

ENHANCING WORKPLACE HEALTH IN MALAYSIA: ADDRESSING STRESS, SEDENTARY LIFESTYLES AND NUTRITION DEFICITS

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Abstract. This study evaluates workplace health challenges in Malaysia within a global framework, focusing on stress, sedentary work routines, and poor nutrition as key factors affecting employee well-being and productivity. Secondary data from national surveys and literature reviews were used to achieve three objectives: (i) to explore the concepts and definitions of workplace health including stress, sedentary behaviour, and nutrition challenges; (ii) to examine the legal framework for workplace health in Malaysia; (iii) to analyse the impacts of stress, sedentary jobs, and poor nutrition; (iv) to recommend strategies and policies to improve workplace health and create supportive environments in Malaysia; and (v) to determine examples of workplace health initiatives as references for effective implementation. The findings reveal these issues have raised employee health concerns, reducing productivity and overall well-being. Flexible work arrangements, ergonomic designs, and partnerships with local vendors for nutritious food are proposed as interventions. These solutions reflect Malaysia's cultural and economic context while aligning with global practices, providing a roadmap for enhancing employee health, and ensuring sustainable organisational success.

Keywords: *workplace stress, sedentary jobs, poor nutrition, lifestyles*

Introduction

In Malaysia, concerns about the health and well-being of employees have grown in recent years. Many workers face high levels of stress, prolonged periods of sitting, and poor dietary habits, often driven by workplace demands to enhance efficiency and remain competitive in a fast-paced market (Hamzaid et al., 2022). Long hours, high expectations, and organisational pressures frequently leave employees with limited time to focus on their physical and mental health (Subramaniam et al., 2024). For instance, professionals in corporate roles often endure significant strain, particularly in urban hubs like Kuala Lumpur. Recent data reveals a concerning increase in depression rates in Malaysia, which have doubled between 2019 and 2023. The highest prevalence is found among individuals aged 16-19, followed by those in the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups (Institute for Public Health, 2024). These groups form the backbone of Malaysia's workforce, they require national attention as an imbalanced working lifestyle can lead to both physical and mental health issues (Chan et al., 2021). Workplace health is a national concern as well as a global issue. The United States and the United Kingdom have seen an increase in burnout rates, particularly in high-stress industries (Lecompte and Whitcomb, 2020). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), poor mental health costs the world economy about USD 1 trillion a year, making it a significant public health burden on a global scale (WHO, 2024). These worldwide patterns demonstrate the prevalence of workplace health issues.

Malaysia's high ranking on the worldwide workplace health concerns list points to a larger problem that many nations find difficult to address adequately.

Workplace stress

Stress in the workplace is a growing problem in Malaysia, affecting workers' health and the national economy. Workplace stress has a huge impact on employees' mental health, job satisfaction, and productivity and is not simply an individual problem; it is a reflection of widespread problems in the workplace (Dousin et al., 2019). Experts and media reports have recently provided information on the serious issue of burnout among Malaysian workers. According to Ragu (2024) at Free Malaysia Today (FMT), Malaysia is currently grappling with a severe burnout crisis, with 67% of workers reporting high stress levels in 2024. These high stress levels among Malaysian employees are mainly due to long working hours and a lack of work-life balance. Many workers struggle to manage both job demands and personal time, making Malaysia one of the top countries for workplace stress globally. Professor Glenn Hitchman from Heriot-Watt University Malaysia describes this situation as a 'silent epidemic' that not only undermines personal health but also costs Malaysia RM14.46 billion annually, according to World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates. Besides, Malaysia ranks poorly for work-life balance, with many employees working more than 45 hours per week. The prolonged working hours, combined with pressure from management and limited career advancement opportunities, contribute to a rise in mental health issues, particularly depression. Based on the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2023 found that nearly one million adult Malaysians, or 4.6% of the population, suffer from depression, a rate that has doubled since 2019 (Institute for Public Health, 2024). Further insights from Chan (2024) at FMT indicate that high burnout rates among Malaysian workers stem not only from long hours but also from high performance expectations and inadequate workplace support. Young professionals, in particular, are at risk. Clinical psychologist Dr. Chua Sook Ning notes that Malaysian workplaces lack sufficient mental health resources, calling for both government and organisational action to address this crisis.

Overall, workplace stress in Malaysia is a multifaceted issue that demands immediate attention from both employers and policymakers (Said et al., 2024). Prolonged stress and burnout not only harm individual health but also weaken organisational productivity and economic stability (Radha and Aithal, 2023). Therefore, addressing these concerns through comprehensive mental health support, balanced work-life policies and active stress- management programmes could create a healthier, more resilient workforce, ultimately benefiting Malaysia's economy and society (Parkyn and Wall, 2020).

Sedentary jobs

The problem of sedentary jobs is also a significant factor impacting Malaysian workers' health. With advancements in technology, a large percentage of jobs require sitting for prolonged hours, reducing physical activity and increasing the risk of lifestyle diseases. The findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 align closely with concerns about sedentary jobs, which are becoming increasingly common in Malaysia's workforce. Sedentary jobs, typically characterised by long hours of sitting at desks or in front of computers, contribute significantly to physical inactivity among Malaysian adults (Institute for Public Health, 2024). Statistic by National Health and

Morbidity Survey (NHMS) show that 1 in 3 adults are physically inactive reflects how daily routines at sedentary jobs limit physical movement. Additionally, the fact that 84% of adults do not engage in regular physical activities, such as sports, fitness, or leisure activities. Hence, it indicates that employees in sedentary roles may lack the time or energy to exercise after work. The repetitive nature of these jobs can lead to physical exhaustion, making it harder for employees to prioritise physical health outside of work hours. Furthermore, the survey's finding that 84% of Malaysians do not walk or cycle as part of their commute illustrates a lifestyle deeply reliant on motorised transport, further reducing opportunities for physical activity. For many working adults, especially those in sedentary office jobs, long commutes in cars or public transport add to the hours spent sitting, both during and outside of work. The report also mentioned that 1 in 2 adults in Malaysia lead sedentary lifestyles, defined as spending more than two hours daily in low-energy activities like sitting, lying down, or reclining. This is particularly relevant for sedentary workers, who frequently spend most of their workday seated. Long-term sedentary behaviour has been related to health risks like obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health problems (Institute for Public Health, 2024).

According to the Malaysian Adult Nutrition Survey (MANS), health risks such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease are among the health problems that have become more common in Malaysia and are considered to be influenced by the trend towards sedentary lifestyles. For example, the prevalence of obesity among Malaysians increased from 4.4% in the year of 1996 to 19.7% in the year of 2019, which implies that a lack of physical activity at work has become a significant problem. The upward trend demonstrates how urgently workplace regulations must be changed to promote more active habits. As a result of enforcing rules that encourage workplace employees' regular movement, such as walking breaks, setting up standing workstations, and planning exercise events, companies may solve these issues and encourage employees' healthy habits (Buckingham et al., 2019).

Poor nutrition

Malaysian workers' health can be impacted by poor nutrition, especially because they have limited access to balanced nutrition meals throughout the job. Besides, employees frequently lack the time to look for healthy meal options because of the rigorous schedules and long hours of occupations or sidelines. Consequently, a lot of workers resort to rapid meals or fast food, which are more convenient but usually deficient in vital nutrients (Cho and Kim, 2022). Furthermore, it is evidenced by recent research that adults in Malaysia rely on fast food. In a cross-sectional study of low-income Malaysian adults conducted by Eng et al. (2022) regarding dietary practices, food purchasing and perceptions about healthy food availability and affordability, a total of 68.1% reported sugar-sweetened beverage consumption at least once per week. Most frequently consumed processed foods included commercially baked goods, such as bread; 52.9% of respondents consumed it once a week or more. The mean number of times per week that fast foods were consumed was significantly higher for males. This trend raises concerns about the long-term effects of poor food choices since malnutrition can result in serious health issues like heart disease, hypertension, and malnutrition. In fact, according to Malaysia's Ministry of Health, the percentage of persons over the age of 18 who had hypertension increased to 30% in 2019, with this figure continue rising (Ismail et al., 2023).

Study objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows: (1) To explore the concepts and definitions of workplace health including stress, sedentary behaviour, and nutrition challenges; (2) To examine the legal framework for workplace health in Malaysia; (3) To analyse the impacts of stress, sedentary jobs, and poor nutrition; (4) To recommend strategies and policies to improve workplace health and create supportive environments in Malaysia; (5) To determine examples of workplace health initiatives as references for effective implementation.

Results and Discussion

This study covers several significant factors that impact employee health at work, including stress, sedentary work, and poor diet. These issues are especially concerning in Malaysia because of high work pressures, changing lifestyles, and a lack of health resources (Norazahar and Suppiah, 2023). This section will compare Malaysian procedures to international standards and understand each component in detail by considering the causes, effects, and challenges. Knowing these components can make it easier to find doable strategies Malaysian workplaces can use to promote a healthy and effective working environment.

Understanding workplace health: Concepts and definitions

Workplace health involves taking steps to support the overall well-being of employees, helping them feel good, be productive, and enjoy their time at work. When employees feel physically and mentally well, they are not only more engaged and motivated, but they are also less likely to take time off due to illness. The three main areas impacting workplace health are stress, sedentary jobs, and nutrition. These factors influence both employees and the organisations they work for, affecting everything from energy levels to job satisfaction and long-term health (Bevan and Cooper, 2021).

Stress in the workplace

Workplace stress can refer to the emotional and physical strain that comes from handling intense workloads, tight deadlines, or limited resources (Ahmad et al., 2024b). Workplace stress occurs when work demands feel unmanageable or exceed an employee's abilities (Arifin et al., 2023). Framework by Martin (2018) illustrates the relationship between workplace pressure and performance, showing how moderate stress levels can enhance productivity within the 'Ideal Zone' of optimal performance, whereas excessive or inadequate pressure can lead to detrimental effects like boredom, strain, burnout, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Tran et al., 2020). Mohammad Mosadeghrad (204) explains how different job stressors, including job demands, organisational factors, and working conditions, could have negative effects on employees' physical, mental, and social health, thus having an impact on job satisfaction, motivation, and turnover. These models emphasise the importance of good management of workplace stress in maintaining balance and preventing both overwork and lack of engagement. For example, in Swedish work culture, the 'fika' breaks encourage employees to take some time off from work, socialise and rejuvenate to maintain their mental health (Backvall, 2023). Similarly, in Japan, initiatives such as a statutory annual leave and the 'Premium Friday' campaign allow employees to leave the

workplace early on the last Friday of the month to prevent overwork and reduce stress (Ansari and Ali, 2019).

Sedentary behaviour in the workplace

Sedentary jobs involve employees seated or engaging in low-energy activities for long periods, like working at a desk all day (Berninger et al., 2020). The Institute for Public Health (2024) describes sedentary work as any job requiring minimal physical activity for at least six hours a day. For instance, a customer service representative may spend the entire workday in front of a computer, which can lead to back pain, stiffness, and even a heightened vulnerability to chronic illnesses. Brierley et al. (2021) illustrates a framework that explores the factors contributing to prolonged sitting at work and strategies to reduce it. It identifies three key components: psychological capability, which includes knowledge of the health risks associated with prolonged sitting and the need for employees to be aware of their sedentary habits; automatic and reflective motivation include the belief that reducing sitting time will not harm productivity; as well as physical and social opportunities, which involve workplace practices, social norms, and organisational support that influence sitting habits. Organisations can make a difference by promoting active breaks, encouraging short walks, or setting up standing desks (Pronk, 2021; Engelen, 2020). For instance, companies such as 'Plus One, an Optum Company', have started holding walking meetings or providing fitness equipment on-site to keep employees moving (Whitsel et al., 2023).

Nutrition challenges in the workplace

Poor nutrition in the workplace is often a result of long hours, time constraints, or a lack of access to healthy food options (Drewnowski, 2020). When employees are pressed for time, they might rely on fast food, vending machines, or snacks that are high in sugar and low in nutrients (Almoraie et al., 2024; Greenhalgh, 2020). For example, an employee who skips lunch due to back-to-back meetings may have a packet of crisps or an energy drink. Malaysia Institute for Public Health (2024) stated that unhealthy eating habits contribute to rising rates of hypertension, obesity, and other health issues among Malaysian workers. Thus, employers can help by offering healthier snack options, providing information on balanced diets, or subsidising nutritious meals in the cafeteria (Hyży et al., 2023). According to Gillespie et al. (2013), reducing undernutrition involves four key components: commitment, accountability, responsiveness, and outcomes. Employers should focus on providing healthier food options, ensuring regular improvements, and addressing employees' needs with quick, nutritious choices. For example, in the Netherlands, workforce nutrition programmes encourage healthier eating habits by offering subsidised healthy meals, nutrition workshops, and counselling. Organisations under the Workforce Nutrition Alliance also provide on-site nutritious meals and support for high-risk employees, demonstrating practical approaches to improving workplace nutrition globally. These examples can guide similar initiatives in Malaysia (Nyhus Dhillon and Ortenzi, 2023).

Legal framework for workplace health: Roles and responsibilities

In Malaysia, workplace health is a legal obligation for employers and a matter of employee well-being (Wong, 2023). There are regulations stated in the Laws of Malaysia that mandate companies to handle a range of hazards that could affect

workers' health to establish a safe and healthy workplace. These rules are intended to protect workers against physical and mental health risks and strengthen workplace policies that promote general well-being. However, enforcement issues do remain, especially in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which form a significant part of the economy in Malaysia but often do not have the resources or the expertise to fully comply with the regulations.

Employment Acts 1955 (Act 265)

Malaysia's Employment Act 1955 seeks to improve working conditions and protect workers' rights (HSBC Web Portal, 2024). It establishes rules for compensation, hours, and working conditions that have a relationship that contributes to workers' health and well-being. First, Section 59 (1) mentions every employee shall be allowed in each week a rest day of one whole day. Meanwhile, Section 60 (1) provides that an employee shall not be compelled to work on a rest day unless the work performed by him requires the performance of two or more consecutive shifts. A designated rest day emphasises the importance of workplace health by providing employees with opportunities for physical activity, which alleviates physical strain such as back pain and poor posture associated with sedentary employment. It also supports mental recovery from job-related stress by reducing fatigue and improving overall psychological well-being. However, because smaller companies frequently lack the oversight and human resources necessary to assure adherence, non-compliance with rest-day laws is more common in SMEs. Next, Section 60A regulates regular hours of work. Subsections 1 (a) to (d) mention that employees shall not be working more than 8 hours in a day and more than 45 hours in a week. By regulating the length of the workday and prescribing mandatory rest periods, this section can improve mental and physical health, thereby reducing employee workplace stress levels and encouraging leisure time or the ability to exercise after work. However, compliance is still challenging, particularly in sectors like manufacturing or retail where labour shortages often lead SMEs to push workers above these boundaries.

Industrial Relations Act 1967 (Act 177)

The Industrial Relations Act 1967 defines employer and employee relationships particularly in resolving conflicts and reaching each party's agreements. It provides ways in which workers confront unfair treatment, and it may include concerns about health and safety at work, although it does not specifically state rules on workplace health. When specific requirements are fulfilled, Section 13 (1) allows collective bargaining between employers and employees. The workers can formally request negotiations with the employer to resolve work-related concerns if they are represented by a recognised trade union. In the same way, employers may also start a conversation with the union. As an example, consider a workplace where workers are assigned to 10 hours with little rest. Over time, the employee discovers that their long working hours and lack of appropriate meal breaks are causing them to gain weight, feel exhausted, and struggle with stress. To help balance work and health, their trade union can choose to use collective bargaining to request longer breaks, shorter shifts, or even a rotating schedule. By doing this, collective bargaining ensures workers' well-being while preserving productivity by providing a formal forum for them to express grievances and require improved working conditions. However, because of their small size and lack of

Domestic Inquiry procedures, many SMEs do not have union representation, which restricts employees' capacity to effectively communicate their issues.

Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (Act 514)

Section 4 (a) to (c) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1994 states the objectives to take precautions for the safety, health, and welfare of persons at work, protect them from risks and safety hazards, and promote an occupational environment which meets their physiological and psychological needs. Although this legislation does not directly address issues such as poor nutrition, sedentary work, and workplace stress, it is closely related to resolving these problems if employers implement measures that promote healthier work environments. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Occupational Safety and Health Convention 1981 (No. 155) and other international standards are partially aligned with this Act. First, it shall be the duty of every employer under Section 15 (1) to ensure the safety, health, and welfare of all their employees. Although the law does not specifically mention stress, nutrition, or sedentary behaviour, it may encourage employers to support employee well-being. For example, employers can provide counselling, flexible work hours, and mental health support to reduce stress from working long hours and their high pressure. Moreover, employers can also encourage ergonomic seating, promote regular movement, and provide healthy food options to prevent health risks such as obesity from poor nutrition and sedentary work. However, the lack of stringent penalties for non-compliance often leads to weak enforcement, especially in the case of smaller organisations. Secondly, Section 16 requires every employer and self-employed person to create and regularly update a written policy on the safety and health of their employees. While this provision is in line with international standards, many Malaysian SMEs do not implement comprehensive policies because they are unaware of the requirements or do not possess the necessary expertise to develop them. For example, the Japanese 'Premium Friday' is a national campaign encouraging employees to leave work early once a month, providing an exemplar of national policies integrating health measures with workplace productivity (Ansari and Ali, 2019). Conversely, the execution of Malaysia's policies on stress reduction appears fragmented and underutilised.

The impacts of stress, sedentary jobs and poor nutrition

Poor nutrition, sedentary jobs, and workplace stress have an impact on both employees and organisations. When workers find it difficult to handle stress, excessive levels of stress can result in job dissatisfaction, higher absenteeism, and a higher turnover rate (Owusu, 2021). For example, stressed workers can be less motivated or take more sick days, which would impact team performance. Since extended sitting is associated with weight gain, heart disease risks, and back pain, sedentary behaviour exacerbates these impacts even more (Gleneagles Hospitals Malaysia, 2024). Cognitive function is further impacted by poor nutrition, which can result in diminished concentration, memory problems, and poor decision-making (Muth and Park, 2021). Therefore, organisations must address these problems since they collectively degrade worker productivity, morale, and well-being (Amadi, 2024).

Steps and procedures to improve workplace health

Improving workplace health in Malaysia requires a methodical approach that emphasises understanding employees' needs, using appropriate treatments to solve the issues, and regularly evaluating their results. For instance, previous researchers such as Skivington et al. (2021) wrote an article about the method of complex interventions in health and social care services. As shown in *Figure 1*, this process includes some important processes, including assessment, intervention design, implementation, and monitoring. These actions can help companies in giving employees a more productive workplace and also a healthier working environment.



Figure 1. The method of complex interventions for improving workplace health.

Assessment

The first step is to assess employees' current health and working conditions. In this case, health tests, interviews, and questionnaires can be given (Ranasinghe et al., 2023). For instance, companies might provide workers with anonymous survey forms or online surveys to find out where stress levels are high or where workers believe they are not doing enough exercise or having a healthy diet. This evaluation helps to identify particular problems that require attention, such as excessive working hours, poor diet, or lack of exercise.

Intervention design

In the second step, targeted interventions can be made to address the health issues when they have been recognised. According to Baskar et al. (2021), the two possible therapies for workplace stress can be offering flexible working arrangements, including the ability to work from home, or mental health resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs). For example, companies can increase workers' physical activity in sedentary occupations by offering standing desks, giving frequent breaks, or setting up team challenges (Pronk, 2021). Companies can also promote nutrition by offering healthier office snacks or by offering financial assistance for nutritious meals. For instance, companies can set up a weekly fruit delivery service for workers to encourage healthier eating habits (Drewnowski et al., 2020). For the cost-benefit aspects, a company investing in health programs could get a return of £3 for each £1 invested, through improved productivity of employees, reduced healthcare costs, and reduced absenteeism, as proven by programs implemented in large international companies such as Google Inc. and Johnson & Johnson (Song and Baicker, 2021).

Implementation

Thirdly, following the design of the interventions comes implementation. It is crucial that, for these changes to be well implemented, management supports them and has open communication with the staff. This can be done by organising targeted workshops or training programs on stress management or exercise (Corbin, 2021). To make sure of their effectiveness, management should also support the changes in the implementation of new rules, such as more flexible work schedules or even breaks (Weideman and

Hofmeyr, 2020). This may imply allowing for schedule changes to fit these activities or providing the necessary supplies, perhaps workplace exercise equipment or an ergonomic chair (Adiga, 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation

However, the interventions are only effective through constant monitoring and changes in their effects. This may be through periodic surveys, health measurements, and workers' feedback (Nwosu et al., 2024). For example, an organisation can assess whether the satisfaction of workers has improved or whether there has been an improvement in stress or physical health following the introduction of a wellness program or a change in working hours (Fox et al., 2022). To measure the long-term health improvements, the company can evaluate by tracking measures such as reductions in sick absenteeism, improvements in employee engagement scores, or sustained changes in workplace fitness and nutrition behaviours over a year or more. Regular monitoring helps in determining what is effective and what would require additional improvement (Nwosu, 2024). Hence, the company can offer more services, such as one-on-one stress management coaching, or expand the wellness program if the workers feel less stressed after attending the seminars (Steketee et al., 2022). Moreover, digital tools such as fitness trackers and wellness applications can be integrated to collect continuous data on the activity levels and dietary habits of the employees.

The examples of workplace health initiatives

According to Theevya Ragu (2024) in the article of Free Malaysia Today (FMT), a professor at Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, Glenn Hitchman, warns that when workplace stress is not treated well might lead to serious mental health problems. He advocates peer support groups, employer-led mental health initiatives, and candid conversations in the workplace. For instance, as part of its dedication to promoting employee well-being, Petronas, one of Malaysia's top oil and gas firms, has implemented the MIND-A-CARE program. This initiative started in partnership with the Malaysian Psychiatric Association (MPA), prioritises the mental and physical health of its employees. Through Petronas's 'myFriends' Employee Assistance Program, a limited group of employees receive training to become certified mental health first aiders, giving them the ability to identify mental distress and direct colleagues to provide help. This initiative is part of PETRONAS' larger commitment to creating a friendly and healthy workplace, intending to train 1,000 first-aiders over the next three years (Petronas Web Portal, 2022). However, implementing this program was not without its difficulties, including removing the stigma associated with mental health in the workplace and ensuring continual employee engagement, especially in high-pressure positions.

A further instance is Maybank's staff Well-Being Program, which prioritises staff support and mental wellness. Maybank acknowledges that mental health is essential to both individual well-being and the overall success of the company. The bank has a staff of qualified Mental Health First-Aiders on hand to offer on-site counselling as part of their dedication to employee wellness. This program promotes open dialogue about personal or professional stress among staff members, encouraging a safe space where problems can be resolved quickly. Maybank promotes an open culture by providing a forum for staff members to freely express their worries, which makes it simpler to ask

for assistance and handle stress before it gets out of reach. This strategy not only promotes mental health but also builds a supportive work environment where staff members feel appreciated and understood (Maybank Web Portal, 2023). These challenges represent the continuous work needed to normalise conversations about mental health in the workplace.

By way of contrast, effective workplace health programs from other organisations help to continue establishing the effectiveness of programs when targeted. One example of how an integrated strategy can be used to effectively address mental health issues is Shell's Global Mental Wellbeing Programme (GMWP). This includes surveys that can aid in the identification of stressors, toolkits that help promote mental health, and professional counselling provided through their Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Additionally, it has promoted training for line managers that includes promoting conversations about mental health concerns to reduce stigma. Similarly, Shell's campaign against burnout utilised projects that were jointly created with employees to address common factors, including demands and boundaries to raise awareness and advocate early intervention (Shell Global Web Portal, 2023). Thus, it shows how important it is to take a proactive approach to mental health to create a supportive work environment. In summary, these examples show that while effective, initiatives like those taken by Petronas and Maybank face challenges in terms of stigma, participation, and barriers to accessing timely support. Learning from regional peers, such as how Shell emphasises mental health awareness and early intervention, Malaysian organisations can further adapt and sustain their approach toward better employee well-being.

Conclusion

To conclude, the health challenges faced by Malaysian workers, including workplace stress, sedentary jobs, and poor nutrition, are substantial problems that impact both employee well-being and organisational productivity. These problems, rooted in modern work environments, necessitate measures from employers to foster healthier workplaces. International practices such as Sweden's 'fika' and Japan's 'Premium Friday' offer valuable lessons in managing stress, while physical activity and healthier food options can improve overall health. In Malaysia, the Employment Act 1955 and Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 provide essential guidelines for employers, but SMEs often struggle with compliance due to limited resources. Without intervention, the physical and mental toll on employees can lead to increased absenteeism, burnout, and declining performance. Moreover, the cumulative impact of these challenges threatens Malaysia's economic growth and global competitiveness. Addressing workplace health comprehensively is a moral obligation and a strategic necessity for long-term sustainability. However, there are obstacles to implementing these measures. The primary barriers are a lack of knowledge about successful health interventions, financial limitations, and organisational culture resistance. Strong leadership commitment and engagement with long-term organisational objectives are required to remove these obstacles. By adopting global practices and legal guidelines, Malaysian workplaces can create a healthier environment, benefiting both employees and organisations. The following recommendations discuss the several approaches to achieve this objective.

First, companies should embrace wellness technology. Companies should adopt technology-driven wellness solutions to monitor and improve employee health. For example, wearable devices and health apps can monitor physical activity, sleep patterns, and stress levels, providing real-time data for both employees and managers (Zou, 2024). A company could introduce an app that encourages short movement breaks throughout the day and offers personalised wellness plans based on an individual's health data. This approach not only reduces sedentary behaviour but also keeps employees engaged in their personal well-being (Boulos and Yang, 2021; Mamede et al., 2021). Despite the advantages, small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) may find it difficult to implement these technologies because of the high expense and lack of technical experience. Government subsidies or partnerships with tech companies could address this gap and make wellness solutions available to businesses of all sizes. Secondly, creating flexible workspaces can make a big difference. The physical well-being of employees can be significantly improved by designing office settings that promote mobility and flexibility. Employees can be encouraged to remain active during working hours by having open-plan offices with standing workstations, breakout spaces, and walking tracks (Brown, 2021; Langer, 2021). For example, to eliminate prolonged sitting, organisations can make 'walking meetings' or 'stand-up meetings.' Moreover, the designation of rooms for yoga or stretching activities promotes a moving and relaxed atmosphere in the workplace (Warner et al., 2024). Nevertheless, rearranging office spaces entails a large financial outlay and meticulous preparation, which may discourage businesses from making these adjustments. Partnering together with architects and workspace designers, the industry may create affordable solutions that meet the diverse requirements of employees.

Third, it is important to provide individualised mental health programs. Companies should provide support that focuses on the specific job demands and pressure points of employees, rather than general mental health support (Gaillard et al., 2020). This could include individual therapy sessions, counselling online, or stress management programs tailored to the needs of each worker, thereby enhancing psychosocial resilience substantially (Kawakami et al., 2021). For instance, individual (one-on-one) coaching may address the emotional and professional issues of a burnt-out employee because of excessive workloads (Knowles, 2024). Yet, the stigma associated with mental health in some organisations may be a barrier to these specialised mental health initiatives. Participation can be encouraged by normalising discussions about mental health through awareness campaigns and government health initiatives. Fourth, the strategy for health promotion is to encourage sustainable nutrition. Companies can collaborate with nearby farmers or suppliers to offer healthy, sustainable, and fresh food (Goh et al., 2020). Moreover, companies can provide an on-site cafeteria that focuses on organic or locally sourced ingredients or provide healthy vending machines to establish healthier eating habits (Greenhalgh, 2020). For example, an organisation could start a 'farm-to-table' program where the employees will consume food prepared from local organic farms to help both the local economy and healthy nutrition (Ahmad et al., 2024b). Nonetheless, the possible rise in expenses for both employers and employees is one of the primary barriers to encouraging sustainable nutrition. Healthy food options can be made more affordable by association between government agencies, the agricultural industry, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Finally, designing a hybrid wellness challenge will make it fun and effective to keep employees' motivation going. Activities involving teamwork and engaging in both

mental and physical exercise will create an incentive for participation and community in the workplace (Cheung, 2021). In the case of offering mindfulness classes or team-based fitness challenges by an organization, employees get points for attending seminars on mental health or working out (Safi et al., 2024). After that, these points could be exchanged for benefits and rewards such as fitness club membership and free spa days. Therefore, these initiatives can encourage employees to adopt healthier lifestyles and achieving well-being is satisfying and rewarding (Tenison, 2022). Although these wellness challenges are helpful, time limits or absence of interest may limit participation. A broader participation could be ensured by government advertising and corporate sponsorships that increase the programs' accessibility and popularity. Overall, resolving employees' health issues is essential for their well-being as well as the success of the company. Employers must prioritise fostering a culture of health and well-being by integrating workplace health initiatives into their core values and business strategies. Collaborative efforts among businesses, policymakers, and health experts will ensure these measures are effective and sustainable. Employers can promote a more productive and healthy staff with the ideal approach, which will benefit both workers and companies in the long term.

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Conflict of interest

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