

# New Study Shows People Want to WFH 'Coz MRT Trains Are too Crowded

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Among the many changes that the pandemic has brought about, or forced upon us, is the entire concept of having to work from home instead of sticking to a workplace; a shift was already gradually happening in the background with the ease of communication that advancing technology has allowed.

The coronavirus merely pushed the societal changes forward harder, and now that at least half of our workforce has experienced what it's like to work from home after April 2020's circuit breaker, people are starting to reconsider what gives them more job satisfaction.

## Factors That Affect Job Satisfaction

The *To Go, Or Not To Go? Modelling Effects of Employment Decentralisation On Telecommuting Preferences* study, which was published in *Travel Behaviour and Society*, was conducted by Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Associate Professor Wong Yiik Diew from the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering and final year student Muhammad Sofian Mohamed Tahir.

The sample they drew from involved 574 train commuters between 31 Dec 2020 and 16 Jan 2021.

Interestingly enough, it found that **12.8% of an employee's preference to work from their home or office involves how crowded the train is**, while the **travel time accounts for 10.7%**.

I can see why— if I had to choose between being able to lounge on a couch and sipping on a cup of coffee casually and being squished like a roti prata on a moving train, I'd *definitely* choose the former.

Travel time comes as a close second to travel comfort, and the study shows that the shorter the travel time is, the better.

No surprise there.

Although there are other factors that can influence an employee's decision-making process, the researchers stated that they chose to focus on comfort and time.

That was because their study model identified that these two factors were the *most likely* to change with the growing decentralisation, wherein businesses and economic activities are moving away from the city centre and nearer to homes.

In essence, it's the opposite of urbanisation.

Professor Wong said that it makes sense that commuters who live further from their workplaces would prefer to work from home, but their study managed to pick out the fact that travelling in comfort was more important to the everyday commuter.

After all, if the everyday commuter is able to secure a seat or have their own space on the public transport instead of being shoved in the ribs by errant elbows every time the train jerks to a stop and people shuffling around, their travelling experience would be much better and more tolerable.

Creatures of comfort and convenience, that's what we are.

## The Significance of the Study

More often than not, studies looking into job satisfaction typically surround work flexibility—working hours, scope of a job, the type of labour—as opposed to travel behaviour.

The recent study conducted by Professor Wong and Mr Sofian covers a blind spot that is frequently brushed over: the views of existing telecommuters and what might sway their decision to work from home or travel to their offices.

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## A Trend or Outlier?

Naturally, no study is given much credence or acknowledgement, unless they have studies that can be cross-referenced to, which bear similar conclusions.

In Oct 2016, a similar study was published by the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), and it was by a professor in travel behaviour, Kiron Chatterjee.

In the study *Commuting and wellbeing: a critical overview of the literature with implications for policy and future research*, more than 26,000 employees in England were engaged over a five-year period.

That's a huge sample size and undertaking.

But that's beside the point.

What the study discovered was that every extra minute of commuting time actually reduces job satisfaction and leisure time satisfaction, thus increasing strain and worsening mental health.

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It seems very straightforward and common sense, but the main difference between science and messing around is writing the results down.

Going back to the NTU study, it found that the median travelling by MRT was 45 minutes.

It matched the 2020 Singapore Census of Population's median, which means that there was a 12.5% increase from the 40 minutes a decade earlier.

In simpler terms, if every minute counts, then job satisfaction and leisure time satisfaction is on the decline due to the longer rides on squeezey trains.

Therefore, people wanting to work from home instead of having to commute to a workplace—especially when ridership is hitting pre-pandemic figures again—is totally understandable.

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Worst of all, the crowding in public transport hasn't even hit its peak yet, since 25% of the workforce still aren't allowed to return to their workplace.

Perhaps the changes in work flexibility that the government is introducing is long overdue in the populated and small island of Singapore.

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