

Servant Leadership and its Influence on Work-Life Balance in Work from Home Settings

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of work from home on work-life balance within the Malaysian public sector, with a specific focus on the moderating effects of servant leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed traditional work practices, requiring an exploration of how work from home influences employee well-being and organisational outcomes. Using a correlational research design and a quantitative approach, data were collected through online surveys from 264 employees. Analysis was carried out using structural equation modelling (SEM) using SPSS version 27 and SmartPLS version 3.3.9. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between work from home practices and work-life balance ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 3.587$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that work from home improves the ability of employees to manage professional and personal responsibilities. Furthermore, the inclusion of Servant Leadership as a moderating factor significantly amplified this relationship, increasing the explained variance in work-life balance outcomes to 27.5%. This highlights the critical role of supportive leadership in shaping positive work from home experiences. However, a subtle understanding emerged from the slope analysis, which showed that while the low to median levels of servant leadership positively influenced the relationship, the high levels of servant leadership had a negative impact. This complexity indicates that the effectiveness of leadership support in remote settings varies and requires a balanced approach. This study contributes to the existing literature by emphasising the importance of leadership dynamics in work from home environments and providing practical recommendations for organisations. These include implementing flexible work policies, promoting open communication, offering training and development opportunities, prioritising mental health, and encouraging clear work-life boundaries. Future research should explore cross-cultural perspectives, the long-term effects of work from home, and the impact of various leadership styles to better understand the intricate dynamics of work from home and work-life balance. By addressing these factors, organisations can foster a resilient, engaged, and well-balanced workforce in the evolving landscape of work from home.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Malaysian Public Sector, Servant Leadership, Work from

Home, Work-Life Balance

Introduction

The global COVID-19 outbreak has significantly altered traditional work practices, leading organisations around the world to adopt work from home arrangements as a strategic response to ensure business continuity and protect employee health and safety. This rapid shift to work from home has reshaped professional dynamics and masked the boundaries between work responsibilities and personal life (Hoffmann-Burdzińska & Austen, 2020). In this transformative landscape, understanding the impact of work from home on work-life balance has become a crucial area of research. This requires a thorough examination of work from home practices, leadership methods, and employee well-being. The interplay of these factors presents both challenges and opportunities for organisations striving to navigate the complexities of work from home environments while prioritising the overall well-being of their workforce (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between work from home and work-life balance within Malaysia's public sector, with a specific focus on the moderating effects of servant leadership. Servant leadership is a leadership approach in which the primary goal of the leader is to serve others. This approach is in contrast to traditional leadership that focusses on the success of the organisation (Rofcanin et al., 2021). Servant leaders prioritise the needs of their employees, fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment. They emphasise empathy, active listening, and the personal and professional growth of their team members. By focussing on serving others, servant leaders can create a positive organisational culture that improves employee satisfaction and well-being, which is particularly important in the context of work from home, where direct supervision and traditional managerial practices are less feasible (Tran & Truong, 2021).

Building on previous literature, this study addresses key knowledge gaps and clarifies the mechanisms by which work from home influences employees' work-life balance (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). By examining the role of servant leadership, this research provides insight into how leadership styles can mitigate the challenges posed by work from home and improve overall employee well-being.

Work-from-Home and Work-Life Balance

The COVID-19 pandemic required unprecedented changes in workplace dynamics, with many organisations, including those in the Malaysian public sector, rapidly transitioning to work from home arrangements to comply with public health directives. This sudden change, mandated by the government's Movement Control Orders (MCO), was designed to control the spread of the virus while maintaining operational continuity (Director General of Public Service, 2020). Work from home has been both a practical solution and a complex challenge, significantly impacting employees' work-life balance.

The implementation of work from home has been recognised as a critical measure to ensure employees' safety and business continuity during the pandemic. Previous studies have indicated that work from home can offer numerous benefits, such as greater flexibility, reduced commuting time, and improved job satisfaction. For example, Subramaniam et al. (2020) found that flexible working arrangements positively impacted work-life balance and

lowered stress levels. However, the rapid transition to work from home during MCO also exposed various challenges. Employees faced difficulties in separating work responsibilities from personal life, which increased stress and fatigue related to work (Palumbo, 2020).

Servant Leadership

The leadership style adopted during such crises plays a crucial role in shaping employees' experiences and outcomes. Servant Leadership, characterised by prioritising the growth and well-being of team members, has been posited as a beneficial approach to enhance employee satisfaction and work-life balance. Greenleaf (1970) as cited by Agazu et al. (2022) introduced the concept of Servant Leadership, emphasising leaders' roles as servants first, focussing on the needs of others, and fostering a supportive work environment. In the context of work from home, effective leadership is vital in addressing employees' unique challenges and ensuring their well-being.

The effectiveness of Servant Leadership in mitigating the negative impacts of work from home on work-life balance, particularly in the Malaysian public sector, remains underexplored. Although some studies suggest that supportive leadership can improve employee adaptability and satisfaction during work from home (Winston, 2022), others indicate potential cultural and contextual limitations (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2021). This study aims to investigate these dynamics by examining the moderating role of Servant Leadership in the relationship between work from home and work-life balance among employees in the Malaysian public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance.
2. To examine the moderating effect of Servant Leadership on the relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance?
2. Does Servant Leadership moderate the relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance?

Hypotheses

1. H1: There is no relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance.
2. H2: Servant Leadership has no moderating effect on the relationship between work from home and employees' work-life balance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a correlational research design to examine the relationships between work from home, servant leadership, and work-life balance within the Malaysian public sector. A quantitative research approach is used, using an online survey method to collect data from employees working in various departments and levels within the organisation (Putri & Amran, 2021).

Sampling Strategy

The study uses a convenience sampling strategy to recruit participants, targeting employees who have experience working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Malaysian public sector. A total of 264 respondents were included in the study, providing various perspectives on the impact of work from home on work-life balance (Chu et al., 2022).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved the distribution of online surveys to selected participants, capturing their perceptions and experiences related to work from home practices, leadership styles, and work-life balance. The survey questionnaire was designed with a 7-point Likert scale of agreement to obtain responses to key variables of interest, allowing a comprehensive analysis of the research constructs (Ilhan, 2021).

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the complex relationships between work from home, servant leadership, and work-life balance. SEM enables the evaluation of both direct and indirect effects between variables, providing a robust framework for understanding the moderating role of Servant Leadership in shaping work-life balance outcomes (Juchnowicz & Kinowska, 2021).

Software Tools

For data analysis, SPSS version 27 was used to perform preliminary statistical analyses and data cleaning procedures. Subsequently, SmartPLS version 3.3.9 was used to perform the structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis, allowing the testing of research hypotheses and the exploration of the moderating effects of Servant Leadership on the relationship between work from home and work-life.

Using these advanced analytical tools and methodologies, this study uncovers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of work from home practices and leadership influences on employees' work-life balance, contributing to a deeper understanding of organisational well-being in the context of evolving work environments.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The study surveyed 264 employees of the Department of Polytechnic Education and Community Colleges (JPPKK) in Putrajaya. Among the respondents, 38.3% were male, and 61.7% were female. A significant majority, 87.5%, were married, while 12.5% were single. In terms of service groups, 72.3% belonged to the Management and Professional group, 5.3% were from the Top Management group, and 22.3% were part of the Support Group.

Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity. All constructs demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.70: Work from Home (0.934), Work-Life Balance (0.919), and Servant Leadership (0.879). The Composite Reliability (CR) values were also above the threshold of 0.70, indicating good reliability that is Work from Home (0.946), Work-Life Balance (0.941), and Servant Leadership (0.905). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, confirming convergent

validity that is Work from Home (0.660), Work-Life Balance (0.762), and Servant Leadership (0.580).

Impact of Work from Home on Work-Life Balance

The impact of work from home on employees' work-life balance was analysed using SmartPLS version 3.3.9. The results of the structural equation model (SEM) revealed a significant positive relationship between work from home practices and work-life balance among JPPKK employees ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 3.587$, $p = 0.000$). This finding indicates that work from home significantly improved employee perceptions of work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results are aligned with previous studies by Putri & Amran (2021) and Sandoval-Reyes et al. (2021), which also found that work from home can enhance employees' work-life balance.

Moderating Effects of Servant Leadership

The study also examined the moderating effect of servant leadership on the relationship between work from home and work-life balance. Analysis using SmartPLS showed that servant leadership significantly moderated this relationship. The inclusion of moderating effects increased the R^2 value to 0.275, indicating that 27.5% of the variance in employees' work-life balance was explained by the combined influence of servant leadership and work from home practices. This finding is consistent with İlhan (2021) and Juchnowicz & Kinowska (2021), underscoring the importance of leadership in shaping the work-life balance of remote employees.

Slope Analysis

A slope analysis was performed to better understand the moderating effects of servant leadership on the relationship between work from home and work-life balance. Figure 1 shows the simple slope analysis, which indicates that at the median level, servant leadership had a mild effect on the relationship. At a low level, servant leadership positively influenced the relationship between work from home and work-life balance. However, at a high level, servant leadership negatively affected this relationship. These findings are in line with those of Vyas & Butakhieo (2021), who also highlighted the complexity of leadership dynamics in work from home settings.

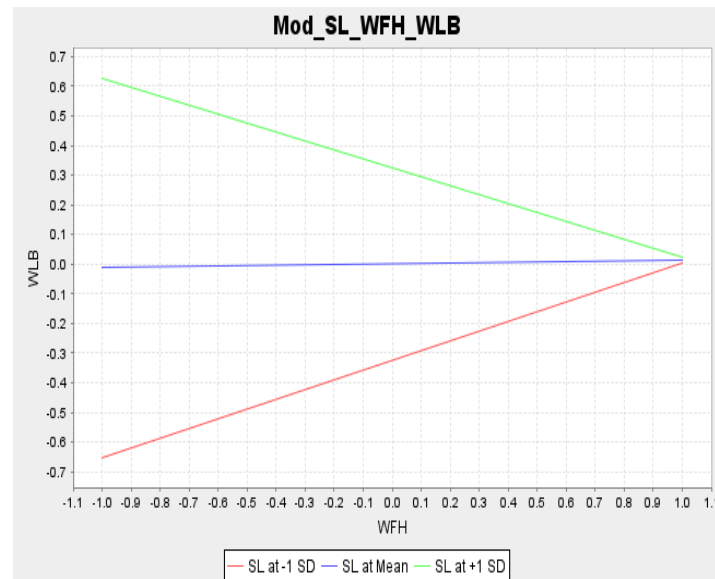


Figure 1 Simple slope analysis of the effect of Servant Leadership (SL) between work from home (WFH) and employees' work-life balance (WLB)

Comparison of Relationship Results Before and After Moderating Effects

Before considering the moderating effects of servant leadership, the initial analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between work from home practices and employees' work-life balance ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 3.587$, $p = 0.000$). This finding indicated that work from home had a beneficial impact on improving employees' perceptions of work-life balance, consistent with the findings of Hoffmann-Burdzińska & Austen (2020).

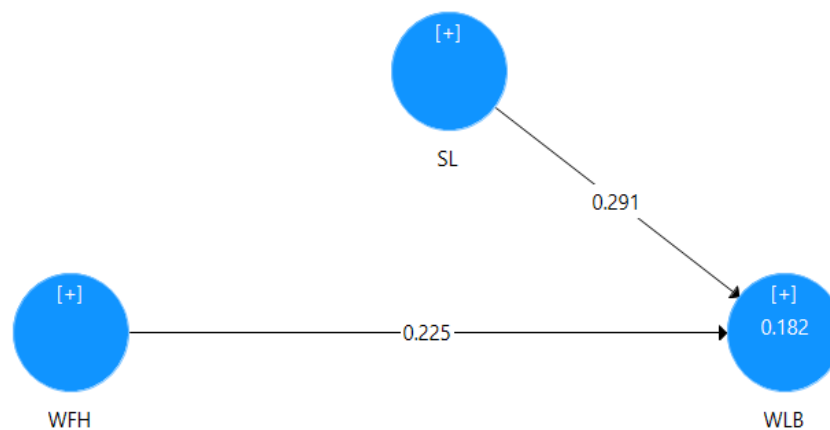


Figure 2 Structural Model indicates the R^2 Value of WLB with the Moderating Effects Excluded

Introducing the moderating effects of servant leadership into the model led to an increase in the R^2 value from 0.182 to 0.275, indicating a notable improvement in the variance explained in employees' work-life balance as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3. This change highlighted the significant role of servant leadership in shaping the relationship between work from home practices and work-life balance outcomes. These results are consistent with the findings of Sandoval-Reyes et al. (2021), who also emphasised the role of leadership in work from home settings.

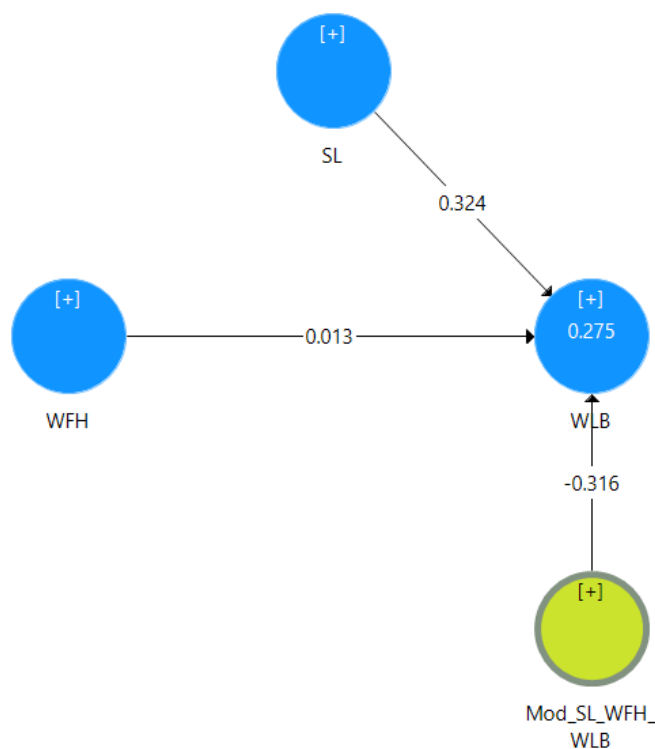


Figure 3 Structural Model indicates the R^2 Value of WLB with the Moderating Effects Included

The post-moderation slope analysis revealed the overall effects of servant leadership on the relationship between work from home and work-life balance. At different levels of servant leadership, the impact on the relationship varied: at a median level, the effects were mild; at low levels, servant leadership positively influenced the relationship; and at high levels, it negatively affected the relationship. This detailed examination highlighted how servant leadership altered the dynamics between work from home and employees' work-life balance, emphasising the importance of leadership support in work from home settings. These findings align with the observations of Kacprowska (2021), who pointed out the complex interplay of leadership in work from home environments.

In summary, the comparison of the relationship results before and after considering the moderating effects of servant leadership demonstrated not only the initial positive association between work from home and work-life balance, but also the significant influence of servant leadership as a moderator. The findings underscore the complex interaction between work from home practices, leadership dynamics, and employees' work-life balance, highlighting the need for customised interventions to support employee well-being in evolving work environments. This is in line with the conclusions drawn by Takami (2023), who also advocated adaptive leadership strategies in work from home contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing research that underscores the positive impact of work from home on employees' work-life balance. This study reaffirms that work from home arrangements promote flexibility and autonomy, key elements to achieving a harmonious integration of work and personal responsibilities. These conclusions are consistent with the observations of Mamatha & Kumar Thoti (2023), who highlighted the essential role of work from home in improving work-life balance through increased flexibility.

Furthermore, the study's findings on the moderating effect of servant leadership align with the principle of supportive leadership styles, which prioritise employee well-being and participation. This is supported by Wong et al. (2020), who emphasised that servant leadership practices positively influence employees' experiences and work-life balance.

However, the study also reveals a divergence from the initial hypothesis that working from home might negatively impact work-life balance. Instead, the data show that work from home can improve work-life balance, highlighting the complexity of work from home dynamics. This discrepancy echoes the insights of Rañeses et al. (2022), who noted the need to consider contextual factors such as leadership and organisational support to understand employee experiences with work from home. Furthermore, the study emphasises the significant role of servant leadership as a moderating factor, which enhances the positive outcomes of work from home on employees' work-life balance.

The study also reflects the evolving nature of work from home practices and the need to adapt research frameworks to address contemporary work environments. Palumbo (2020) similarly stressed the importance of adapting research models to capture the nuances of modern work arrangements, which is corroborated by the findings of this study.

For organisations and policymakers, these findings emphasise the need to develop policies and initiatives that support flexible working arrangements and foster a sustainable work-life balance. Recognising the positive influence of work from home on work-life balance, as supported by Prasad & Satyaprasad (2023), can guide the creation of supportive work environments that improve employee satisfaction and productivity.

Additionally, the role of servant leadership as a moderating factor underscores the importance of leadership practices that focus on empathy, support, and collaboration. This aligns with the work of Gică et al. (2022), who highlighted the critical role of supportive leadership in work from home settings.

For policymakers, the study emphasises the need to adapt regulatory frameworks to accommodate the growing prevalence of work from home. García-Salirrosas et al. (2023) also advocate for policies that support employee well-being and address the challenges of work from home, suggesting that such measures can improve organisational performance and employee engagement.

In general, this study contributes valuable information to the debate about work from home, work-life balance, and leadership dynamics. It highlights the interconnection of these factors in shaping employee experiences and organisational outcomes. By considering these findings,

organisations and policymakers can foster a culture of well-being and resilience in the evolving landscape of work practices, as supported by Pensar & Rousi (2023).

Conclusions

This study explores the relationship between work from home, servant leadership, and employees' work-life balance within the Malaysian public sector. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the findings reveal that work from home positively affects work-life balance, supporting existing research such as Lamprinou et al. (2021), which emphasises the benefits of work from home arrangements in enhancing employee satisfaction through increased flexibility and autonomy. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the significant role of servant leadership as a moderating factor, improving the relationship between work from home practices and work-life balance outcomes. This finding aligns with Abdul Aziz et al. (2023), who emphasised the importance of leadership styles, particularly servant leadership, in influencing employee well-being and work-life balance in work from home settings.

By contributing to the literature on work from home and leadership, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact to affect work-life balance. It underscores the importance of supportive leadership and its impact on employee experiences, consistent with previous research.

Future research should consider expanding the scope to include larger sample sizes and diverse organisational contexts to improve the generalisability of the findings. Further investigation of other leadership styles and organisational factors could offer a more comprehensive view of their impact on work-life balance in remote settings. Furthermore, studying the long-term effects of work from home on employee well-being and organisational performance could provide valuable insights into the sustainability and effectiveness of work from home practices, echoing the recommendations of Aliasah et al. (2020).

In general, this study offers important information on the complex interaction between work from home, leadership, and work-life balance. It highlights the need for organisations to implement supportive systems and policies that prioritise employee well-being in remote environments. These findings align with the recommendations of Dousin et al. (2021), advocating resilient, participatory, and productive work cultures to navigate the evolving landscape of modern work practices.

Recommendations

Practical Recommendations to Improve Employees' Work-Life Balance during Work from Home

Organisations are encouraged to implement flexible work policies that support remote arrangements and improve work-life balance. Allowing employees the autonomy to manage their schedules and tasks can significantly boost their sense of control and well-being, consistent with findings from Mamatha & Kumar Thoti (2023). Promoting communication and support is also crucial. Encouraging open communication channels and providing regular support through check-ins, virtual meetings, and access to necessary resources can help employees working from home feel more connected and engaged, according to Sharma (2021) recommendations for effective work from home management. Offering training and development opportunities is another key recommendation. Investing in continuous learning

and development programmes can improve employee skills and productivity, thus increasing job satisfaction and motivation, as supported by Gică et al. (2022).

Furthermore, prioritising mental health and well-being is essential. Organisations should offer mental health resources, wellness programmes, and stress management support to improve employee morale and performance. This approach aligns with İlhan (2021), who highlights the importance of employees' well-being initiatives during work from home. Encouraging work-life boundaries is also recommended. Setting realistic expectations, promoting effective time management strategies, and encouraging regular breaks can help prevent burnout and improve overall well-being, reflecting the findings of Pensar & Rousi (2023).

Recommendations for Leadership and Organisational Development

To effectively support working from home, organisations must implement leadership development programmes that focus on cultivating servant leadership qualities among managers. Emphasising empathy, support, and ethical behaviour in leadership practices can create a supportive environment to maintain healthy work-life balance, according to Palumbo (2020). Establishing clear communication channels is crucial to ensure that employees who work from home feel connected and informed. Using technology to facilitate seamless communication and regular updates, as well as to encourage open dialogue between remote employees and supervisors, aligns with the recommendations of Rañeses et al. (2022). Promoting flexible work policies that allow autonomy while ensuring productivity and collaboration among team members is essential. Such policies enable employees who work from home to manage their schedules effectively and integrate work and life seamlessly, reflecting Hoffmann-Burdzińska & Austen (2020) emphasis on flexibility in work arrangements. Encourage wellness initiatives through wellness programmes, mental health resources, and social connection opportunities can improve job satisfaction and work-life balance. This approach supports the findings of Sharkey & Caska (2020), which stress the importance of comprehensive well-being support for employees who work from home.

Areas for Further Research

Future research might explore the role of technology in the development of working from home dynamics and the well-being of employees. Investigating the impact of digital tools, communication platforms, and virtual collaboration methods will provide more detailed insight into how technology affects work from home, as suggested by Shirmohammadi et al. (2022). Examining cross-cultural perspectives is also recommended to understand the influence of cultural factors on work from home experiences and the results of work-life balance. This approach can shed light on the diversity of work from home practices in different cultural contexts, as discussed by Wong et al. (2020). Longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term effects of work from home on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organisational performance. Such studies will offer valuable information on the sustainability and effectiveness of work from home arrangements, as highlighted by Vaidya et al. (2023).

To better understand the influence of work from home dynamics and employee well-being, research on leadership styles other than Servant Leadership could be conducted. This research will contribute to a broader understanding of the leadership factors that influence work-life balance in remote settings, as noted by Elizabeth Eniola (2023). Exploring the gender-specific challenges and opportunities associated with work from home, including its

impact on work-life balance, career advancement, and caregiving responsibilities, will contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable work from home environment, according to Malik (2023). By implementing these practical recommendations and addressing these key areas for further research, organisations can improve the employees' work-life balance during work from home and gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics shaping work from home experiences and employee well-being, as highlighted by Sandoval-Reyes et al. (2021).

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