ($\beta = 0.315$, t = 4.520, $p < 0.001$. This confirms that despite physical separation, the flexibility of remote work contributes positively to employee vigor and dedication.

H2 Supported: Perceived Organizational Support (POS) has a significant positive relationship with Employee Engagement ($\beta = 0.468$, t = 6.890, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that POS is a dominant predictor of engagement in the Malaysian context.

5.4 Moderation Analysis (Interaction Effect)

The central objective of this study was to test Hypothesis 3: whether Perceived Organizational Support (POS) moderates the relationship between Remote Work and Employee Engagement.

The interaction term (Remote Work ×POS) was added to the structural model. The results revealed a significant positive interaction effect ($\beta = 0.185$, $t = 2.950$, $p < 0.01$).

For employees who feel highly supported by their organization, increasing remote work intensity leads to a rapid increase in engagement. Conversely, for employees with low organizational support, the benefits of remote work are dampened, showing only a marginal increase in engagement. This confirms H3, establishing POS as a crucial enhancing moderator.

Table 3. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	T-value	P-value	Decision
H1	Remote work→ Engagement	0.315	4.520	0.000	Supported
H2	POS→Engagement	0.468	6.890	0.000	Supported
H3	Interaction (RW ×POS) → Engagement	0.185	2.950	0.003	Supported

In conclusion, the findings empirically validate the proposed framework, confirming that while Training and Development directly improves engagement, a significant portion of its impact is transmitted through the enhancement of employees' intrinsic Work Motivation.

6. Discussion
6.1 Discussion of Findings

This study empirically examined the relationship between Remote Work and Employee Engagement in Malaysian multicultural organizations, focusing on POS's moderating role. Analysis of 312 responses provided robust support for the proposed theoretical framework.

Hypothesis 1 was supported, confirming a positive direct link between Remote Work and Employee Engagement. This aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model: autonomy and flexibility function as critical job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). For Malaysian knowledge workers, work environment control and commuting reduction appear to enhance vigor and dedication.

Hypothesis 2 also received support, reinforcing Social Exchange Theory's (SET) applicability. POS's strong positive effect on engagement indicates that employees reciprocate perceived organizational care through heightened engagement－particularly significant in Malaysia's high-context culture where workplace relationships and "face" (dignity) are central (Hofstede, 2001).

Most critically, Hypothesis 3 was confirmed: POS significantly moderates the remote work-engagement relationship. Interaction analysis revealed that remote work's positive effect amplifies under high organizational support but diminishes under low support. This addresses the "isolation paradox" (Golden & Veiga, 2005), demonstrating that remote work's success depends not on inherent qualities but on organizational support levels.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to the Organizational Behavior literature in two key ways.

While previous studies often categorized remote work simply as a resource, this study demonstrates that it is a "conditional resource." The utility of remote work autonomy is heavily dependent on the presence of another resource: organizational support. This nuance enriches the JD-R framework by highlighting the synergistic effects between structural resources (remote policies) and social resources (support).

Most remote work studies originate from Western, individualistic contexts. By validating these relationships in Malaysia a multicultural, collectivist society this study suggests that the mechanism of "support" is even more critical in non-Western settings. In cultures where group cohesion is valued, the physical separation of remote work must be compensated for by stronger, more visible organizational support to maintain the social contract.

6.3 Managerial Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable strategies for HR leaders and managers in Malaysia＇s service sector:

(1) Beyond "Access" to "Support": It is insufficient for organizations to merely provide laptops and VPN access. The significant moderation effect suggests that managers must actively demonstrate "care." This could involve regular mental health check-ins, virtual town halls, and clear communication channels that replace the informal support previously found in physical offices.

(2) Culturally Responsive Support: In a multicultural workforce (Malay, Chinese, Indian), "support" may be interpreted differently. Managers should be trained to practice inclusive leadership－for instance, acknowledging diverse

cultural festivities virtually or accommodating flexible hours for religious observances (e.g., Friday prayers). This personalized support strengthens the POS, thereby maximizing the engagement of remote workers.

(3) The "High-Touch" Hybrid Model: Since low POS dampens the benefits of remote work, organizations should implement a "high-touch" approach for their remote teams. This means increasing the frequency of feedback and recognition. When employees feel that their contributions are seen and valued despite being physically distant, their engagement levels remain high.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, which limits the ability to make strict causal inferences. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to track how engagement fluctuates as employees transition between office and remote settings over time.

Second, while the study focused on POS as a general construct, future research could break this down into specific types of support, such as "IT Support," "Supervisor Support," and "Peer Support," to see which dimension is most critical for remote workers.

Third, the sample was drawn broadly from the service sector. Future studies could conduct a comparative analysis between specific industries (e.g., the highly digital IT sector vs. the more traditional education sector) to see if industry culture acts as a boundary condition.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the shift to remote work in Malaysia presents both a challenge and an opportunity. This study definitively shows that while remote work has the potential to drive high employee engagement, this potential is unlocked only when backed by strong organizational support. POS serves as the vital "safety net" that allows employees to enjoy the freedom of remote work without falling into the trap of isolation. For Malaysian organizations aiming to thrive in the digital economy, the message is clear: To disconnect geographically, you must connect psychologically. Investing in a supportive culture is not just a "nice-to-have"—it is a strategic imperative for sustaining a resilient and engaged remote workforce.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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