

What Happens to Workers Who Work from Office Again During Covid-19 Pandemic?

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Abstract

Background: The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the government to make regulatory changes to suppress the spread of Covid-19, one of which is to Work From Home (WFH). Today, as Covid-19 cases began declining, offices slowly began returning to the Work From Office (WFO). Changes from WFH to WFO during the Covid-19 pandemic created pressure that made certain perceptions of stress and work stressors during this period.

Method: This study examined the stress dynamics at the Tax Public Service Office in Tangerang using a mixed method approach. Quantitative methods were used to describe work stress and stressors using the Indonesian version of the SV-NBJSQ (Short Version New Brief Job questionnaire). Qualitative methods with semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to obtain an overview of workers' perceptions of work stress and stressors in WFO during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Results: From the results of the questionnaire which were confirmed with in-depth interviews, we found that the results of stress symptoms were similar, namely low vigor, fatigue, fear, and physical stress, with stressors in the form of negative work-life balance, Covid-19, and work overload.

Conclusion: In-depth interviews could explore the questionnaire answers about existing stress symptoms and the underlying stressors. This research can be a factor for consideration for companies to take steps to reduce work stress as they began transitioning towards WFO.

Keywords: Covid-19, public service workers, perception, work stress, work stressors, work from office.

Abstrak

Latar Belakang: Pandemi Covid-19 membuat pemerintah merubah regulasi untuk menekan penyebaran Covid-19, salah satunya dengan *Work From Home* (WFH). Saat kasus Covid-19 mulai menurun, perlahan mulai kembali *Work From Office* (WFO). Perubahan dari WFH ke WFO di masa pandemi Covid-19 menimbulkan tekanan yang membuat persepsi tertentu terhadap stres dan stresor kerja selama ini.

Metode: Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika stres pada Kantor Pelayanan Publik Pajak Tangerang dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran. Metode kuantitatif digunakan untuk mendeskripsikan stres kerja dan stresor dengan menggunakan SV-NBJSQ (Short Version New Brief Job Questionnaire) versi bahasa Indonesia. Metode kualitatif dengan wawancara mendalam semi terstruktur untuk memperoleh gambaran persepsi pekerja terhadap stres kerja dan stresor di WFO selama pandemi Covid-19.

Hasil: Dari hasil kuisioner yang dikonfirmasi dengan wawancara mendalam, didapatkan hasil gejala stres yaitu rendahnya semangat kerja, kelelahan, ketakutan dan stres fisik, dengan stresor berupa keseimbangan kehidupan kerja yang negatif, Covid-19, dan beban kerja yang berlebihan.

Kesimpulan: Wawancara mendalam dapat menggali jawaban kuesioner tentang gejala stres yang ada dan penyebab stres yang mendasarinya. Penelitian ini dapat menjadi bahan pertimbangan bagi perusahaan untuk mengambil langkah-langkah mengurangi stres kerja saat mereka mulai bertransisi menuju WFO.

Kata kunci: Covid-19, pekerja pelayanan publik, persepsi, stres kerja, stresor kerja, *work from office*.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government has decided to enforce a policy to protect its citizens from the transmission of Covid-19, by allowing offices to conduct work from home (WFH), except for essential sectors such as finance, healthcare, and retail services system. This policy forces all work systems to undergo new changes in the working system. The policy continues to be updated according to the development of active cases of Covid-19 in Indonesia.¹ Office workers are forced to work from home and must adapt as quickly as possible to keep working productively. The implementation of WFH has both positive and negative impacts on workers and companies.² Previous studies during the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed that working patterns have changed and that gave rise to a psychosocial problem.³⁻⁶

The Tax Public Service Office, which operates under the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, is an essential government sector that implements WFH. This office must operate in order to support the country's economy during the Covid-19 pandemic even though conducted from home.^{7,8} As the changes of covid-19 pandemic situation, the working system is also adapting. The workers have to start working from office (WFO) when the number of covid-19 cases have declined. The return of workers to WFO during the Covid-19 pandemic has forced workers to work in uncertain environments while still under threat from the virus. However, workers must continue working and immediately adapt to these changes to feel comfortable without work stress.^{9,10} The stressful situations and these changes will cause work stress problems. This study aimed to obtain an overview of stress and work stressors when returning to WFO during the pandemic so that mitigation actions can be taken to work effectively without stress.

METHODS

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed method approach, where we first conducted quantitative methods, followed by a qualitative study to help explain the phenomena. This study was conducted from July until August 2022 when office workers have started to return to WFO for one month. The quantitative approach used a cross-sectional design to assess the outcome description of work stress and work stressors in the Tax Public Service Office in West Tangerang. This was done by distributing the Indonesian version of the SV-

NBJSQ questionnaire online to all workers with staff positions and Account Representatives (AR) with a total of 82 respondents. The Indonesian version of the SV-NBJSQ is a validated work stress and stress assessment questionnaire, which can assess:¹¹

1. Job demands: quantitative work overload, interpersonal conflict, emotional burden, role conflict, work-self balance;
2. Task-level job resources: job control, job fit, meaning at work, role clarity, career opportunities;
3. Workgroup-level job resources: supervisor support, support from family and friends, monetary/status rewards, achievement appreciation, leadership, interactional justice, workplaces where people complement each other, workplaces where mistakes are acceptable;
4. Organization-level job resources: trust in management, readiness to change, respect for individuals, fair personnel evaluation, diversity, career development, (positive) self-work balance, job involvement, capital social workplace, and job satisfaction.
5. Results (outcome stress): low vigor/vitality, anger, anxiety, fatigue, depression, physical stress.

Data collection was in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews with an interview guide for workers. Qualitative samples are all workers in the staff and account representatives who get results from the questionnaire at least one of the outcome stress, then continued to in-depth-interviewed until a saturation of ideas has been formed. This research has passed the ethical review with number KET-668/UN2.F1/ETIK/PPM.00.02/2022 issued by the University of Indonesia Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee. Independent variables are work stressors, perceptions of work stressors, age, length of work, gender, education level, and marital status. The dependent variables are job stress and perceptions of work stress. This research will analyze quantitative data in a univariate in the form of a frequency distribution in order to obtain a descriptive picture of each variable. Qualitative data analysis was carried out by means of verbatim transcription, choosing main ideas, taking keywords by coding and categorization, confirm the validity using the researcher's triangulation method, and then presented in narrative form. Keywords were determined based on the limitations of the operational definitions of work stress and work stressors according to the Indonesian version of the SV-NBJSQ.

RESULTS

The study started with quantitative data collection by distributing online questionnaires to 82 people. The results showed in Table 1.

The prevalence of work stress is 28% (23 people), with those who have at least one outcome stress. The distribution of outcome stress result seen in Table 2.

There are 28 types of work stressors from the questionnaire and the most common stressors are presented in Table 3.

Table 1. Respondent's Characteristic

Variable	N	%	
Age	82	100	Med (min-max) 35 (21-57)
Sex			
Male	36	43,9	
Female	46	56,1	
Education			
High School	4	4,9	
Academy	48	58,6	
Bachelor	28	34,1	
Magister	2	2,4	
Length of work			
≤ 10 tahun	56	68,3	
>10 tahun	26	31,7	
Marital status			
Single	26	31,7	
Marriage	56	68,3	
Position			
Staff	40	48,8	
Account Representative (AR)	42	51,2	

Table 2. Result Outcome Work Stress

Outcome Stress		Total	
		N	%
Low Vigor/ Vitality	Yes	15	18,3
	No	67	81,7
Fatigue	Yes	10	12,2
	No	72	87,8
Anxiety	Yes	8	9,8
	No	74	90,2
Physical stress	Yes	3	3,7
	No	79	96,3

Table 3. Result Work Stressor

Work stressor		Total	
		N	%
Emotional demands	Yes	26	31,7
	No	56	68,3
Role conflict	Yes	59	28
	No	23	72
Negative work-life balance	Yes	20	24,4
	No	62	75,6
Quantitative job overload	Yes	13	15,9
	No	69	84,1

Furthermore, 23 people were selected as qualitative research samples after obtaining the prevalence of work stress because they have at least 1 of the outcome stresses from the questionnaire result. Interviews were conducted with the research team while audio and video were recorded. Fourteen people were eventually interviewed in depth because an idea saturation was reached. It was proven through a repeated answer more than twice so that data saturation has been formed.¹²

The interview started with identifying the outcome of stress that workers feel through knowing their initial perceptions of work stress and stressor. After knowing their perception, we continue into questions

about what they feel when work stress arises. From the identification of the stress, the next question to ask is what work stressors underlie the emergence of this work stress. Finally, we can categorize it as work stress and stressor based on an in-depth interview of the existing keywords.

When we were doing in-depth interviews, Covid-19 were still considered as pandemic, which causes fear among workers. The fear that emerged during in-depth interview was described as fear of Covid-19, fear of being infected, and fear of meeting taxpayers again. So that we categorize fear as work stress with the stressor is Covid-19, which can be seen from the results below:

Keyword: Fear

“At least WFO is due to a pandemic, so I’m more nervous and afraid of getting Covid” – Respondent IDI 1

“When first opened, I was afraid...I see taxpayers like monsters, I’m afraid.” – Respondent IDI 7

“Scared but not afraid. A little scared....”- Respondent IDI 9

“... around us, there are many who are infected with covid, that’s what I’m afraid of.” – Respondent IDI 10

Keyword: Covid-19

“...for example, when it's getting a high case of Covid-19, we're told to go in...that's more risky.” – Respondent IDI 1

“..afraid of Covid-19.” – Respondent IDI 7

“...still have to go to the office, it feels like..ummm..” - Respondent IDI 9

“...the problem is that we serve. I once felt that I was still told to take care of it, even though it was already this bad. In the end, it's true that I got Covid-19.”- Respondent IDI 10

Another category of work stress is fatigue. Fatigue for everyone has its own meaning and is subjective. Fatigue here is a variety of conditions accompanied by a decrease in efficiency and endurance at work. Work fatigue is fatigue that occurs in humans because of the work done.¹³ The fatigue in this study is illustrated by the following interview results:

Keyword: Fatigue

“More tired... I’m still working hard, just tired... – Respondent IDI 5

“...Going home..no energy to do anything.”- Respondent IDI 7

“Tired during WFO... what makes you tired is because there is additional work, there is an event like that...”-Respondent IDI 8

“..tired on the road, tired of going to work every day. So tired...”- Respondent IDI 12

Work life balance is a condition in which individuals are able to manage and divide work responsibilities and personal life such as family, hobbies, spiritual activities, and other self-development activities.¹⁴ There is a workload that has a negative effect on personal life which we finally describe as a negative work balance, which can be seen from the following interview results:

Keyword: Negative Work Balance

“When WFO wakes up feeling more lazy, because they have to get up early, the distance to the office even though it’s Tangerang but it can get jammed also makes it more tiring when it’s WFO because it’s already tired on the way..” -Respondent IDI 5

“Only at the beginning I had problems with the check-in time, until I was reprimanded too...Because it’s a new habit, right? At that time I was in Bekasi not at the Mess, it started to have traffic jams.” – Respondent IDI 10

“...in the past, before the WFO was at home, during the WFH, I just took a shower in the afternoon, now I have to take a shower in the morning before going to work.” - Respondent IDI 13

Quantitative workload means workload due to the large quantity of work and the inability to process work on time.¹⁵ This started happening during the WFO era because there were already offline meeting events and work targets were starting to return to how they were before the pandemic, as can be seen from the results of the interview below:

Keyword: Quantitative workload

“The load goes up, because the needs are different again during this pandemic, there’s a lot more to take care of...many activities have started recently.”- Respondent IDI 5

“There will be more tax payers sending postage like that, and it’s like we’re the ones piling it up ourselves, because WFH isn’t as productive as WFO. the post is very stacked. -Respondent IDI 7

“Yes, the activities will be the same if it’s due. Office activities, which involve a lot of work, often come home at half past 6, do as much as you can, as if you are running out of time.” – Respondent IDI 9

“The workload is different now, but because of the WFO it can be done because it’s in the office.”- Respondent IDI 12

There were also results of outcome stress and stressors that were only experienced by a minority of people. Physical stress is considered a physical response to stress, which can be in the form of symptoms of tired eyes, stiff neck, palpitations, headaches, indigestion, or other physical complaints.¹⁶ Physical stress found in this study is in the form of headaches, according to the results of the following interviews:

Keyword: Physical stress

“Yes, I have a headache, I really have a headache...” -Respondent IDI 7

This is felt by workers as the provision of work that is not their responsibility which can make them feel stressed, so we categorize a stressor called role conflict.¹¹

Keyword: Role Conflict

“... given additional work suddenly, if for example given something like this, work on the deadline for the next 2 weeks, the next week, you can divide the time, sir.” – Respondent IDI 2

Another stress outcome that is felt is low vigor, because you have to work back in the office after working at home for so long.

Vigor is defined as a feeling of readiness that allows a worker to produce more and better work without increasing fatigue.¹⁷

Keyword: Low vigor

“It’s like when I come home from work, I feel like I want to go home quickly... in the end, there’s no energy at home” - IDI Respondent 7

“Until 5 o’clock, I’m still working hard, just tired.. Still trying to fulfill it” - IDI Respondent 5

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted from July until August 2022 when office workers have started to return to WFO for one month. At that time the positive number for Covid-19 was decreasing, so the government tried to transition to WFO.⁸ The results of this study will explain what work stress and stressors occur when they have to return to work in the office.

In this study, 18.3% workers had low vigor. This is very different from the research conducted in Jakarta at 2015 on blue-collar workers (39.6%). This difference occurs because they have just returned to work from the office after almost 2 years having WFH. So there is a new working atmosphere that creates a new sense of enthusiasm. Similar results obtained from in-depth interviews that there is a feeling of wanting to quickly return home or return to WFH. According to Hardy (2009) it is said that low vigor is a negative affective state characterized by depression, lethargy, and fatigue.¹⁷

Returning to work from the office in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic has created a perception of stress as fear because the stressor comes from the Covid-19 environment itself. Fear arises because of fear of contracting Covid-19, going home, and being a disease carrier for other family members. These results are in line with other studies by Sumakul (2020) that there are stress, fear, and anxiety related to the danger of Covid-19 transmission when working from the office.¹⁸ According to the theory of Lazarus and Folkman that the work environment is considered a threat that endangers well-being and can trigger work stress.¹⁹ The office is expected to have standard operating procedures (SOP) regarding the prevention of Covid-19 to eliminate the fear of workers.

After a long time doing WFH, workers have to re-adapt when they return to WFO, resulting in physical fatigue, which is different from before the Covid-19 pandemic. They feel more fatigue than before due to negative work-life balance as a stressor, which is interpreted as less time to do home and family activities due to the time taken to go to work.¹³

The finding of negative work balance as a stressor in this study is in line with research with the theme of a new era in the Covid-19 which has changed the work-life balance of workers.²⁰

The physical stress that reappears when returning to WFO during this Covid-19 pandemic is headaches, and this is due to the accumulated workload, which causes a change in the schedule for working. There is a habit of piling up work that should have been done during WFH but is now being completed during WFO. So when they have to WFO it makes the workload seem like a lot because of the pile of work.^{15,21}

Workers are expected to have good personal time management to help them from this problem.

These all findings are in line with research on hospital administrative workers who still have to work in offices during the Covid-19 pandemic which causes work stress in participants, namely psychological symptoms in the form of feelings of fear, anxiety, panic, and worry about working in a hospital environment; fatigue as physical symptoms; and behavioral symptoms is delaying work so that it has an impact on decreased work productivity.²²

According to the workers, there is no change in work stress levels in the pre-pandemic and WFO period, as their work position and workload remains the same. Only the method they work has changed, but according to them, the new method can be done and

is no longer a problem for them. This is different from research at the North Malang Tax Office, which found that during the WFO Covid-19 pandemic stress became lighter because of new online service methods so that the quantitative workload decreased.²³

CONCLUSION

The results of questionnaires and interviews conducted during the 100% WFO during the Covid-19 pandemic were similar, namely the presence of work stress in the form of low vigor, fatigue, anxiety, and physical stress. The interview can confirm deeper into the perception of the source of these symptoms. Complaints of fatigue stem from a negative work-life balance due to reduced time to do activities at home. Meanwhile, the anxiety in the questionnaire is perceived as the fear of working in the Covid-19 environment.

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