NUMBER OF COMMUTERS POLLED FOR TRANSPORT STUDY ON WORKING FROM HOME OR OFFICE | B2

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MRT crowds, journey times impact decision to work from home: Study

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People are more comfortable to travel to their workplaces rather than continue logging in from home if first, MRT trains are less crowded and, second, journey times are shorter.

This was the finding of a Nanjing Technological University (NTU) study published in Travel Behaviour and Society, a journal of the Hong Kong Institute for Transportation Studies, in January.

Conducted by Associate Professor Wee Yik Soon from NTU's School of Civil and Environmental Engineering and final-year student Muhammad Afif Amrul Tahir, the study involved polling 1,740 commuters between Jan 21, 2020 and Jan 11 last year amid the pandemic.

It found that overcrowded trains are accounted for 12.7 per cent of an employer's decision to work from home or the office, and travel times are accounted for 30.7 per cent.

While acknowledging that there are several other factors which can influence the decision-making process, the researchers said they chose to focus on comfort and time. This was because their study, To Go Or Not To Go? Modelling The Effects Of Employment Decentralisation On Travel Commuting, concluded that travel time as most likely to change with increasing decentralisation moving business and economic activity away from the city centre to municipalities.

Professor Wang said: "It would make sense that commuters who live far from their workplace would generally prefer to work from home, but through our study, we managed to identify that travel in comfort - be it having a seat or a simple place to stand in a train - was more important to the everyday commuter."

The finding, he noted, was especially relevant given the trend in urban planning to maximise the amount of residential, business and leisure space with walking distance of public transport.

Mr Selvan, who is pursuing a Master of Science in Transportation Systems at the Technical University of Munich, said: "While there have been many studies discussing the impacts of workplace mobility on travel behaviour, what we have lacked is an understanding of the views of existing tele-commuters who may be urged to return to commuting to that office."

Commenting on the finding, Singapore University of Social Sciences transport economist Walter Theatra said: "This study makes the important point that one of the benefits of decentralisation would be improved travel through commuter travel time need not be as long or as uncomfortable as before.

"The question is whether commuters in regional business hubs would really be more comfortable and shorter for most commuters."

"For example, I'm going to one of the stations with the highest traffic in the NTU system. For commuters who don't live in the west, it's likely that their commute is having less than 10 minutes shorter than the city, and could be better or worse in comfort, depending on whether they need to pass through the city."

NTU's research is similar to a study conducted by the University of the West of England (UWE) that was published in October 2017.

Led by Dr Xiao Chen, a professor in travel behaviour at UWE Bristol, it found that an additional 15 minutes of commuting each weekday day had the same impact on satisfaction as a 10 per cent pay rise.

The study, which involved more than 20,000 employees in England over a five-year period, found that every extra minute of commuting time reduces job satisfaction and lowers time satisfaction, increases stress and worsening mental health.

The NTU study found that the median travel time by MRT was 45 minutes - the same with a 2020 Singapore Census of Population's mean, which was a 12.5 per cent increase from 40 minutes a decade earlier.

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