

Headline	SEEKING BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE WITH 40-HOUR WEEK		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	26 Jun 2019	Color	Full Color
Section	Local News	Circulation	36,278
Page No	67	Readership	108,834
Language	English	ArticleSize	768 cm ²
Journalist	AISYAH ABDUL HADI	AdValue	RM 26,372
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 79,116



WAGES AND PRODUCTIVITY

SEEKING BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE WITH 40-HOUR WEEK

Research has proven that long working hours does not necessarily lead to higher productivity and efficiency, writes **AISYAH ABDUL HADI**



Working 40 hours in a week has been implemented in many developed countries, without any adverse effect towards employability and company's profitability. PIC BY ROSELA ISMAIL

MALAYSIA'S new government had progressively made few changes for the betterment of the people as well as for the country.

As of now, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government had managed to fulfil just 53 initiatives out of the 128 initiatives in total.

Some of the significant changes brought by the PH government include the implementation of the Sales and Services Tax, implementation of Employees Provident Fund contribution for housewives, stabilising the price of petrol and a few others.

Early this year, the monthly wage ceiling of RM1,100 or RM5.29 per hour was implemented as the standard minimum wage. The public discontentment was obvious as many felt the raise in minimum wage was paltry and perceived as inadequate to cope with rising living cost.

According to the Malaysian Trades Union Congress, the meagre rate was not enough and should have been increased based on the high cost of living including the rising prices of goods at the present time.

This opinion was supported by Bank Negara Malaysia's 2018 annual report which stated that:

"Analysis examining the wage to productivity ratio showed that Malaysian workers are still being paid less than workers in benchmark economies, even after accounting for the different productivity levels across countries."

This suggests that Malaysia's

current wage productivity levels are misaligned. Theoretically, the ideal wage levels for workers can only be realised if employers are able and willing to increase wages significantly. However, this might be difficult to do, especially for companies bent on maximising profits.

In another perspective, the government can help ease the pressure on workers by reducing the weekly working hours from 48 hours, as stated in the Employment Act 1955, to 40 hours a week. This amendment is the least the government can do to help employees from being overworked and underpaid.

The notion of working for 48 hours a week is rationally arguable. Working eight hours for six days is unseemly for workers, especially those with a family.

The more time spent at work will translate into less time available for participation in non-working life. Long working hours reduces opportunities for socially productive leisure by restricting the time available for being an effective marriage partner, parent and citizen.

Khazanah Research Institute also highlighted the problem of long working hours in Malaysia, which reduces time for relationships, leisure and other impor-

tant pursuits.

Research has proven that long working hours does not necessarily lead to higher productivity and efficiency. Long working hours may instead lead to exhaustion and contribute to higher probability of employees committing errors during work. Overwork can also lead to sleep deprivation and stress.

According to a AIA vitality survey, 54.4 per cent of workers sleep under seven hours per night due to sleep problems caused by long working hours and stress.

Bank Negara Malaysia's 2018 annual report also stated that higher labour productivity comes with higher wages and not by the duration of working time.

In Jakarta, the standardised working duration is 40 hours per week with seven or eight working hours per day as stated in the labour law, with the minimum wage of 3.94 million rupiah (RM1,149).

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that labour laws would undergo major reforms to improve legislation related to labour and manpower, as well as to improve the wellbeing and social security of workers in Malaysia.

Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran had said that the

labour law amendments were almost done and the amendment bills will be presented in Parliament next month. It is hoped the ministry will amend the working hours by reducing it from 48 hours to 40 hours per week.

Working 40 hours in a week has already been implemented in many developed countries, without any adverse effect towards employability and company's profitability.

In Europe, a full-time employee works 40.3 hours in a working week, whereas the longest working hours is in the United Kingdom with 42.3 hours while Denmark has the shortest working hours with 37.8 hours per week.

In fact, people working in Denmark, Sweden and Norway with much fewer hours per week tend to be very productive, happy and healthy. Even in Indonesia, the labour law prescribes normal working duration of 40 hours per week.

In essence, the government should legislate a reduction in the number of working hours per week to produce more high quality employees with a happy lifestyle.

The writer is a researcher at Institute for Research and Development of Policy (IRDP)

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