

# PwC's Hopes and Fears Survey 2021

## Malaysia report

April 2021



**pwc**

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# Introduction

It's been over a year since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and suffice to say, we wouldn't have coped as well as we did if not for technology. Thanks to technology, we were able to stay connected though physically apart. We were able to shop online, implement contact tracing measures, and of course, work remotely.

As we experienced, COVID-19 became the unexpected catalyst that hastened digital transformation, carrying with it a number of significant implications for organisations, namely the change in (i) skills needed; (ii) workplace behaviours and expectations; and (iii) how and where we work.

How have Malaysian workers adapted to our digital world amid the pandemic? And what are their thoughts on the future of work?

## **The hopes and fears of the Malaysian workforce**

During this period of uncertainty, we heard from 2,003 Malaysians to see if their views on technology, jobs, and skills have changed since we polled them last year\*.

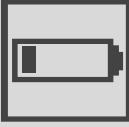
The responses from our survey - gathered when states in Malaysia were under various Movement Control Orders - put a spotlight on the double-edged impact of technology. That while it can deliver tremendous benefits, it can also disrupt job roles and widen the digital divide, not to mention promote unhealthy workplace cultures where people are unable to disconnect.

This report will provide you with key insights, as you redesign your workforce strategy and rethink your upskilling/reskilling plans in order to strengthen organisational resilience and agility.



\*Our 2020 report 'Digital resilience in a new world' was an independent report prepared by PwC Malaysia as a local version of PwC's Global 'Hopes and Fears 2019' report. The responses from this 2021 report are taken from the global survey commissioned by the PwC global network, of which Malaysia was one of the 19 participating territories.

# Key findings\*

 Malaysians embrace technology but are anxious about jobs	 Many are eager to develop new skills	 Remote work is in demand	 Malaysians are in danger of burnout	 Malaysians want to work for purpose-driven companies, but not at any price
<p><b>77%</b> believe technology presents more opportunities than risks.</p> <p>However, <b>71%</b> are worried that automation is putting many people's jobs at risk.</p>	<p><b>57%</b> say they improved their digital skills since the pandemic began.</p> <p><b>92%</b> are given the opportunity by their current employers to improve their digital skills outside their normal duties.</p> <p><b>88%</b> are ready to learn new skills or completely retrain in order to remain employable in the future.</p>	<p><b>55%</b> prefer a mostly virtual work environment, while</p> <p><b>28%</b> prefer a wholly virtual place where employees can contribute from any location.</p> <p>Only <b>16%</b> prefer a mostly face-to-face work environment.</p>	<p>Only <b>28%</b> are able to disconnect from work outside working hours and make use of their full annual leave entitlement.</p> <p>Only <b>25%</b> say their employer helps them to manage stress and focus on creating mental and emotional wellbeing.</p> <p>Only <b>22%</b> are encouraged to take short breaks in the working day.</p>	<p><b>85%</b> say they want to work for an organisation that will make a positive contribution to society.</p> <p>However, if forced to choose, <b>70%</b> would take every opportunity to maximise their income, while</p> <p>only <b>30%</b> would choose a job that makes a difference over more money.</p>

\*Based on 2,003 responses from Malaysia

# Malaysians embrace technology but are anxious about jobs

Many acknowledged technology's potential in delivering opportunities even before COVID-19. But it was during the pandemic, when social distancing and working from home became the norm, that the advantage of adopting technology was truly demonstrated.

Almost overnight, our dependence on technology went from optional to essential, with technology supporting safety and business continuity through the enablement of contact tracing and remote working.

Perhaps due to our Malaysian respondents' first-hand experience in seeing what technology can do, it's not surprising that 77% of them believe technology presents more opportunities than risks (vs 64% globally<sup>1</sup>), a figure almost unchanged from last year's local survey<sup>2</sup> (78%). Age appears to influence this particular view, with the majority who agree with this statement coming from respondents between the ages of 18-34.

However, similar with last year, this optimistic view remains at odds with our respondents' sense of job security. 71% of Malaysian respondents are concerned that automation is putting many people's jobs at risk, compared to 60% globally<sup>3</sup>. What's crucial to note, is that this number appears to have risen significantly from last year's<sup>4</sup> 34%.

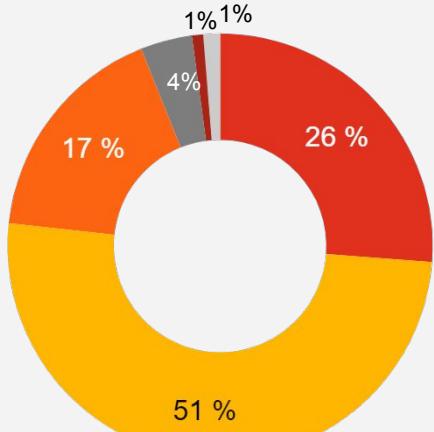
Meanwhile, over half of Malaysian respondents (57%) believe it's likely that their job will be made obsolete in the next 5 years because of technological advancements, compared to 39% globally<sup>5</sup>.



<sup>1, 3, 5</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021. PwC. 2021

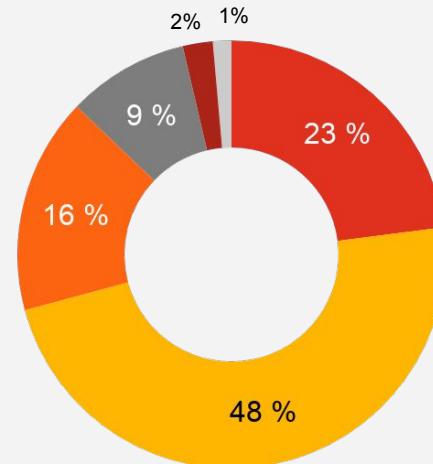
<sup>2, 4</sup>Digital resilience in a new world. PwC Malaysia, July 2020. Pg. 7

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?** Technology presents more opportunities than risks. (Some believe new technology and more automation present exciting opportunities to free people from routine work and focus on more interesting challenges. Others believe it risks causing mass unemployment and economic inequality)



- Strongly agree    ● Agree    ● Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree    ● Strongly disagree    ● Don't know

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?** I am worried that automation is putting many people's jobs at risk



- Strongly agree    ● Agree    ● Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree    ● Strongly disagree    ● Don't know

Note: Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding



The sentiment of job insecurity uncovered in our study may point to a worrying issue: workers may be getting opportunities to upskill or reskill (more in the next chapter), but perhaps the effectiveness of those programmes could be improved upon.

To support employees in their ability to work cohesively with machines, whether in their present or new roles, organisations may need to reassess the types of training needed, then implement customised programmes<sup>6</sup> for employees based on their job functions and level of proficiency.

<sup>6</sup>PwC's Academy, PwC Malaysia

## Takeaways

1

People were already anxious about the digitalised future before COVID-19, and with the pandemic heightening uncertainties, employers have a responsibility to see to it that their employees are not left behind. Employers will need to commit to educating their employees on how digital transformation is impacting the organisation, and how that may disrupt job functions. The relevance of current skills will then need to be assessed to identify gaps, so that employees can be properly upskilled or reskilled.

2

This applies across all industries, where digital transformation plans are being intensified. Essential to those plans, is an upskilling or reskilling programme that comprises a mix of technical and human skills, core to enabling employees to better adapt to the digital era.

# Many are eager to develop new skills

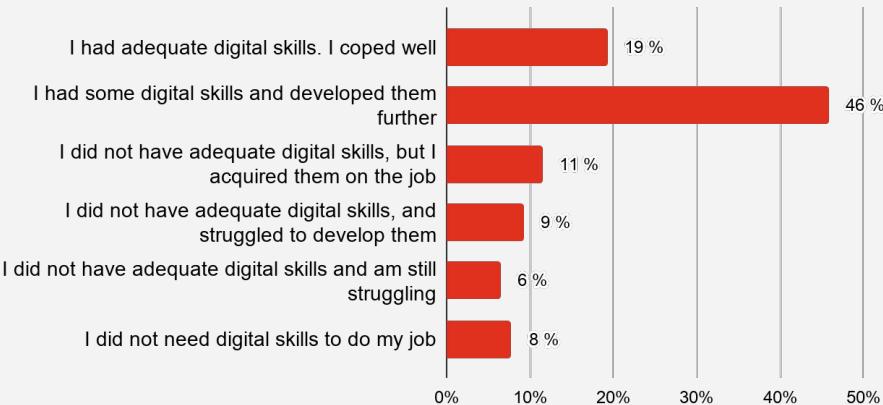
Going hand-in-hand with technology adoption are digital skills, which only 19% of respondents say they possess adequately, allowing them to cope better with the effects of the pandemic.

However on a positive note, 57% of Malaysian respondents report an improvement in this area since the pandemic began (vs 40% globally<sup>7</sup>). From that 57%, 46% say they had some digital skills and developed them further, while 11% didn't have adequate digital skills, but acquired them on the job.

Digital skills are certainly critical as they will be the difference between someone who can build a data visualisation platform that improves process efficiency, and someone who can only recommend the same old time-consuming method of collating and analysing data, for example. But as we noted in our 'Staying relevant to stay in business'<sup>8</sup> thought leadership, human skills need to be nurtured too.

That's because human skills like empathy and leadership cannot be replicated by technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI). And to adapt to change and be quick at problem-solving, employees will need to be agile and resilient, with mindsets that drive innovative solutions forward.

**Since the pandemic began, what best describes your experience regarding any digital skills needed to do your job?**



<sup>7</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

<sup>8</sup>Staying relevant to stay in business, PwC Malaysia, February 2021, Pg. 16

## Where are employees getting their opportunities to upskill?

If employees were improving their digital skills during the pandemic, who can they thank for that? Our findings point to our Malaysian respondents' current employers, with 92% saying they are given the chance to do so outside their normal duties, consistent with last year's results.

Breaking down the numbers, of the 92% above, 43% say they are provided 'many opportunities', a 5% increase from last year's 38%<sup>9</sup>, which indicates that employers are intensifying their efforts in ensuring their employees have a more solid understanding of digital solutions, and the know-how to implement and use them.

To provide learning opportunities outside an employee's day-to-day role, our experience tells us that a structured programme may help. For instance, at PwC Malaysia, we run what we call a 'Digital Accelerator' programme, where interested employees can sign up to digitally upskill themselves. The programme isn't mandatory, and has been designed to develop digital change agents who can build innovative digital solutions, which they can then share with their teams. To date, the impact we've seen from the programme has been positive.

**92%** are given the opportunity to improve their digital skills\* outside their normal duties



Of those who were given opportunities:  
**43%** are given 'many'  
**49%** are given 'some'

\*By digital skills we mean improving understanding and use of latest technologies, including computer applications and online platforms.

## Who bears responsibility for upskilling?

In PwC's 24th CEO Survey<sup>10</sup> released in March 2021, we found that CEOs in Malaysia believe that building a skilled, educated and adaptable workforce should be the top priority for both government (73%) and businesses (73%).

This is in line with our government's present focus. To sharpen our country's competitive edge, the government has launched MyDIGITAL<sup>11</sup>, a strategic plan with the end-goal of propelling Malaysia's digital economy forward. Recognising that a digitally-savvy workforce is key to ensuring technology is leveraged optimally, a number of initiatives<sup>12</sup> have been identified in the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint to prepare the rakyat for inevitable change.

And as we just covered, businesses also appear to be placing emphasis on enhancing their employees' skill sets.

These are positive developments in Malaysia, which suggest that we are on the right trajectory towards addressing the existing skill gaps within the country. It's also encouraging given that our local respondents rank 'employers' as number one in terms of who is most responsible for helping people reskill.

But what about individuals? Is the onus also on them to update their skills, rather than relying on their employers? Most of our Malaysian respondents (87%) give an affirmative answer. The increase from last year's 49%<sup>13</sup> could be attributed to a variety of reasons.

Perhaps our respondents are self-learners who are intrinsically motivated to acquire new skills. Or maybe the training provided by their employers do not meet their personal needs - for example, your employer assigns you to attend a design thinking workshop as it's a business need, but you find yourself wanting to work on your communication or leadership skills too.

**87%** agree and strongly agree that it's their own responsibility to update their skills rather than relying on their employers

<sup>10</sup>A leadership agenda to take on tomorrow, 24th Annual Global CEO Survey, Malaysia findings, PwC, 11 March 2021

<sup>11</sup>Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, Economic Planning Unit, 2021

<sup>12</sup>Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, Economic Planning Unit, 2021, Pg. 60

<sup>13</sup>Digital resilience in a new world, PwC Malaysia, July 2020, Pg.13

Our survey shows that Malaysians are translating their belief into action. While respondents are given learning opportunities from their employers:

**54%** say they learned via free online resources (For example, online videos, podcasts, e-learns, etc.)

**32%** say they learned through training or a course they funded for themselves

These avenues provided our respondents with new skills that they were able to use over the last 12 months.

### For a brighter future, many are hungry to learn

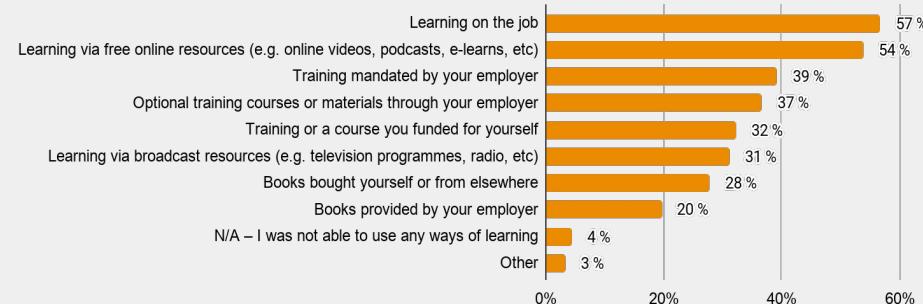
Through the independent efforts of our respondents above, we can establish that the desire for continuous improvement is strong. In fact, similar to last year's findings<sup>14</sup>, 88% of Malaysian respondents are ready to learn new skills or completely retrain in order to remain employable in the future (vs 77% globally<sup>15</sup>).

They also believe they have the ability to learn new skills quickly (87%) and are confident that they can adapt to using new technologies entering their workplace (86%), with 35% saying they are 'very confident'.

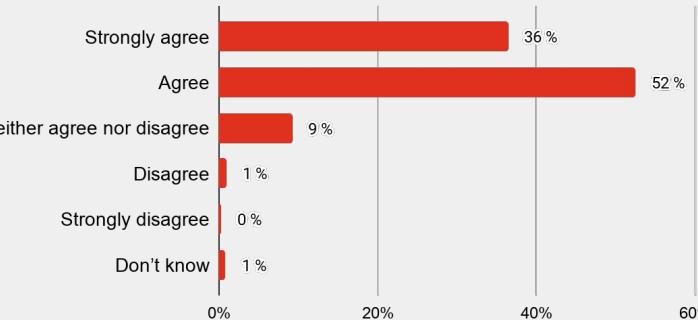
<sup>14</sup>Digital resilience in a new world, PwC Malaysia, July 2020, Pg.11

<sup>15</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

### Which of the following ways of learning have provided you with new skills you were able to use over the last 12 months?



### To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I am ready to learn new skills or completely retrain in order to remain employable in the future.



Note: Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding

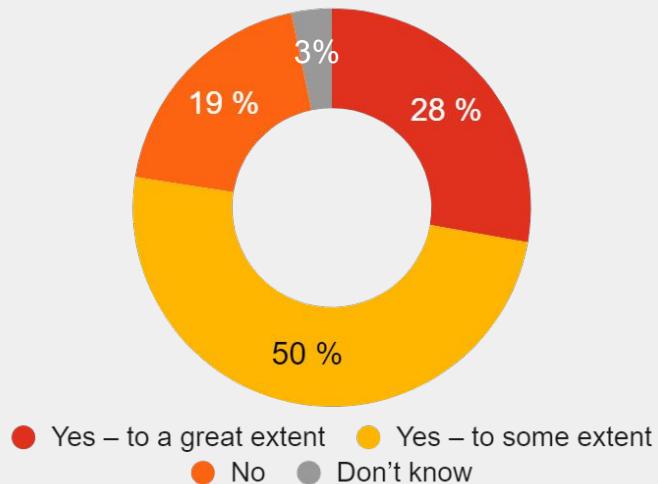
## Barriers to developing skills

The desire to learn is there, but hindering progress is the lack of access to technology, with 78% of Malaysian respondents saying their ability to develop skills has been limited because of this reason.

Organisations will need to ensure their people are properly equipped with the necessary devices or software to satisfy their upskilling/reskilling requirements. For instance, it won't be enough to 'tell' employees how to use a new digital solution via a video demo. Employees will need to be provided with the software itself so that hands-on practical training sessions can commence for them to become comfortable with the new tool prior to any introductions to new processes.

With regards to infrastructure, the government recognises that this is an issue that needs to be addressed<sup>16</sup> urgently, being a critical component to advancing our digital economy. The initiatives to improve broadband access and internet speed in the country are much anticipated, as they are paramount to narrowing Malaysia's digital divide.

**Would you say that your ability to develop your skills has been limited by a lack of access to technology? Either in the form of devices (for example, PC / laptop) or infrastructure (for example, lack of reliable wi-fi / broadband)?**



<sup>16</sup>[Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, Economic Planning Unit, 2021, Pg. 56](#)

## **COVID-19 has awakened the rakyat's entrepreneurial spirit**

A trend a number of us may have noticed during the pandemic, is an increase in the emergence of small or side businesses by Malaysians. Our survey confirms this observation. 69% of local respondents say they would like to be an entrepreneur and set up their own business (vs 49% globally<sup>17</sup>).

However, there may be a skills gap, as only 23% 'strongly agree' that they have entrepreneurial skills, that is, the ability to create and build businesses. For those who are serious about taking their business to the next level, it may be worth spending some time identifying what these gaps are in order to upskill, prioritising the skills that will be most relevant to their business. Regardless of the types of products or services sold, digital knowledge would help, as it would allow entrepreneurs to operate their business online, opening up the potential for a wider consumer base.



While **69%** would like to be an entrepreneur and set up their own business, only **23%** strongly agree they have entrepreneurial ability (ability to create and build businesses)

<sup>17</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

## Takeaways

1

COVID-19 has further established the need for upskilling and reskilling, which should encompass a mix of both digital skills and human skills (for example, resilience, agility, leadership, creativity, problem solving).

2

Upskilling or reskilling programmes should be developed based on the specific needs of employees and the business. For more effective training, employees should undertake a skills assessment, allowing organisations to better pinpoint what crucial skill sets are lacking.

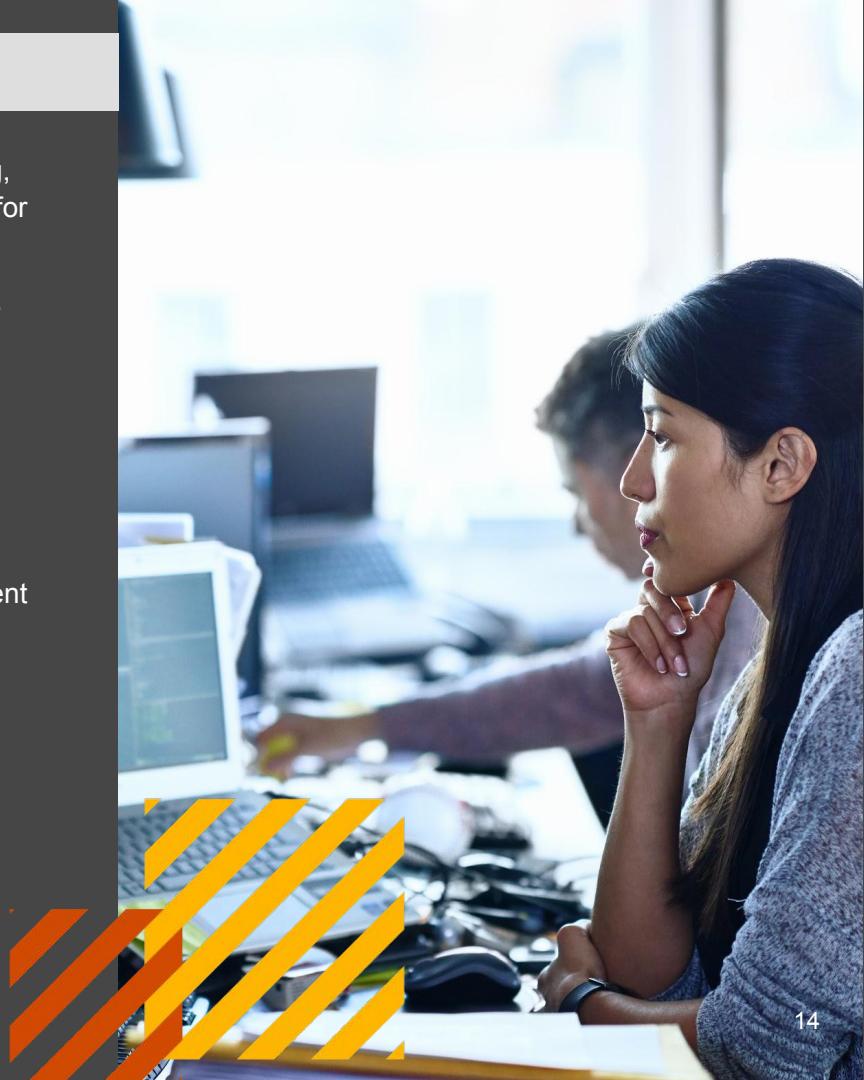
3

Everyone is responsible for ensuring upskilling/reskilling happens: the government, businesses and individuals. Public-private collaborations would help accelerate progress in this area, as each sector has their specific abilities that contribute to this goal (for example, the government in ensuring the nation has the necessary infrastructure in place to broaden digital access; businesses<sup>18</sup> in helping the government shape and drive the upskilling agenda forward in the country).

4

Malaysians show determination to acquire new skills and are getting opportunities to learn, whether through their employers or by themselves. However, there are still barriers blocking access. The disparity in access to infrastructure and upskilling and reskilling opportunities is a problem that needs urgent prioritisation, the failure of which could further widen the digital divide.

<sup>18</sup>Staying relevant to stay in business. PwC Malaysia. February 2021. Pg. 17



# Remote work is in demand

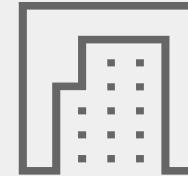
The possibility of employees working away from the office had long been a topic of discussion before COVID-19, but for many organisations, it was just a concept. It wasn't until the pandemic forced the need for social distancing that remote working was put into practice on a global scale.

One year on, and the proof is in: people *can* work remotely. Experiencing the success of this workplace model has altered employees' behaviours and expectations. We see that employees want the option to continue working virtually even after the pandemic ends. From our survey, 55% describe their ideal work environment in the future as one that's mostly virtual. This preference is shared by both younger and older respondents (aged 18 and up, including those who are 55 and over). Of the 55%, 28% prefer a mix of face-to-face and remote working, while 27% prefer mostly virtual working with some face-to-face.

28% do not see the need to return to a physical office, preferring a wholly virtual place where employees can contribute from any location (powered by technology but where high performance is demanded). Only 16% prefer a mostly face-to-face work environment, out of which 8% would like the traditional work environment to be retained and 8% would also prefer working mostly face-to-face with some remote working. This vision of the future of work is consistent with what we're hearing from employees around the world<sup>19</sup>.



**55%** prefer a mostly virtual work environment



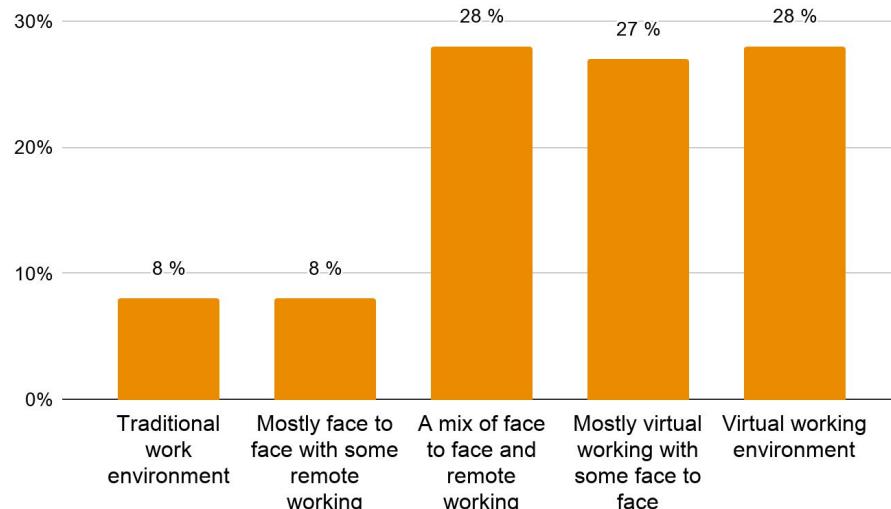
**28%** prefer a wholly virtual place where employees can contribute from any location



**16%** prefer a mostly face-to-face work environment

<sup>19</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

## In the future, what would your ideal work environment look like?



Note: Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding

The desire to shift permanently to a fully virtual or hybrid model is understandable, as working from home allows employees to save time on commuting, and for some, the flexibility to attend to family obligations at home.

In order to successfully reinvent ways of working that put people first, the perspectives of an organisation's employees will need to be given due attention.

That being said, as organisations work on their post-pandemic workforce strategy, they should also keep in mind that there isn't one fixed answer with regards to which workplace model should be adopted. The winning model would depend on the organisation's nature of work, their culture, and whether it supports productivity for the long-term.

From an employer branding standpoint, another important assessment to make would be whether the workplace model will help the organisation attract<sup>20</sup> or retain talent in today's job market.

<sup>20</sup>It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done, PwC's US Remote Work Survey, PwC, 12 January 2021

## **Moving away from the traditional workplace model**

For organisations that may be thinking about moving to a fully virtual or hybrid model, there will be a number of considerations to take into account:

### **1) Who goes in? And how frequently?**

70% of respondents believe that there are elements of their work that can be performed remotely with the help of advanced technology. The degree in which employees can do so may differ from role to role, which is why for a hybrid model to work, it may help for organisations to first create personas. Once these personas are identified, organisations can then map their roles and responsibilities to the percentage of time<sup>21</sup> employees are required to spend in the office.

### **2) Provide infrastructure that supports remote working**

Last year, we found that more effort was needed to fully enable employees to work remotely, as less than half<sup>22</sup> of our respondents were provided with all the necessary tools needed to work effectively. With a slight increase in respondents saying they are given many opportunities to improve their digital skills outside their normal duties (refer to pg. 9), we can infer that during the prolonged work-from-home (WFH) period, employers may have stepped up

<sup>21</sup>Creating the office of the future, Strategy+Business, 29 July 2020

<sup>22</sup>Digital resilience in a new world, PwC Malaysia, July 2020, Pg. 16

<sup>23</sup>It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done, PwC's US Remote Work Survey, PwC, 12 January 2021

efforts in equipping their people with the technology needed to carry out their roles, though more can still be done (refer to pg. 12).

For remote working to be sustainable, organisations will have to recognise that research and investments into technology will have to happen on a continuous basis. With 58% of respondents believing that technology breakthroughs will transform the way people work over the next 3-5 years, organisations will have to stay on top of the latest advancements in order to effectively support workplace innovation and productivity.

Organisations will also have to think about their real estate strategy<sup>23</sup> i.e. should they consolidate offices into one location or open satellite offices instead? In making a decision, the purpose of office spaces will have to be properly defined (For instance, for brainstorming sessions, collaboration etc.).



### 3) Strengthen cyber security

Stakeholders need to trust that remote working will not render them vulnerable to cyber attacks, a deterrent to transformation. Such is the importance of cyber security that it's one of the strategies<sup>24</sup> highlighted in the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, where an initiative under it is to 'encourage companies to invest in cyber security to create a safe, secure and trusted digital ecosystem'<sup>25</sup>.

In a remote work environment where there's heavier reliance on technology, mitigating the risk of cyber threats becomes even more pivotal. Defenses need to be strengthened to prevent data breaches, because if an organisation's data fell into the wrong hands, not only could this spell financial loss, but an erosion of brand trust as well.

And should organisations go down the route of using tools to monitor employees (more on this on pg. 19-20), they would need to implement this with extreme care, or they risk violating the privacy of their employees, not to mention privacy laws.

<sup>24</sup>Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. Economic Planning Unit. 2021. Pg. 42

<sup>25</sup>Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. Economic Planning Unit. 2021. Pg. 75

<sup>26</sup>It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done. PwC's US Remote Work Survey. PwC. 12 January 2021

<sup>27</sup>Hybrid work comes to financial services. The when, why and how often of the physical office. PwC's US Remote Work Survey. 2021. Pg. 10

### 4) Reshape culture and change existing mindsets that work is a place

Only 50% of respondents believe attitudes to remote working and benefits preferences will transform the way people work in the next 3-5 years, bringing into focus the question of mindset.

To maintain a strong company culture, there are employers<sup>26</sup> who believe the office plays an integral role, the value being that they facilitate collaboration and build camaraderie among team members. While there is truth in this, culture isn't tied exclusively to a physical place. As noted in a PwC US report<sup>27</sup>, "when employees buy into a culture, they're identifying with a team that reflects distinct values and needs."

Organisational culture will likely evolve in a remote work model. One hurdle to overcome, would be to change the perception that employees must be physically present at all times to be part of a team. The challenge would be to implement relationship-building alternatives that balance the need for face-time without contributing to virtual meeting fatigue.

And because an employee's clock-in, clock-out time isn't a perfect indicator of value delivered, managers should also be trained to focus on outcomes instead of how much time their employees spend in the (virtual) office.



#### 4) Build and practise trust

Generally, Malaysians don't seem to mind having their employers monitor their performance at work using technology like sensors or wearable devices (58%), with only 19% against it. Local willingness is higher than global willingness, with 44% agreeable and 31% against<sup>28</sup>.

This may demonstrate that Malaysians are committed to showing their employers that they have nothing to hide, that how they work at home is no different than how they would work in the office.

There is, however, a line that employees are not happy for employers to cross, and that's for employers to have access to employee personal data (for example, social media profiles etc.). 39% are unwilling to give employers access, while 35% are willing, consistent with global sentiments<sup>29</sup>.

Virtual monitoring of employee productivity may be the preferred course of action for some organisations. However, it's worth highlighting that this could potentially send employees a message of distrust, albeit indirectly.

<sup>28, 29</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

Rather than keeping employees under surveillance with devices or software - which, if not carried out carefully, could potentially violate employees' privacy - employers could communicate their expectations and schedule check-in sessions more frequently.

This would help build greater trust in a remote-working environment. And the quality of deliverables would themselves be proof of productivity and efficiency.



## Takeaways

1

Employees are not ready to give up on working remotely, having demonstrated that they're able to deliver on their responsibilities away from the office. A hybrid workplace model or a fully virtual one is, to them, the ideal work environment for the future.

2

However, there isn't one fixed model for every organisation. Workplace models should also depend on factors such as the organisation's nature of work, their culture, and how it could contribute to making the organisation a more attractive place to work.

3

The success of remote working will require organisational support in various forms, be it in providing employees with infrastructure or nurturing a culture of trust that also strengthens collaboration and teamwork virtually.

4

To update their real estate strategy, organisations will have to re-evaluate the purpose of the office and determine their employee footprint.

5

With technology heavily supporting the possibility of remote working, investments will also need to be made to strengthen cyber security, in order to minimise the risks of cyber attacks.

# Malaysians are in danger of burnout

Burnout isn't a phenomenon borne out of COVID-19. However, the blurring of boundaries between employees' personal and work lives due to working from home for an extended time, appears to have heightened<sup>30</sup> the likelihood of employees experiencing its symptoms.

Past PwC studies from our network have found that employees are struggling to cope during this challenging time, with employees saying they feel the pressure to be 'always on'<sup>31</sup>, and that their physical and mental wellbeing<sup>32</sup> have deteriorated.

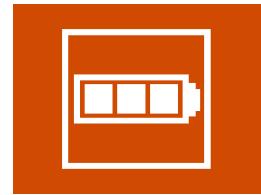
Unfortunately, this survey revealed that Malaysians are faring no better. Only 28% are able to disconnect from work outside working hours, and only 25% say their employer helps them manage stress and focus on creating mental and emotional wellbeing. At the same time, only 22% are encouraged to take short breaks in the working day.



Only **28%** are able to disconnect from work outside working hours (on weekends, in the evenings, on vacation, during study time, etc.) and make use of their full annual leave entitlement



Only **25%** say their employer helps them to manage stress and focus on creating mental and emotional wellbeing



Only **22%** are encouraged to take short breaks in the working day

<sup>30</sup>CHRO insights, PwC Pulse Survey, PwC, 15 September 2020, Pg. 2

<sup>31</sup>The future of work, Thinking beyond: How the pandemic is rewiring a new world of work, PwC Australia, 2020, Pg. 8

<sup>32</sup>Supporting employees working from home, Strategy+Business, 29 January 2021

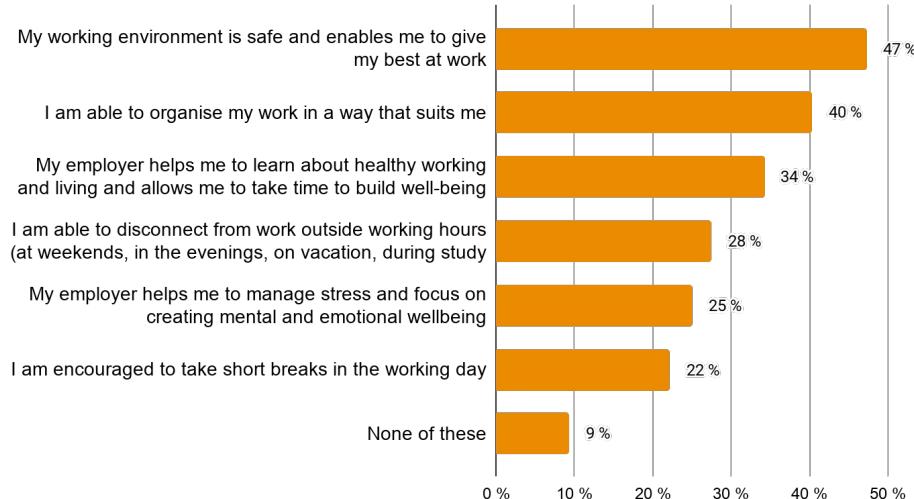
No doubt, the number of calls per day may have increased during the pandemic, as teams meet virtually to discuss and coordinate projects. We have technology to thank for enabling this ease in communication, fundamental to team cohesion. However, while on lockdown, the scheduling of back-to-back calls appears to have been normalised, likely leading to meeting fatigue.

Away from the gaze of their employers, employees may also feel the need to prove that they are not slacking, and so feel compelled to work for much longer after-hours. Whether this feeling is warranted or not is besides the point. The fact that employees feel this way could possibly signal towards underlying problems, for example, anxiety over job security or even the perception that they are not trusted.

If remote working is going to be the way forward, the root cause of issues that negatively impact wellbeing will need to be identified and addressed. What may help is adopting tools that provide workforce analytics and insights<sup>33</sup>. That's because data would enable workforce planning to be done more strategically, and support a better balancing of workloads<sup>34</sup> between teams and individuals.

Care packages and activities like virtual gatherings may inject employees with a dose of encouragement, but it's only a short-term fix. To boost vitality for the long-term, only measures that strike at the source of workplace stress will prove effective at preventing burnout.

### Are any of the following true of your employer?



<sup>33</sup>People analytics and insights, PwC

<sup>34</sup>Productivity 2021 and beyond: Five pillars for a better workforce, Upskilling the workforce of the future to create a competitive advantage in financial services, PwC, 2021

## Promoting wellbeing for sustainable productivity

Studies have found that performance suffers<sup>35</sup> when employees work for extended periods without a break. Expecting employees to work continuously then, would not only be detrimental to employees' mental and physical health, but may also lead to adverse results for the organisation's bottom line and the value they're able to deliver.

As mentioned earlier, organisations will have to get to the bottom of what exactly is feeding into workplace stress, as the root cause may differ from entity to entity. However, looking at the sentiments captured in this survey and speaking from our own experiences, these are some general practices that organisations can consider implementing.

### 1) Minimise meetings

Can an update be given through email? If yes, then reconsider sending that calendar invite for a call. Employees need time to execute tasks, and one less call may mean an extra hour for them to work on their assigned deliverables.



### 2) Be mindful of when you email

To help employees disconnect from work, a simple step to take would be to exercise mindfulness when sending out emails. Keep them within office hours, and should there be a need to communicate beyond that (i.e. at night or on weekends), then be clear about its urgency. If an email isn't urgent, then inform the recipient that an immediate response isn't expected.

### 3) Encourage short breaks

While working from home, it's easy to stay seated in one spot and toil away at a task at hand. This may be a common route people take in a bid to quickly cross off an item on their to-do list. But employers should encourage their employees to take microbreaks - even if it's just for five minutes - as this may actually boost productivity<sup>36</sup> instead.

### 4) Encourage employees to take their entitled leave

People need to rest in order to effectively reboot, which is why for productivity and high-performance to be sustained, employers should make it a point to ensure their employees are taking sufficient time off. And while employees are on leave, there shouldn't be any expectation for them to work.

<sup>35</sup>Dear Boss: Your Team Wants You to Go on Vacation, Harvard Business Review, 18 June 2015

<sup>36</sup>Go ahead and take five – it'll boost your productivity, The Star, 22 March 2021

## 5) Provide employees an avenue to share their feelings

Nurture a speak-up culture where employees aren't afraid to share their opinions with their teams or managers. This may prevent employees from struggling in silence and could lead to constructive conversations about how a particular issue could be resolved.

In view of our present challenging climate, organisations may also consider implementing a programme that offers employees counselling. For example, at PwC Malaysia, we have what we call our 'Employee Assistance Programme', which is available to all staff. Through the programme, our people have a channel to talk about their work or personal problems with a certified external counsellor, should they wish to do so. Talking about problems and having someone lend a listening ear are, to us, more than necessary to help relieve mental stress.

In summary, organisations need to support their employees' wellbeing so they can give their best at work. The key here would be to find the right balance between ensuring peak productivity and efficiency without compromising employees' quality of life. Giving weight solely to the former will contribute to overworked and tired employees, which increases the risk of disengagement and feelings of burnout.

The data has spoken. With greater awareness, it's now time to take action.



## Takeaways

1

Technology has made it easier for people to work anytime, anywhere, making it difficult for employees to disconnect. While productivity and efficiency are important, organisations cannot neglect their employees' physical and mental wellbeing. A balance has to be struck to prevent burnout and to sustain motivation and the delivery of high performance.

2

Organisations will have to identify the root cause of workplace stress as this will lead to long-term results, as opposed to relying heavily on feel-good fixes that offer employees temporary happiness.



# Malaysians want to work for purpose-driven companies, but not at any price

In our digital age where people have greater access to information, the resulting effect is more informed and aware communities who care deeply about societal issues.

In Malaysia, our survey reveals that societal impact matters, with 85% of respondents saying they want to work for an organisation that will make a positive contribution to society (vs 75% globally<sup>37</sup>).

This is evidence that workers value purpose, and they are demanding more from the corporate world. Issues like sustainability, the growing digital divide, and our ongoing health crisis, for example, can devastate people's lives and our economy, as we have seen. Being in a position to effect change, organisations will have to assess how they can help address these pressing issues. This may entail reviewing or even developing their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy<sup>38</sup>, which correlates with improved company performance according to a growing body of evidence. Or, organisations may also consider upskilling their people and communities in order to improve inclusivity within society, among others.

By contributing to society, organisations can meet the current expectations of workers and the public in general, who are increasingly seeking brands that mirror their values and beliefs<sup>39</sup>. This would not only strengthen the organisation's position in attracting top talent, but also its position in the consumer market.

But more than that, helping our society prosper is also directly linked to a stronger economy, and ultimately, a stronger nation.

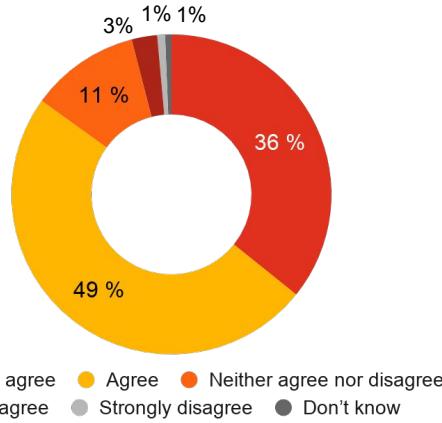


<sup>37</sup>Hopes and Fears 2021, PwC, 2021

<sup>38</sup>Rethinking ESG in a post COVID-19 world, PwC Malaysia, November 2020, Pg. 3

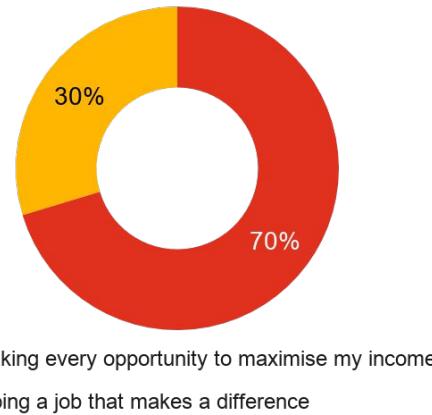
<sup>39</sup>Preparing for tomorrow's consumers today: The future of consumer markets, PwC, 2021, Pg. 8

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?** I want to work for an organisation that makes a positive contribution to society



Note: Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding

**Thinking about your career to date and your future career, which of the following factors is most important to you?**



While Malaysians do care about positive societal impact, if forced to choose between a career that enables them to maximise their income and one that 'makes a difference', 70% say they would pick the former.

The result may not be surprising, given the uncertain times we're in and the volatility of today's job market. As compensation for work is also a significant factor in helping people determine their careers, organisations will have to think about how purpose and remuneration can work together in strengthening their position as a great place to work, one that fulfills employees' economic needs and also their drive to make a positive impact on society.



## Takeaways

1

Organisations that contribute positively to society are viewed favourably by employees, underlining the need for the development of an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy.

2

With digital skills being critical in today's world, another way that organisations can contribute back to society is by playing a role in upskilling their communities, for instance, through targeted Corporate Responsibility programmes.

3

As more people want a job with a sense of purpose, organisations need to ensure their organisational purpose aligns with their business practices.

4

But as economic realities matter too, remuneration will have to be equally attractive in order to retain and recruit top talent.



# Conclusion

COVID-19 has left a lasting impact on people's lives, jobs, and the way we work. No one knows for sure what the future of work will look like, but we are beginning to see the possibilities in which they could take shape. What's certain is that skills, both digital and human, are central in enabling workers to meet the evolving demands of their employers effectively. This points to why upskilling and reskilling are so critical. And as job roles continue to be disrupted, upskilling and reskilling will have a huge part to play in reducing the risk of social inequality.

Having the right skills and digital capabilities will also enable workers to function optimally in a remote setting. Should remote working take hold post-pandemic, measures that ensure wellbeing and productivity are not mutually exclusive will need to be implemented. Going against this may prove detrimental, as employees who are burned out will fail to sustain their ability to deliver quality work over time. Culture will play a big role here. Nurtured right, employee engagement will improve, leading to greater value delivered to stakeholders (for example, through better customer service), as a study<sup>40</sup> has shown. These

highly engaged teams, the study<sup>41</sup> found, also resulted in greater profitability by as much as 21%. In fact, in a different study<sup>42</sup> conducted in the US, companies that ranked high in better employee experiences outperformed their peers in terms of their stock gains.

Lastly, to achieve inclusivity, Malaysia will need to improve digital accessibility across the nation. This is where the public and private sectors will need to work together, drawing on their strengths, to achieve this shared goal. Through collaboration, we'll be steps closer to fulfilling the hopes of Malaysians while putting their fears to rest.



<sup>40, 41</sup>The Right Culture: Not Just About Employee Satisfaction, Gallup, 12 April 2017

<sup>42</sup>Companies with happier employees outperform their peers, Fortune, 6 October 2020

# Summary of recommendations



Customise upskilling/reskilling programmes

- Strengthen workforce capability by assessing current and future business needs.
- Identify skills gaps and mismatches.
- Develop and roll out programmes that will help address specific skills needs.



Minimise barriers

- Ensure employees have the relevant tools to learn in their own time.
- Provide the necessary access to new business applications.
- Nurture a productive culture in a remote work setting.



Empower employees to work anywhere

- Realign culture with new workplace models.
- Develop and implement programmes to drive change in manager and employee mindsets and behaviours.
- Provide employees with infrastructure needed, and implement controls to mitigate cyber risks.



Pay closer attention to employee wellbeing

- Promote healthy workplace habits like encouraging employees to take breaks and annual leave.
- Identify the source of workplace stress.
- Use workforce analytics to identify issues and solutions that matter.



Build a purpose-driven organisation

- Develop and communicate an organisational purpose that will guide decisions, behaviours and culture.
- Ensure consistency between organisational purpose and how employees as well as consumers experience your brand.

# About the survey

PwC commissioned a survey of 32,517 members of the general public from 26 January to 8 February 2021. Respondents were from 19 territories (Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Netherlands, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UAE, UK, and the US), and included workers, business owners, contract workers, students, unemployed people looking for work, and those on furlough or who were temporarily laid off.

In Malaysia, a total of 2,003 responses were received.

This report may be considered a follow-up to our 'Digital resilience in a new world' thought leadership, which was prepared independently by PwC Malaysia in 2020 as a local version of PwC's Global 'Hopes and Fears' report published in 2019.

## About 'New world. New skills.'

'New world. New skills.' is a global initiative by the PwC global network that aims to narrow the digital divide by improving the skills and digital understanding of millions of people worldwide. At PwC Malaysia, we have invested in training to ensure our people are prepared for the future of work. We are also equally committed to helping our clients identify and address their workforce challenges, and doing our part in reaching underserved communities who may not have access to upskilling opportunities, in order to ensure no one gets left behind.

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