

U-turn on WFH policy lauded

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PETALING JAYA: The revocation of the work-from-home (WFH) policy will give the economy a much needed boost.

However, strict adherence to standard operating procedures (SOP) is essential to prevent another surge in Covid-19 infections, according to healthcare experts and economists.

An associate professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, epidemiologist Dr Malina Osman, said the decision by the National Security Council would have been made based on proper risk assessments by the relevant authorities.

She said the authorities would have considered the fact that vaccines were already available although the number of new cases daily has not abated in the past 10 days, and decided that it was important for economic activities to resume gradually.

“As long as the SOP is strictly observed and the situation is being closely monitored, I think it should not be an issue,” she told *theSun*.

“The current SOP is adequate, comprehensive and relevant, but the implementation and monitoring need to be stricter to prevent the emergence of new clusters.”

➤ Expected increased consumer spending accompanying move would help economic recovery, say experts

Malina said at the same time, employers should start coordinating registration for vaccination, and assist employees who have underlying chronic diseases to expedite the vaccination process.

Head of the Independent Covid-19 Vaccination Advisory Committee under the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry, Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud, said any decision to revoke the WFH policy must depend on the country’s pandemic strategy.

“If the country is in the mitigation phase and containment is no longer possible, then the rescinding of the policy is expected.”

However, he said the Health Ministry only “appears” to indicate that the country is now in the mitigation phase but has not explicitly said so.

Awang Bulgiba, who is an epidemiologist at Universiti Malaya, said such a measure must also be accompanied by a concerted vaccination drive, the setting up of a proper syndromic and genomic surveillance system, an integrated

AI-driven data management system and more sophisticated indicators than those currently in use.

“If these measures are not in place, then there is a real danger of a surge in infections.”

Sunway University Business School economics professor Dr Yeah Kim Leng said the flexibility given to employers could facilitate the optimisation of operational efficiencies to enhance productivity while minimising workplace infection risks, in tandem with the rollout of the national vaccination programme.

“If synchronised well, the economic recovery could be accelerated.”

He also added that with employees returning to work, there will be an increase in travelling and time spent away from home, thereby spurring local business activities, especially retail, food and beverages and travel.

“This is important as private consumption accounts for about 60% of the nation’s gross domestic product.

“A speedier normalisation of business and consumer spending, especially those involving workplace activities in urban centres, will certainly boost the domestic demand component of the economic recovery process,” Yeah said.

Professor of Economics at the Asia-Europe Institute at Universiti Malaya, Datuk Dr Rajah Rasiah, said given the economic and social issues the country is currently facing, it was a good idea to scrap the WFH policy.

“Working on-site will enable employees to raise their collective synergies back to the levels they enjoyed before the work from home regime was imposed.”

He said the move should enhance the country’s trade participation internationally and expressed hope that businesses would take advantage of the problems other countries are facing because of the pandemic to catch up and possibly leapfrog competitors abroad by targeting the intensification of innovations.

“It will allow Malaysian producers to expand further their exports to fill the gap left by the contraction in production in other countries. An added advantage Malaysia enjoys here is its success in raising the production of in-demand products, such as gloves, masks and ventilators,” he added.