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Research Article

The whole-life psychological contract: Flexibility, remote work and pet-inclusive practices in what Malaysian employees now expect from work

Mehrunishah Begum[1]*, Vimala Kadiresan[2], Sudhashini Nair[3], Adlina Suleiman[4]

[1]School of Business & Technology, IMU University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[2]Business Department, Faculty of Business, Economics and Accounting, HELP University, Shah Alam, Malaysia
[3]Faculty of Business, SEGi University, Kota Damansara, 47810 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
[4]Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author email: Mehrunishahhamid@imu.edu.my**

ABSTRACT

What Malaysian employees expect from their employers has changed. Flexible hours and location now rank among the benefits they value most, almost half cite work-life balance as a reason for leaving, and the public service moved to a hybrid model in August 2026. Expectations are also reaching beyond work into the rest of employees' lives, including care responsibilities, health and, for many, pets that 91 per cent of Malaysian owners regard as family. Grounded in social exchange theory, this conceptual paper proposes the whole-life psychological contract: employees' belief that, in return for their effort and commitment, their employer owes them room for the main domains of their lives. We distinguish the construct from relational contracts, family-supportive organisation perceptions and idiosyncratic deals, and use the dynamic phase model of psychological contracts to explain how pandemic-era disruption and new legal rights have pushed Malaysian contracts into renegotiation. Drawing also on signalling, organisational support, boundary fit, attachment and cross-cultural theories, eleven propositions explain how flexible working arrangements, negotiated deals and pet-inclusive practices shape contract fulfilment, perceived support, engagement and retention. The framework specifies when these practices help or backfire, depending on procedural fairness, roles that cannot work remotely, monitoring, fit with employees' boundary preferences, collectivist norms and the religious inclusivity of pet policies in a Muslim-majority society. A comparison with seven jurisdictions yields best-practice lessons for Malaysian employers and policymakers.

Keywords

Psychological Contract;

Flexible Working Arrangements;

Remote Work;

Pet-Friendly Workplace;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consider a 29-year-old marketing executive in Kuala Lumpur. She is good at her job, but she turns down a better-paid offer because the new employer expects five days a week in the office, and she shares the care of her grandmother with her mother. When her cat falls seriously ill a few months later, her manager lets her work from home for a week without being asked twice. Two years on, she is still with the company. Her story illustrates a broader change in what Malaysian employees expect from work.

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The terms on which Malaysians are willing to work have shifted. In Randstad's 2026 survey of 982 Malaysian workers, flexible work hours were the second most valued benefit after performance bonuses, cited by 59 per cent of respondents, and flexible work location was valued by 44 per cent (Randstad Malaysia, 2025). Work-life balance was a reason for leaving an employer for 47 per cent of respondents, and 44 per cent said they would not work beyond their contracted hours. Expectations of flexibility are no longer limited to the private sector. From 1 August 2026, eligible federal civil servants work three days a week in the office and two days from home under a hybrid policy that the Public Service Department describes as a new work norm (Malay Mail, 2026a).

These Malaysian shifts are part of a global pattern. Remote and hybrid work have settled at levels far above those before the pandemic. In the United States, full days worked from home accounted for 28 per cent of paid workdays in mid-2023, roughly four times the 2019 rate (Barrero et al., 2023). The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies technological change, the rising cost of living and demographic ageing among the macrotrends reshaping labour markets to 2030, and 64 per cent of surveyed employers see supporting employee health and well-being as a key strategy for securing talent (World Economic Forum, 2025). Governments have responded with new rights. Between 2018 and 2025, the Philippines, the European Union, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and Singapore each introduced or strengthened legal rules on telework, flexible working requests or contact outside working hours. Malaysia's reforms belong to this wave, and the experience of other countries offers lessons for how they can be implemented.

The legal framework has changed too. Since 1 January 2023, Sections 60P and 60Q of the Employment Act 1955 have allowed employees to apply in writing to vary their working hours, days or place of work. Employers must decide within 60 days and must give reasons if they refuse (Chau, 2023), and the Ministry of Human Resources issued implementation guidelines in December 2024 (The Star, 2024). Flexibility is not an absolute entitlement, but a refusal now has to be explained.

Employees' expectations also extend beyond the timing and location of work to the rest of their lives. Malaysia's population is ageing and many employees care for children and older relatives at once. A further and less studied domain is pets. In a 2026 survey of more than 10,000 Malaysians, including 4,872 pet owners, 91 per cent of owners regarded their pets as family, and 65 per cent had cut their own spending to pay for pet care (Malay Mail, 2026b). Employees who see a pet as a family member may expect understanding when the pet is ill or dies, flexibility to care for it, or a workplace where pets are welcome. In Malaysia, however, pet policies must also respect the religious sensitivities of the Muslim majority, particularly concerning dogs, so the question of what employers should offer is not straightforward.

Management research has not caught up with these changes. Studies of flexible working tend to treat it as an employee benefit and assess its effects on performance and well-being (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Bloom et al., 2024). Research on pet-friendly workplaces is small and mostly Western (Wilkin et al., 2016). Neither body of work asks how these practices fit into the implicit exchange between employer and employee, or how they are

perceived by colleagues who cannot benefit from them. This paper argues that the psychological contract, the set of beliefs employees hold about what they and their employer owe each other (Rousseau, 1995), is the right lens for understanding these changes, and that the content of that contract is expanding to cover employees' whole lives.

1.1. Research Questions

RQ1: How have Malaysian employees' expectations of their employers expanded, how can these expectations be conceptualised, and how are they renegotiated over time?

RQ2: Through which mechanisms do organisational responses to these expectations, including formal flexibility, negotiated arrangements and pet-inclusive practices, affect engagement and retention?

RQ3: Under what conditions, including employees' boundary preferences and Malaysia's collectivist and religious norms, do these responses strengthen or undermine the employment relationship?

1.2. Contributions

At the centre of the paper is a new concept, the whole-life psychological contract: employees' belief that, in return for their effort and commitment, their employer owes them room for the main parts of their lives, including when and where they work, the people they care for, their health and their companion animals. We root the concept in social exchange theory, which explains why employees respond to what they receive with commitment or withdrawal, and we take care to show how it differs from neighbouring ideas such as relational contracts, family-supportive organisation perceptions and idiosyncratic deals. Because expectations are moving, not fixed, we also draw on the dynamic phase model of psychological contracts to explain how the pandemic and Malaysia's new legal rights have pushed many employment relationships into renegotiation. Signalling and organisational support theories explain why the manner of an employer's response matters as much as its substance, while boundary fit, attachment and cross-cultural theories explain why the same practice can delight one employee and unsettle another. The argument is set out as eleven propositions, written in positive, directional form as the journal recommends. Because Malaysia is not the first country to grapple with these questions, we also compare its approach with seven other jurisdictions and draw out lessons for employers and policymakers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social Exchange: The Foundation

Underneath any discussion of what employees expect lies a simple idea: people at work respond to how they are treated. Social exchange theory distinguishes economic exchange, in which specified goods are traded for specified payment, from social exchange, in which one party does the other a favour without a precise agreement on what will come

back, trusting that it will be repaid in time (Blau, 1964). Social exchange creates diffuse obligations and, when those obligations are honoured, builds trust. Over time, relationships that follow the rules of exchange, especially the norm of reciprocity, can develop into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Flexibility and support for employees' lives outside work fit squarely within social rather than economic exchange. They are rarely written into contracts, their value is hard to price, and they invite employees to reciprocate with effort and loyalty that are equally hard to specify. This is why the employee's interpretation of such practices, and not only the practices themselves, deserves theoretical attention.

2.2. The Psychological Contract

A psychological contract consists of an individual's beliefs about the terms of an exchange agreement between themselves and their employer (Rousseau, 1995). Unlike a written contract, it is subjective, often unspoken and continually revised. Transactional contracts focus on specific, short-term economic exchange, while relational contracts involve broader, longer-term obligations such as loyalty, support and development. When employees believe their employer has failed to meet its obligations, they experience breach, which reduces trust, satisfaction and intention to stay (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). The content of psychological contracts reflects wider social and economic conditions, so it is reasonable to expect that changes in the labour market, technology and family life will change what employees believe they are owed.

Psychological contracts are not set once and left alone. The dynamic phase model describes four phases through which they move: creation, when initial beliefs form; maintenance, when both parties broadly meet expectations and little attention is paid to the contract; renegotiation, when a change on either side prompts the terms to be revisited; and repair, when a perceived breach must be addressed if the relationship is to continue (Rousseau et al., 2018). In the maintenance phase, employees tend to notice only large deviations. Disruptions jolt them into actively reassessing what they are owed. The pandemic was such a disruption on a massive scale. It showed many Malaysian employees that their jobs could be done differently, and in doing so it moved large numbers of employment relationships out of maintenance and into renegotiation. The statutory right to request flexible working, in force since 2023, and the civil service hybrid policy of 2026 can be read as institutional moments in that renegotiation. Individual life events, such as a parent's illness or the arrival of a pet, can trigger the same process on a smaller scale.

2.3. Flexible and Remote Work

Research on flexible and remote work has grown rapidly. A meta-analysis found that telecommuting had small but beneficial effects on perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, job satisfaction, performance and turnover intention (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). The effects depend on how flexibility is managed. Telecommuting combined with employee control over boundaries is associated with better outcomes than telecommuting imposed without control (Kossek et al., 2006), and remote work is most effective when job design provides social support, autonomy and manageable monitoring (Wang et al., 2021).

The strongest recent evidence comes from a randomised trial of 1,612 employees, in which working from home two days a week reduced resignations by one third without harming performance or promotion (Bloom et al., 2024). A separate field experiment found that employees who spent about two days a week in the office reported better work-life balance, higher job satisfaction and less isolation than those who spent more or fewer days there, with no difference in performance ratings (Choudhury et al., 2024). The Malaysian civil service's two-day model mirrors these designs. Reduced working time is a further form of flexibility now being tested at scale. In a study of 2,896 employees in 141 organisations across six countries that moved to a four-day week without loss of pay, burnout and stress fell, job satisfaction and mental and physical health improved, and more than 90 per cent of organisations kept the arrangement after the trial (Fan et al., 2025).

2.4. Boundary Preferences and Person-Environment Fit

It would be easy to assume that more flexibility is always better. Boundary research suggests otherwise. People differ in whether they prefer to keep work and home apart (segmentation) or to blend them (integration) (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006). What matters is the fit between an employee's preference and what the workplace provides. In a study of 325 employees, the fit between preferred and actual segmentation predicted work-home conflict, stress and job satisfaction, and the effects of misfit were asymmetric, challenging the common view that integration is always the answer (Kreiner, 2006). For the whole-life contract, this means that accommodation is not the same as integration. An employee who wants to protect evenings from email, or who would rather not have animals in the office, may experience some 'whole-life' practices as intrusions. A contract that respects the whole of an employee's life must also respect how that employee wants to arrange it.

2.5. Idiosyncratic Deals and Fairness

Flexibility is often granted individually. Idiosyncratic deals, or i-deals, are voluntary, personalised agreements negotiated between individual employees and their employers that benefit both parties (Rousseau et al., 2006). They can reward valued employees and meet specific needs, but they also raise fairness concerns among colleagues who do not receive them. Organisational justice research shows that perceptions of fair procedures, including consistency, accuracy and the opportunity to be heard, shape how people react to decisions, often more strongly than the outcomes themselves (Colquitt et al., 2001). In Malaysia, the requirement in Section 60Q for written reasons when a request is refused introduces an element of procedural justice into what was previously a matter of managerial discretion.

2.6. Signalling and Organisational Support

Signalling theory explains how one party conveys information about unobservable qualities to another through observable actions (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Employers' human resource practices act as signals of how much they value employees. Organisational support theory holds that employees form global beliefs about the extent

to which their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986), and that these beliefs increase commitment and reduce withdrawal (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Practices that are discretionary and that address employees' lives outside work are especially strong signals of care, because they go beyond what is legally or commercially required.

2.7. Pet-Inclusive Workplaces

Pet-inclusive practices range from allowing pets in the workplace, to flexibility for veterinary care, to leave for the death of a pet. Evidence is limited but suggestive. In a study of a manufacturing company, employees who brought their dogs to work reported declining stress over the working day, while those without dogs reported rising stress (Barker et al., 2012). In a more recent study of 208 pet-owning employees in Portugal, pet-friendly practices were associated with stronger organisational identification, which in turn was associated with higher life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Junça-Silva, 2022). Practice is also spreading. In the United States, where 62 per cent of adults own pets and almost all owners regard them as family (Axios, 2024), a small but growing number of employers offer pet bereavement leave or allow dogs at work. In New Zealand and Australia, a pet insurer introduced two days of pet bereavement leave for all its employees in 2026, and 83 per cent of New Zealand pet owners surveyed supported workplace pet leave (1News, 2026). Wilkin et al. (2016) argue that pet-friendly policies may improve recruitment, retention, health and productivity, but they also identify concerns about health and safety, property damage, distraction and religious preferences. The last concern is particularly important in Malaysia. Many Malaysian Muslims regard contact with dogs as requiring ritual cleansing, which means that a workplace policy designed in a Western setting could exclude or offend many colleagues. Cats, which outnumber dogs by about two to one among Malaysian pet-owning households (Malay Mail, 2026b), and practices that do not involve animals at work, such as flexibility for veterinary appointments, raise fewer concerns.

Why should pets belong in a theory of the employment relationship at all? Attachment research offers an answer. People form attachment bonds with their pets that resemble their attachments to other people, differing in how anxious or avoidant they are, and these attachment orientations shape their expectations of the pet and their reactions when it dies (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Yet the loss of a pet is often a form of disenfranchised grief: grief that is real but not socially recognised, so that the bereaved person receives little sympathy or time to mourn (Cordaro, 2012). In the workplace, this gap is where an employer's response becomes meaningful. A manager who treats a pet's death as trivial confirms that the employee's grief does not count, whereas one who allows a day off recognises it. Given that most Malaysian owners describe their pets as family (Malay Mail, 2026b), pet-related practices can carry far more emotional weight than their modest cost suggests.

2.8. Culture and the Psychological Contract

Most psychological contract research comes from individualistic Western settings, but culture shapes both the content of contracts and how people react when they are broken. Thomas et al. (2003) argue that individualism and collectivism influence whether employees form more transactional or more relational contracts, how they perceive breach, and how they respond to it. Employees with a collectivist orientation are more likely to see their relationship with the employer in relational terms and may respond to breach less through open complaint or exit and more through quiet withdrawal or loyalty, depending on their attachment to the group. Malaysia is generally regarded as collectivist and high in power distance (Hofstede, 2001), and family obligations extend well beyond the nuclear household. This has two implications. First, Malaysian whole-life expectations are likely to include obligations towards employees' families, not only towards employees as individuals. Second, breach may be harder to see, because dissatisfied employees may not voice it. Malaysian evidence is limited and mixed. One study of 153 private-sector employees found that job resources predicted engagement but found no relationship between psychological contract breach and engagement (Norhizam and Mohd Anuar, 2020), a result that may reflect the less visible ways in which breach is expressed in collectivist settings.

2.9. Monitoring

Remote work has been accompanied by electronic performance monitoring, the use of technology to observe, record and analyse employee behaviour (Ravid et al., 2020). Monitoring can provide useful feedback, but it can also signal distrust and reduce the autonomy that makes flexibility valuable. The Malaysian civil service hybrid policy uses the SPOT-Me system to record attendance and output on work-from-home days (Malay Mail, 2026a). How monitoring is designed and communicated is likely to influence whether flexibility is perceived as a sign of trust or of surveillance.

2.10. Megatrends Shaping Employee Expectations

Why are expectations rising now? Four broad trends help explain it. Technology comes first: AI and digital tools are expected to transform the businesses of 86 per cent of employers surveyed by the World Economic Forum (2025), and the same technologies make remote work possible while also enabling closer monitoring. Demography is a second driver. Ageing populations increase the number of employees with care responsibilities and extend working lives, so that more employees must combine work with other obligations. Generational change matters too. In Deloitte's 2025 survey of more than 23,000 Gen Z and millennial respondents in 44 countries, these generations said they prioritise work-life balance and meaningful work, 44 per cent of Gen Z had left a job because it lacked purpose, and one in three Gen Z respondents felt anxious or stressed all or most of the time (Deloitte, 2025). Then there is the cost of living. Rising prices, cited by half of employers as a transformative trend (World Economic Forum, 2025), raise the value of benefits that save employees time and money, such as reduced commuting. The International Labour

Organization concludes that giving workers more control over how, where and when they work can raise productivity, whereas restricting flexibility increases turnover (International Labour Organization, 2023).

2.11. International Policies and Practices

Table 1 compares Malaysia's approach with policies in seven other jurisdictions. Three models can be distinguished. The first is a procedural right to request flexibility, under which employers must consider requests within a set period and justify refusals. Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Singapore follow this model, with response periods of 60 days in Malaysia and two months in the United Kingdom and Singapore (Chau, 2023; Ministry of Manpower, 2024; Pinsent Masons, 2024). The United Kingdom has gone furthest by making the right available from the first day of employment and requiring employers to consult before refusing, and Ireland extended the right to request remote working to all employees in 2024 (Law Society Gazette, 2024). The second model protects time outside work. Portugal has required employers since 2022 to refrain from contacting employees outside working hours (Ramos, 2022), and Australia introduced a right for employees to refuse unreasonable out-of-hours contact in August 2024, extended to small businesses in August 2025 (JURIST, 2024). The third model links flexibility to care and equal treatment. The European Union's Work-Life Balance Directive gives workers five days of carers' leave a year and a right to request flexible arrangements for care (European Union, 2019), while the Philippine Telecommuting Act requires that teleworkers receive the same pay, workload, training and career opportunities as comparable office-based staff (Republic of the Philippines, 2018).

Table 1. Flexible work policies and practices: Malaysia and selected jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Instrument and date	Key provisions
Malaysia	Employment Act 1955, ss. 60P-60Q (from 1 January 2023); civil service hybrid policy (from 1 August 2026)	Right to request flexible hours, days or place; decision within 60 days with written reasons for refusal; 3 office days and 2 home days for eligible civil servants
Singapore	Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (from 1 December 2024)	Employers must consider formal requests properly and respond within two months
United Kingdom	Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 (from 6 April 2024)	Day-one right; two requests a year; decision within two months; consultation required before refusal
Ireland	Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023; WRC Code of Practice (from 7 March 2024)	All employees may request remote work; parents and carers may request flexible working
European Union	Work-Life Balance Directive (EU) 2019/1158	Five days of carers' leave a year; right to request flexible arrangements for care purposes
Portugal	Law 83/2021 (from 1 January 2022)	Employer duty to refrain from contacting employees outside working hours
Australia	Fair Work Act amendments (from 26 August 2024; small business from 26 August 2025)	Right to refuse unreasonable contact outside working hours

Jurisdiction	Instrument and date	Key provisions
Philippines	Telecommuting Act, Republic Act 11165 (20 December 2018)	Voluntary telework; equal treatment with office-based staff in pay, workload, training and career development

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from the sources cited in Section 2.11.

Several lessons follow for Malaysia. Malaysia's Sections 60P and 60Q already include a decision deadline and written reasons, but they lack three features found elsewhere: an explicit duty to consult before refusing, protection of time outside working hours, and an equal-treatment guarantee for employees who work remotely. Each of these addresses a boundary condition in the framework developed below. Consultation strengthens procedural fairness, protected rest time limits the risk that flexibility becomes constant availability, and equal treatment reduces the career penalties that may deter employees from using flexibility.

2.12. Research Gap

This leaves some clear gaps. Psychological contract research has not yet explained how contracts expand to cover employees' lives beyond work, or how cultural and individual differences shape that expansion. Research on flexibility has measured the effects of particular arrangements without asking how they change the content of the psychological contract. Practices such as pet inclusion have been studied in isolation, with no framework connecting them to the wider employment relationship and almost no attention to workplaces with diverse religious norms. And little work has examined how Malaysia's new statutory right to request flexibility shapes employee perceptions of fairness and support, or what Malaysia can learn from countries that have regulated flexibility for longer. Table 2 summarises the main evidence on which the framework draws.

Table 2. Key evidence informing the framework

Source	Context and design	Key finding relevant to the framework
Randstad Malaysia (2025)	Survey of 982 Malaysian workers	Flexible hours valued by 59%, flexible location by 44%; work-life balance a reason to leave for 47%
Malay Mail (2026a)	Public Service Department circular	Civil service hybrid policy (3 office, 2 home days) from 1 August 2026; frontline services excluded
Chau (2023); The Star (2024)	Employment Act 1955, ss. 60P-60Q; MOHR guidelines	Right to request flexible hours, days or place; decision within 60 days with written reasons
Malay Mail (2026b)	Survey of 10,055 Malaysians incl. 4,872 pet owners	91% of owners regard pets as family; cats outnumber dogs about two to one
Bloom et al. (2024)	Randomised trial, 1,612 employees	Two days of home working cut resignations by one third with no loss of performance
Gajendran and Harrison (2007)	Meta-analysis	Telecommuting modestly improves autonomy, satisfaction and retention
Wilkin et al. (2016)	Conceptual review	Pet-friendly policies may aid retention and health but raise safety, distraction and religious concerns

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from the sources cited.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a conceptual paper that follows the theory adaptation approach described by Jaakkola (2020), in which an established theory is extended by introducing new concepts to account for a changed context. Psychological contract theory serves as the domain theory and social exchange theory as its foundation. The dynamic phase model, signalling theory and organisational support theory supply the mechanisms, while organisational justice, boundary fit, attachment and cross-cultural research supply the boundary conditions. The framework is designed to meet Whetten's (1989) criteria for a theoretical contribution by specifying the constructs, their relationships, the logic behind them and the conditions under which they hold.

Literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using combinations of the terms social exchange, psychological contract, contract renegotiation, flexible working arrangements, boundary management, pet attachment, collectivism, remote work, hybrid work, idiosyncratic deals, perceived organisational support, electronic monitoring, pet-friendly workplace and Malaysia. Meta-analyses, randomised trials and foundational theoretical works were prioritised. The Malaysian context was established from the Employment (Amendment) Act 2022 and related guidance, the Public Service Department's 2026 hybrid working policy as reported in national media, and recent surveys of Malaysian employees and pet owners. To identify international policies and practices, the review covered the European Union's Work-Life Balance Directive, national legislation and official guidance from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, Australia, Singapore and the Philippines, and global reports by the World Economic Forum, the International Labour Organization and Deloitte. Survey findings were treated as indicative because the samples were not nationally representative. Policy information was checked against at least two sources where possible. No primary data were collected, and ethics approval was therefore not required.

Generative AI disclosure: Claude (Anthropic; model Claude Opus 5.5) was used on 8 November 2026 to assist with literature searching, structuring the argument, drafting and language editing. The prompts used are available from the corresponding author on request. The author(s) verified all references and policy information against the original sources and take full responsibility for the content.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: THE WHOLE-LIFE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

4.1. Overview

Fig. 1 presents the framework. Employees hold whole-life expectations covering temporal flexibility, spatial flexibility and support for life domains such as care, health and pets. Organisations respond through formal flexible working policies, individually negotiated arrangements and pet-inclusive practices. These responses influence two exchange mechanisms, psychological contract fulfilment and perceived organisational support, which in turn shape engagement and intention to stay. Several conditions shape the

process: the gap between roles that can and cannot work flexibly, procedural fairness, monitoring intensity and the cultural-religious inclusivity of pet practices, while pet attachment determines who values pet-inclusive practices most. The framework is also dynamic. Disruptions move contracts into renegotiation, and employers who engage openly in that renegotiation are more likely to keep the relationship healthy (Proposition 9). The value of any practice depends on its fit with employees' boundary preferences (Proposition 10), and in Malaysia's collectivist setting, unmet expectations are more likely to surface as quiet withdrawal than as open complaint (Proposition 11).

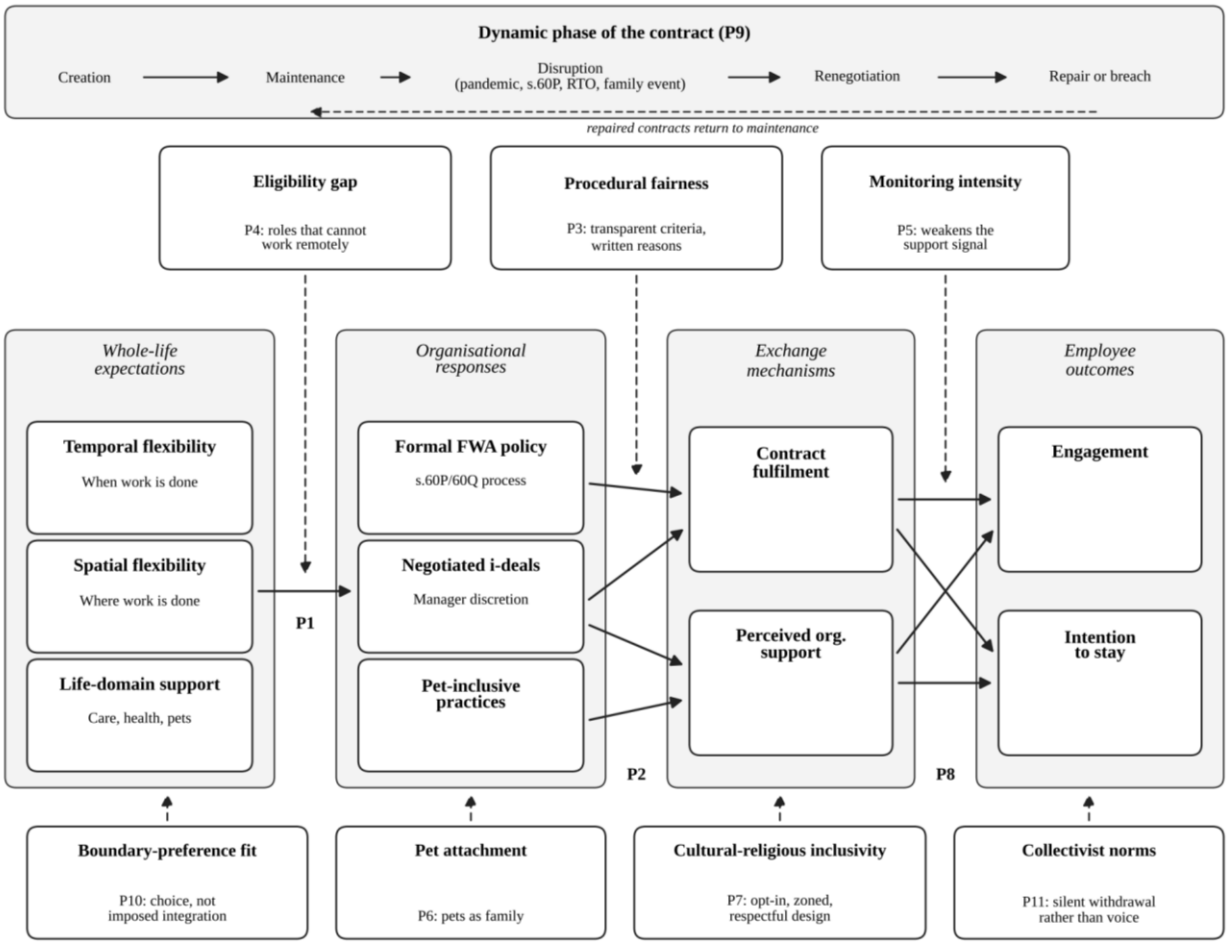

Fig. 1. The whole-life psychological contract framework

Source: Developed for this study.

The central construct is the whole-life psychological contract. It differs from a conventional relational contract in its scope. A relational contract concerns obligations within the employment relationship, such as development and job security. A whole-life contract extends the employer's perceived obligations to the domains of employees' lives that work affects, including when and where they work, their caring responsibilities, their health and their companion animals. It does not imply that employees expect their employer to provide for these domains, only that they expect the employer to accommodate them, so that work does not prevent them from meeting their obligations elsewhere.

A new construct earns its place only if it says something that existing ones do not. Table 3 compares the whole-life contract with its closest neighbours. Family-supportive

organisation perceptions capture employees' global view of whether their organisation supports their family responsibilities, and they explain work-family outcomes over and above specific benefits (Allen, 2001). But they describe a perception of the organisation, not a belief about mutual obligation, and they are limited to family. Relational contracts involve broad, long-term obligations but are confined to the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). I-deals are individually negotiated terms (Rousseau et al., 2006), whereas the whole-life contract concerns what employees in general now believe they are owed. Perceived organisational support is a broad belief about being valued (Eisenberger et al., 1986), which the whole-life contract helps to explain rather than duplicate. What is distinctive about the whole-life contract is the combination of two features: it is a belief about reciprocal obligation, and its scope covers the domains of life beyond work, including the companion animals that previous constructs have ignored.

Table 3. Distinguishing the whole-life psychological contract from related constructs

Construct	Definition	Scope	How the whole-life contract differs
Relational psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995)	Beliefs about broad, long-term mutual obligations	Within the employment relationship	Extends obligations to life domains beyond work
Family-supportive organisation perceptions (Allen, 2001)	Global perception that the organisation supports employees' family responsibilities	Family	A belief about reciprocal obligation, not only a perception; includes health and companion animals
I-deals (Rousseau et al., 2006)	Individually negotiated, personalised employment terms	Individual employee	Concerns what employees in general now believe they are owed
Perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986)	Belief that the organisation values one's contribution and cares about one's well-being	General	An antecedent: fulfilling the whole-life contract builds perceived support
Work-life balance and flexible working arrangements	Practices or states that reduce conflict between work and other roles	Time and place of work	Treats these practices as content of an exchange, with meaning for reciprocity

Source: Developed for this study.

4.2. Fulfilment of Whole-Life Expectations

When expectations change but organisational practices do not, the gap is experienced as breach. The Randstad data, showing that work-life balance is a leading reason for leaving and that the gap between expectations and experience widened in 2025 (Randstad Malaysia, 2025), are consistent with this. Conversely, when employers meet whole-life expectations, employees perceive that the contract has been honoured, and they reciprocate with engagement and loyalty (Rousseau, 1995). The evidence that hybrid work reduces resignations without reducing performance (Bloom et al., 2024) suggests that meeting flexibility expectations need not come at the employer's expense.

Proposition 1: The extent to which an organisation meets employees' whole-life expectations is positively related to perceived psychological contract fulfilment.

4.3. Formal Policies, Negotiated Arrangements and Support

Organisations can meet expectations through formal policies that apply to everyone in eligible roles or through individual arrangements negotiated with managers. Formal policies are more visible and predictable, and they signal that flexibility is an organisational commitment rather than a personal favour (Connelly et al., 2011). Individual arrangements can be tailored to specific needs and can strongly signal that the employee is valued, but they depend on the manager and may be withdrawn when the manager changes (Rousseau et al., 2006). We expect both to raise contract fulfilment and perceived organisational support among recipients, but formal policies should have a stronger and more durable effect on perceived support across the workforce, because they communicate the organisation's stance rather than an individual manager's goodwill.

Proposition 2: Formal flexible working policies and negotiated i-deals are both positively related to contract fulfilment and perceived organisational support among recipients, and formal policies are more strongly related to perceived organisational support across the workforce.

4.4. Procedural Fairness

Flexibility can create resentment when it is distributed in ways that seem arbitrary. Colleagues who see others receiving arrangements they were denied may perceive injustice, and recipients may feel uncomfortable or exposed. Fair procedures, including clear criteria, consistent decisions and explanations, reduce these effects (Colquitt et al., 2001). The requirement in Section 60Q that refusals be given in writing with reasons (Chau, 2023) provides a minimum standard of procedural fairness. Organisations that go further, publishing their criteria and applying them consistently, are likely to get more goodwill from the same flexibility.

Proposition 3: Procedural fairness in flexible working decisions strengthens the positive relationship between flexibility practices and perceived organisational support, both among recipients and among colleagues who do not receive flexibility.

4.5. The Eligibility Gap

Not all roles can be done remotely. The civil service hybrid policy excludes frontline counters, security, defence, enforcement, education, healthcare and the judiciary (Malay Mail, 2026a), and many private-sector roles in retail, manufacturing and hospitality similarly require physical presence. When remote work becomes a visible norm for some employees, those in ineligible roles may perceive that their contract has been breached even though they were never promised it. Organisations can narrow this gap by offering forms of flexibility that suit place-bound roles, such as shift choice, compressed weeks or flexible start times, which Section 60P allows in principle (Chau, 2023).

Proposition 4: Employees in roles ineligible for remote work perceive lower psychological contract fulfilment when remote work is available to others in the organisation, and this effect is weaker when alternative forms of temporal flexibility are offered to them.

4.6. Monitoring Intensity

The signal sent by flexibility depends on how it is managed. Flexibility accompanied by intensive electronic monitoring may be read as conditional trust, reducing its value as a sign that the organisation cares (Ravid et al., 2020). Monitoring focused on outputs, explained in advance and used for feedback rather than control is less likely to have this effect. As the Malaysian public service tracks work-from-home output through the SPOT-Me system (Malay Mail, 2026a), the design of such systems will influence whether the new hybrid norm strengthens or weakens the relationship between civil servants and their employer.

Proposition 5: Monitoring intensity weakens the positive relationships between flexibility practices and both perceived organisational support and engagement, and this weakening is smaller when monitoring focuses on outputs and is transparently communicated.

4.7. Pet-Inclusive Practices

For employees who regard pets as family, an employer's response to pet-related needs sends a strong signal about whether their whole life is respected. Practices may include flexibility for veterinary appointments, short leave when a pet dies, or pet-friendly days in designated areas. Because such practices are uncommon and discretionary, they are likely to be read as evidence of genuine care (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Wilkin et al., 2016). We would expect the effect to be concentrated among pet owners, for whom the practices are relevant, while non-owners will be largely indifferent provided the practices do not affect them.

Proposition 6: Pet-inclusive practices are positively related to perceived organisational support, and this relationship is stronger for employees who own pets than for those who do not.

4.8. Cultural And Religious Inclusivity

In a multicultural society, any practice that brings animals into shared space must respect the beliefs of all employees. A pet policy that ignores the concerns of Muslim colleagues about dogs, or of colleagues with allergies or phobias, can damage the very climate of care it is meant to create (Wilkin et al., 2016). Inclusive design includes opt-in participation, designated areas, a focus on practices that do not require animals at work, and consultation before introducing any change. Designed this way, pet-inclusive practices can support pet owners without imposing costs on others; designed carelessly, they may be perceived by some colleagues as a breach of their own psychological contract.

Proposition 7: The cultural and religious inclusivity of pet-inclusive practices moderates their effect on the wider workforce, such that inclusive design is positively related to perceived organisational support among all employees, whereas non-inclusive design is negatively related to perceived organisational support among employees whose beliefs or needs are not accommodated.

4.9. Outcomes

Contract fulfilment and perceived organisational support are well-established predictors of engagement and retention (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). In the whole-life contract, these mechanisms carry the effect of flexibility and life-domain practices to the outcomes that matter most to employers. The effect may be stronger among younger employees. Generational research suggests that younger workers place greater value on leisure and work-life balance (Twenge, 2010), and in the Malaysian survey, Gen Z respondents were more likely than others to prioritise learning and development (Randstad Malaysia, 2025). Younger employees may therefore be more sensitive to whether their whole-life expectations are met.

Proposition 8: Psychological contract fulfilment and perceived organisational support are positively related to engagement and intention to stay, and these relationships are stronger among younger employees.

4.10. Renegotiation After Disruption

If contracts move between phases, then the moment of disruption is when employers have most to gain or lose. When a disruption pushes a contract into renegotiation, employees reassess what they are owed and watch closely how the employer responds (Rousseau et al., 2018). An employer that opens a genuine conversation about new terms, for example by asking employees what flexibility they need after a return-to-office decision or after a family crisis, gives the relationship a chance to settle into a new maintenance phase. An employer that simply reasserts pre-disruption terms leaves employees to conclude that their contract has been breached, and pushes the relationship into the more difficult work of repair. Social exchange theory explains why the conversation itself matters: it is evidence of good faith, which is the currency of social exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Proposition 9: Following a disruption, such as a return-to-office decision or a major change in an employee's family or personal life, explicit renegotiation of whole-life terms is positively related to subsequent psychological contract fulfilment, whereas reassertion of pre-disruption terms is positively related to perceived breach.

4.11. Fit with Boundary Preferences

Because employees differ in how they want to arrange work and life, the same practice can be a gift to one person and an imposition on another (Kreiner, 2006). Remote work suits an integrator who enjoys moving between work and family during the day, but it can leave a segmenter feeling that home has been invaded. Pet-friendly days delight some employees and make others uncomfortable. The whole-life contract is fulfilled not by maximising accommodation but by matching it to individual preferences, which argues for choice rather than uniform policy.

Proposition 10: The positive relationship between whole-life practices and psychological contract fulfilment is stronger when the practices fit employees' boundary preferences, and

imposed integration is negatively related to fulfilment among employees who prefer segmentation.

4.12. Collectivist Norms And Silent Breach

In Malaysia's collectivist and hierarchical workplaces, employees may hesitate to ask for flexibility or to complain when it is refused, especially to a senior manager (Thomas et al., 2003; Hofstede, 2001). Their response to unmet expectations is therefore more likely to take the form of reduced effort, disengagement or a quiet search for another job than of open voice. This has an uncomfortable implication for employers. The absence of complaints is not evidence that whole-life expectations are being met. Organisations that rely on employees to speak up may discover the breach only when an employee resigns. Regular, safe channels for discussing flexibility, such as skip-level conversations or anonymous surveys, are likely to matter more in Malaysia than in more individualistic settings.

Proposition 11: In collectivist and high power-distance settings such as Malaysia, unmet whole-life expectations are more strongly related to silent withdrawal than to voice, and proactive organisational channels for discussing flexibility weaken the relationship between unmet expectations and turnover.

4.13. Theoretical Implications

The framework contributes to psychological contract theory in several ways. Most directly, it shows that the content of the contract is expanding beyond the workplace and names this expansion as the whole-life contract, a construct that is distinct from family-supportive perceptions, relational contracts and i-deals. By rooting the construct in social exchange theory and linking it to the dynamic phase model, it explains not only what employees now expect but how those expectations came to be renegotiated and how they can be restored after breach. It also brings in two perspectives that contract research has largely overlooked: boundary fit, which shows that more accommodation is not always better, and culture, which shows that breach may be silent in collectivist settings. It extends research on flexible work by moving the focus from the effects of particular arrangements to their meaning within the employment exchange, and by highlighting the experience of employees who are excluded from them. It adds to the small literature on pet-inclusive workplaces by grounding these practices in attachment theory and the concept of disenfranchised grief, placing them within organisational support theory and by identifying cultural-religious inclusivity as a necessary condition for their success in diverse societies. Finally, it shows how a statutory right to request flexibility, such as Sections 60P and 60Q, can be analysed as a source of procedural justice.

4.14. Practical Implications

The message for Malaysian employers is that flexibility and support for employees' lives outside work are now part of the employment deal, not optional perks. Table 4 summarises recommended practices, drawing on international best practice. Employers should establish formal, published flexibility policies that go beyond the minimum requirements

of Section 60Q, apply consistent criteria and train managers to explain decisions. They should design alternative flexibility for place-bound roles so that the benefits of hybrid work do not create a two-tier workforce. Monitoring should focus on outputs and be explained to employees in advance. Pet-inclusive practices can be introduced at low cost, starting with flexibility for veterinary care and leave for pet bereavement, and any practice involving animals at work should be opt-in, zoned and introduced only after consultation.

Table 4. Recommended employer practices under the whole-life psychological contract

Area	Recommended practice	Linked proposition
Formal policy	Publish a flexible working policy with clear eligibility criteria, beyond the minimum s.60Q process	P1, P2
Fairness	Apply criteria consistently; explain all decisions; offer an internal review of refusals	P3
Place-bound roles	Offer shift choice, compressed or four-day weeks, or flexible start times where remote work is not possible	P4
Right to rest	Set norms against routine contact outside working hours, following Portugal and Australia	P5
Equal treatment	Guarantee remote workers the same pay, training and promotion opportunities, following the Philippines	P3, P4
Monitoring	Measure outputs rather than activity; explain monitoring in advance and use it for feedback	P5
Pet inclusion	Start with flexibility for veterinary care and pet bereavement leave; keep any on-site pet days opt-in and zoned	P6, P7
Consultation	Consult employees of all faiths and those with allergies or phobias before introducing animal-related practices	P7
Renegotiation	After any major change, such as a return-to-office decision or an employee's family crisis, hold an explicit conversation about new terms	P9
Choice	Let employees choose between arrangements rather than imposing integration; respect those who prefer to keep work and home apart	P10
Safe voice	Use skip-level conversations and anonymous surveys to surface unmet expectations before they lead to resignations	P11

Source: Developed for this study.

Policymakers can borrow from what has worked elsewhere. The United Kingdom now requires employers to consult employees before refusing a flexible working request, a simple step Malaysia could adopt. Portugal and Australia protect employees from unreasonable contact outside working hours, which would help ensure that flexibility does not slide into constant availability. The Philippines guarantees remote workers equal treatment in pay, training and promotion. And the European Union's short carers' leave offers a model for supporting employees with family care responsibilities. The Ministry of Human Resources' guidelines on flexible working could also be strengthened with guidance on fair criteria and alternative flexibility for place-bound roles, including trials of reduced working time, which has shown promising results elsewhere (Fan et al., 2025). The experience of the civil service hybrid policy offers an opportunity for evaluation, including its effects on employees in ineligible services, which could inform private-sector practice.

4.15. Limitations and Research Agenda

The framework is conceptual, and its propositions need testing. Measures already exist for psychological contract fulfilment and breach (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and procedural justice (Colquitt et al., 2001), and for family-supportive organisation perceptions (Allen, 2001), segmentation preferences (Kreiner, 2006) and pet attachment (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011), but a measure of whole-life expectations needs to be developed and validated in the Malaysian context. Because the framework is dynamic, longitudinal designs that follow employees through disruptions such as return-to-office decisions would allow the renegotiation proposition to be tested directly, and cross-cultural comparisons would show whether silent breach is more common in collectivist settings. Multilevel studies could compare employees in eligible and ineligible roles within the same organisations, and the introduction of the civil service hybrid policy provides a natural experiment. Research on pet-inclusive practices should examine the views of both pet owners and colleagues, including Muslim employees, before any causal claims are made. The Malaysian survey evidence cited here comes from non-representative samples, so national data on employee expectations would strengthen the empirical base. Comparative studies across Malaysia, Singapore and other countries with right-to-request laws could show whether stronger procedural rights increase perceived fairness and support. Finally, the framework focuses on formal employees, and the expectations of gig and platform workers, who often lack both the protections of the Employment Act and a stable employer, deserve separate study.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Malaysian employees increasingly expect their employers to make room for their whole lives: when and where they work, the people they care for, their health and, for many, their pets. We have argued that these expectations are best understood as an expansion of the psychological contract, rooted in social exchange and constantly renegotiated, and that the way employers respond, fairly, inclusively and without excessive surveillance, determines whether flexibility strengthens or weakens the employment relationship. The eight propositions give researchers a basis for testing these claims. For employers, the lesson of our opening example is a simple one: small, fair and respectful accommodations can keep good people for years.

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