

# An Exploratory Study of Work from Home Experiences at Different Pandemic Stages in Thailand

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## Abstract

Work from Home (WFH) was a concept that began in the 1970s, but before COVID-19 it was not widely popular. The rising of COVID-19 outbreak is a catalyst for changes in working styles around the world. Pre-pandemic stage, many companies in Thailand rarely allowed employees to WFH. However, in-pandemic stage, the government had implemented the policy for every organization to voluntarily Work from Home.

This research aims to explore employee experience in changing working style in different pandemic stages. Data was collected from 504 subjects via online survey during June 2022 and gathered participants who had experienced WFH in pre-pandemic, in-pandemic, and post-pandemic stages. In order to measure differences among each stage, Net Promoter Score (NPS) was used to signify whether participants were willing to refer WFH to others or not.

The results indicate that the NPS of in-pandemic stage improves significantly compared to the NPS of pre-pandemic stage. Once the pandemic is more relaxed during midyear of 2022, NPS of post-pandemic stage, for both expected and actual values, becomes decreasing but still higher than NPS of pre-pandemic stage. Women with master degrees were likely to continue WFH after the pandemic. This research shed light on future work design for employee experience as Work from Anywhere (WFA) or Hybrid Work.

*Keywords: COVID-19, Work from Home (WFH), net promoter score, employee experience*

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 started from China on January 13, 2020. On January 31, 2020 Thailand was the first country that found a confirmed case of COVID-19 outside China. Then the number of infected cases in Thailand increased significantly in mid-March 2020. The government's response to the outbreak started with screening and contact tracing of infected people but the number of infection cases was increasing continuously. During that time, the COVID-19 was a new pandemic which had no vaccines and medicines. The advice from the World Health Organization was to live without facing other people or keeping social distance. At the end of March 2020, the government announced the suspension of going out of the habitat, closure of department stores, and restaurants in Bangkok in order to reduce the risk of infection. Almost every organization had to apply a teleworking policy immediately. Work from Home (WFH) is one of the social distancing ways to work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since most companies changed the way to work from Work from Office (WFO) to WFH, employees must change the way they work suddenly. The early period of this working style changing was very unprepared because before this pandemic, WFH was not

widely adopted in Thailand. WFH has advantages in the aspect of flexibility but the main drawback is the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues, supervisors, subordinates and customers. Moreover, the way to make relationships and brainstorming are difficult so that it impacts on organizational engagement. Consequently, WFH policy was not commonly used before COVID-19.

Until 2022, the situation of COVID-19 becomes better as our world has vaccines and a way to treat it. Afterwards, Thailand's Ministry of Public Health issued an announcement from 1 October 2022 onwards, canceling COVID-19 from a dangerous communicable disease. This announcement resulted in many companies to cancel their WFH policy. Although employees have become accustomed to WFH, the change in working style thus occurred again. Some employees prefer WFH rather than return to full-time work at the office. On the other hand, some employees may feel better to change back to WFO because they need to engage with their colleagues.

Different work environments affect different employee experiences. An increasing positive experience leads to better productivity. Therefore, this issue leads to the important question: *After COVID-19 becomes a non dangerous disease, how should an organization*

allow employees to WFH? What is the level of WFH that employees expect? Consequently, this research aims to explore WFH experience in each stage of COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings should support Human Resource to design the best work experience to maximize both employee productivity and satisfaction.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Work from Home

There are different forms of working styles. Before COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of businesses operated in style of face-to-face. Face-to-face working style maximizes communication effectiveness, participation, employee engagement and also customer engagement. However, certain types of work can be operated under teleworking or remote working styles. For instance, major corporations in the USA use outsourcing strategies to Asian countries to produce goods at lower costs which then encourage teleworking or remote working style. The most commonly outsourced tasks are accounting, digital marketing, and IT-related services according to Grand View Research. Top ten outsourcing service destinations were China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam (Outsource Asia, 2020).

Once COVID-19 emerged, employees were not allowed to work in face to face style. It disrupted all organizations to change working styles abruptly to work from home (WFH). COVID-19 first wave brought about unemployment in various industry sectors. Certain occupations cannot work remotely, including tasks that require working with equipment, hardware or jobs that involve face-to-face service. This is estimated to be as high as 63% in the United States according to the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) database (Dey et al., 2020). Industry business conditions and labor demand also played vital roles in employment during the virus outbreak. The highly adversely affected industry including Accommodation/Food, Arts/Entertainment/Recreation, Warehousing, Mining, and Public Sector unemployed staff significantly at 35% - 58% in May 2020 compared to February 2020 in the United States (Bick et al., 2020).

Research showed that occupations and salary range were factors in changes of working style. High paying occupations with knowledge-intensive nature could well embrace such changes due to the fact that the work can be carried out anywhere/anytime with the Internet although it represented only 13%. While vulnerable groups of workers were negatively impacted by WFH policies (Saltiel, 2020). Surprisingly, the sentimental analysis global study

via 100,000 total tweets revealed the positive emotions. It was found that 73.10% of the tweets were with positive emotions (trust, anticipation, joy, surprise) while 26.10% were with negative emotions (fear, sadness, surprise, anger, disgust) (Dubey and Tripathi, 2020).

Other factors that affected satisfaction during WFH including access devices, and number of children in the families. A study in the US, UK and Germany resulted in four groups of teleworkers including 1) Teleworking Lifers (9%), 2) City Escapees (24%), 3) Family Jugglers (30%), and 4) Struggling Commuters (37%). First two groups were individuals with high income and high education levels with their occupations in information technology, finance and education. The latter two groups were employees who have kids at home and less than two Internet access devices with their occupations in administration, health, retail and manufacturing (Strategy Analytics, 2020).

Although several countries adopted WFH before COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand adopted it at a very low rate. Therefore, after the pandemic happened, Thailand encountered key challenges in adaptation due to the country lockdown.

The situation forced Human Resources to change their policies to support employees to WFH with hardware support in the early stages of COVID-19. The IT department also played important roles in preparing software deployment, remote access authorization and authenticity. While in most cases, software and network to work remotely was not supported at hardware level, therefore it affected both the psychology of work productivity in work and creating a working society. Fatigue, stress, burnout and physical deterioration can occur due to not being able to manage time properly. Although in many cases, WFH operations saved time on transportation, enabled a formation of virtual teams online to work and a provision of more time for family members (Galanti et al., 2021).

Work from home (WFH) style also was extended to Work from anywhere (WFA) style because the pandemic diminished firm revenues. Cost cutting policies were executed by selling firm property or reducing office spaces. Until after covid period, such firms adopted WFH/WFA styles permanently. For instance, Boeing allows back-office employees to WFH.

There was limited research in Thailand studying working styles. Authors hypothesized that each stage of pre-pandemic, in-pandemic, and post-pandemic provided different employee experiences. Therefore, this research aims to study employee experiences in different stages of pandemic in order to understand appropriate

working style and assist HR to design policy to optimize both employee experience and associated costs.

## 2.2 Net Promoter Score

There are many metrics to measure customer satisfaction such as Net Promoter Score (NPS), Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT) and Customer Effort Score (CES). In the business perspective, customer satisfaction was a good indicator of customer experience. The perception of customer experience had the potential to influence the way people feel and talk positively about brand and business. The Net Promoter Score (NPS) was a score based on customer survey questions and an analytical approach used by both large and small companies to measure customer experience and predict customer loyalty. Originated from Fred Reichheld's research, NPS had been widely accepted by consulting firms for using it to predict customer behavior in order to recommend products or services (Reichheld, 2003).

Organizations realized employees were as equally important as customers. Customers were an important external stakeholder and employees were essential internal stakeholders. Measure of employee satisfaction could shed important light on how employees feel and think about their organization. Satisfied employees were more likely to be more engaged, more productive and stay with the company for a long time (Dziuba, 2020). There were various methods to measure employee satisfaction for instance Employee Satisfaction Index (ESI) and Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS). It could be observed that NPS is used as a measure that can measure both internal and external stakeholder feedback. Although NPS was mostly used in marketing literature, it had been recently adapted to be NPPS (Net Performance Promoter Score) in order to measure employee performance during crises. NPPS involved three following questions: 1. How likely was it that you would recommend working with [name of individual, workgroup, or unit] to a friend or a colleague? 2. Why did you provide the rating that you provided? 3. What would it take to raise the score just by one point? (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021).

Main concept of NPS was to ask the simple but powerful question of "How likely was it that you would recommend our company to a friend or colleague?" (Reichheld, 2003) was asked based on a scale from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely), spaced 1 evenly apart, to be an input data for NPS. To calculate NPS, scores were divided into the following groups: Scores 0-6 were those who were dissatisfied and would slander (Detractors). Scorers 7-8 were neutral and passive (Passives). Scorers 9 -

10 were those who were satisfied and will tell good stories (Promoters). NPS was calculated from (Percentage of Number of Promoters) - (Percentage of Number of Detractors), percentage of Number of Passives was not taken into account.

The core NPS benefit was that a company's NPS could be compared versus its competitors or other companies. NPS was often used as a key measure in feedback programs. In Marketing view, it acted as a predictor of future business revenue growth. For the Human Resource view, NPS could be a measure of employee satisfaction to understand staff's engagement level and in turn boost productivity and happiness levels. Therefore, this research had adopted NPS to measure employee experience in WFH during the COVID-19 crisis in order to explore their feelings about working style changing in different pandemic stages.

## 3. Methods

This section described data acquisition, data preparation, data analysis and data visualization. The objective of this research was to explore WFH experience in each stage of COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, the data collection was designed as an online questionnaire to acquire the data from knowledge workers in Thailand. The online questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was designed to gather information about WFH. In order to deeply understand the employee's point of view about WFH, this part asked the respondent to answer WFH experience in four stages. The first stage is pre-pandemic and the second stage is in-pandemic that their company applied WFH policy. The last stages occur after the Thai government announced COVID-19 was not a dangerous communicable disease and this research called it post-pandemic stage.

For the post-pandemic stage, it was divided into two sub-stages which were post-pandemic stage (expected) and post-pandemic stage (actual). The reason to separate it into expected and actual sub-stages is that in this period some companies needed their employees to return to work full-time at the office but some companies were still adopting a full-time remote working policy. Moreover, some companies combined working at the office and working remotely together as appropriate. Even companies in the same industry may have different policies. The interesting issue is how employees think and expect about their working style in the post-pandemic stage. Each person has different expectations and their expectations may not be the same as the actual set by the company. To acquire the insight of this issue, post-pandemic (expected)

and post-pandemic (actual) stages will reveal the different WFH experience perception from employees.

Furthermore, this questionnaire part applied a scale based on NPS that designed an answer scale of 0 to 10. These answer scales will group employees' responses into 3 groups: Detractors, Passives, and Promoters. Criteria for NPS goodness judgment was described in one of the market research agencies as general guidelines. NPS score above 0 is "good". It means that your audience is more loyal. NPS above 20 is considered "favorable". Bain & Co, the source of the NPS system, suggests that above 50 is excellent, and above 80 is world class. However, NPS varies from countries to countries (Perceptive Insights Team, 2022).

In this study, NPS was used as a proxy to represent the willingness of employees to refer WFH for the others in different pandemic stages: pre-pandemic stage, in-pandemic stage, post-pandemic stage (expected), and post-pandemic (actual) stage.

The second part contained ten questions about the respondent's profile. These two parts of questionnaire were created via Microsoft Forms and launched via online in June 2022. The invitation and details of study including link to online survey were distributed via social media channels. The respondents totally equate to 504. Data result was represented via Microsoft Forms. A variety of NPS were calculated

for each WFH stage. Visualizations were performed with Gauge to represent the positive or negative level of NPS.

#### 4. Results

The survey finding presented in this section provides an insight into WFH status in order to understand experiences of teleworkers in Thailand. The online questionnaire was collected with 504 persons. Respondents were asked about their gender, age range, education level, occupation, companies' industry and income range. Moreover, this survey also asked them about their information during COVID-19 outbreak: number of families, place of stay and electronic device usage.

Most of the respondents were female 308 (61%) and male 196 (39%) and more than half (54.9%) of them were in the age range of 35-49 years old. The large proportion of 128 (25.9%) respondents were from the technology industry. Almost a quarter of respondents 123 (24.4%) got a salary range of 60,001 - 100,000 baht/month. During COVID-19, only 76 (15%) respondents lived alone, 233 (46.2%) lived with father and mother and 223 (44.2%) lived with their spouse. Notebooks and mobile phones are the main devices during WFH.

The result about WFH status was analyzed into four stages: Before COVID-19, During COVID-19, After COVID-19 (Expected), and After COVID-19 (Actual) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Net Promoter Score of WFH Experience in Each COVID-19 Stage

	Pre-pandemic	In-pandemic	Post-pandemic (expected)	Post-pandemic (actual)
Promoters	29	184	57	80
Passives	22	111	102	84
Detractors	453	209	345	340

For the pre-pandemic stage, there was a very low proportion of employees who were working from home as NPS = - 85. The level of WFH Promoters before COVID-19 equaled 29/504 (5.75%). The level of WFH Detractors before COVID was at 453/504 (89.88%).

For the in-pandemic stage, WFH NPS = - 4, there were 184/504 (36.51%) of people adjusting to WFH at the Promoters level, whereas WFH Detractors were at 209/504 (41.47%). It represented higher change from NPS=-85 before COVID-19.

Currently, when the COVID-19 situation was relaxed, WFH NPS = - 57, people "expect"

WFH 57/504 at Promoters level (11.30%) and WFH 345/504 (68.45%) for Detractors level.

However, WFH NPS = - 51, in the "actual" situation, employees experienced WFH 80/504 at Promoters level (15.87%) and 340/504 at Detractors level (67.46%).

Data was further explored for demographics analysis: gender and education level. It was found that women with master's degrees had a higher "expectation" of WFH than men (42.25%: 18.85%), while those with bachelor's degrees were slightly different (17.19%: 11.52%) and Ph.D. (5.14%: 4.76%).

In addition, it was found that women who graduated with a master degree were in "actual"

situation more likely to be WFH than men (40.95%: 20.50%), while the bachelor's degree was slightly different (16.62%: 11.63%) and the doctoral degree was almost even (4.18%: 6.07%).

At the doctoral level, female respondents had more career diversity. It brought about those getting less WFH because of specific occupations. Such positions included front-line jobs, government officers, and public health professionals that had to serve people in face-to-face operations.

## 5. Discussion & Conclusion

Working remotely from home was not new in the age of the Internet. However, the outbreak of an epidemic caused social distancing which became a significant accelerator for remote working.

Even WFH NPS of all pandemic stages were not positive, WFH NPS of the in-pandemic stage (NPS = -4) improved significantly from WFH NPS of pre-pandemic stage (NPS = -84). It implies there were more WFH promoters compared to WFH detractors notwithstanding they were forced by government lockdown policies. Once COVID-19 situation gained more relaxed, expected WFH NPS of the post-pandemic stage (NPS = -57) became more negative but was not equal to NPS of pre-pandemic stage (NPS = -84). The actual WFH NPS of the post-pandemic stage (NPS = -51) were not different from expected WFH NPS.

As this research collected data in four stages of pandemic which were pre-pandemic, in-pandemic, post-pandemic (expected) and post-pandemic (actual) stages, analysis results found three interesting issues in each transition period. First, from pre-pandemic to in-pandemic stage, it was a surprise that results indicated respondents were happy with WFH despite the fact they did not WFH before and they were forced to WFH unintentionally. Second, the transition from in-pandemic to post-pandemic (expected), people would be happy when they can go back to WFO, but the finding showed that going back onsite was not as happy as when they got WFO during COVID-19. Third, comparing between post-pandemic (expected) and post-pandemic (actual), the finding expressed that respondents were happier about WFH more than they expected. These three issues could help Human Resource to understand employee's feelings in each period of transition and could be useful information to support how to design working styles which were optimal for employees such as Work from Anywhere (WFA) or hybrid work style.

In view of demographic, this finding found that women expected WFH more than men, especially women with a master degree. This might be due to the responsibility of household chores including the burden of raising a child at a young age, and caretaking for the elderly at home. This study revealed the set of variables including gender, education, occupation (especially the nature of work), industry sectors and the level of impact affected by COVID-19, including government policies that had influences on the design of the WFH of the organization, because COVID-19 was not yet over. There must be a combination of on-site and on-line work in the future or "Hybrid" work. It was considered a new dimension of working as a flex-time employee, which was different from a full-time employee and part-time employee.

Changing of working style will affect many stakeholders. For employees, as the finding indicated that different demographics of employees require differing working styles. WFH influences both work and life, and further impacts family relationships. For human resources, the need for different working styles of employees has become a concern. To manage a variety of employee segments, human resources has to design strategies on how to retain talents, improve employee morale and keep pace with workplace trends. For the Information Technology (IT) department, if an organization designed multiple working styles, IT has to support all flexible styles including design security policy, internet access, firewall setting, and hardware providing. For organization, each type of working style had a different cost. This pandemic has affected many businesses and some businesses have not recovered yet. Many companies need to reduce their cost to survive their business. Therefore, the working style should be designed appropriately in order to satisfy all stakeholders.

In summary, both public and private organizations should be aware of the changing working style after our world faces this pandemic. The other important issue is to understand the expectation of the style of work that employees want in order to build trust and loyalty in work for employees as they are the most valuable resource. Moreover, organizations will be able to handle the situation of an unending epidemic or in the future that may cause a new epidemic or an unforeseen event.

The researchers believe that the results of this study should provide some perspective that can be useful to other organizations. For future research, there might be other factors to support organizations to design working style such as productivity at work including productivity of

each employee, as well as the overall productivity of the organization. It depends on the nature of work and lifestyle of each employee and also depends on the organization's culture. These might be interesting factors to study about WFH experiences in the future.

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