

JOB INSECURITY AS A BARRIER TO WORK ENGAGEMENT DURING PANDEMIC COVID-19: WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE AS A MODERATOR

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Abstract

The upheaval induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in job insecurity, which may lead employees to have less engagement with their work. Drawing upon the role stress theory and role enhancement theory, we postulated that the detrimental impact of job security on employee engagement can be further attenuated or strengthened by the employee's work-family interfaces. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between job insecurity and job engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study further aimed to examine the moderating role of the work-family interface in the relationship between job insecurity and job engagement. Data was obtained from 284 employees in Malaysia via a self-administered questionnaire. Out of the total, 43% were male, whereas 57% were female. The average age of the participants was 38 years old. Three instruments were used in this study, namely the job insecurity scale, job engagement scale, and work-family interface scale (WFIS). The empirical data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 software. Two main results were found. First, job insecurity negatively affected job engagement ($B = -.735$, $SE = .189$, $t = -3.895$, $p < .001$). Second, the negative impact of job insecurity on job engagement can be attenuated by the negative work-to-family interface ($B = .131$, $SE = .064$, $t = 2.041$, $p = .042$), positive work-to-family interface ($B = .179$, $SE = .063$, $t = 2.829$, $p = .005$), and the positive family-to-work interface ($B = .130$, $SE = .065$, $t = 2.003$, $p = .046$). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been moved to an endemic, employees' job insecurity remains high due to Malaysia's unstable economic and political conditions. Based on the study's findings, we found that effective work-family inferences can minimise the negative impact of job insecurity on job engagement. This paper will provide greater detail on how work-family inferences can attenuate the negative association between job security and employee engagement.

Keywords: Job insecurity, job engagement, work-family interface, COVID-19 pandemic.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Since December 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 virus has swiftly spread around the world (WHO, 2021), which has severely impacted organisations across all industries. Likewise, the situation was bleak in Malaysia, ever since the first announcement of the nationwide movement control order (MCO) imposed by the government on March 18, 2020, organisations have been forced to immediately change their work practises to remote settings. The change has caused uncertainty and a slowdown in business, which has jeopardised employees' security in their jobs and resulted in an overall increase in job insecurity. Nevertheless, it is notable that the detrimental relationship between job insecurity and work engagement could be minimised by positive work-family and family-work interactions. On the other hand, negative work-to-family and family-to-work interfaces may exacerbate the negative relationship between job insecurity and work engagement, resulting in more severe outcomes. There is a lack of empirical research examining the relationship between job insecurity, work engagement, and the work-family interface; therefore, the objective of this research is to fill this void by examining the moderating role of the work-family interfaces in the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement.

Literature Review

Job insecurity is defined as an employee's fear of losing their job and being unemployed (De Witte, 1999). The fear of job loss has subsequently affected employees' work engagement in the workplace negatively (Jung, Jung & Yoon, 2021; Shin and Hur, 2020). Work engagement is the term used to describe an employee's positive work-related state, which is exhibited by their vigour, dedication, and absorption in their work (Schaufeli & Salanova 2007). In other words, during the COVID pandemic, the organizations had to deal with serious survival threats and a great deal of uncertainty. The uncertainty and survival threats were implicitly passed down to their employees, resulting in increasing job insecurity and decreasing work engagement (Asfaw & Chang, 2019; Frare & BEUREN, 2021; Karatepe et al., 2020). This is because, when employees have a great deal of fear of losing their jobs, it will likely affect their emotional

commitments to organisation (Presti & Nonnis 2012), and they tend to restrict their effort, energy, and time to achieve the organisational goals, resulting in decreased vigour, dedication, and absorption in work. Based on the discussion, we hypothesise that:

H1: Job insecurity is negatively associated with work engagement.

Despite the fact that there is strong evidence from previous research indicating there is a negative association between job insecurity and work engagement, the study of the relationship between these two variables is still limited in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, hence, the study is conducted.

Given that work engagement is one of the key contributors to organizational performance (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010), it particularly serves an important role in critical times of uncertainty (Macey & Schneider, 2008) such as during the COVID pandemic. As employees tend to withdraw their commitments from the organisation when they feel insecure about the job, this has a detrimental impact on their work performance. It is essential for us to identify potential moderators to minimise the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement. In other words, the present research seeks to answer this question: how can the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement be reduced?

Drawing upon the role stress theory and the role enhancement theory, we postulated that the detrimental impact of job security on employee engagement can be further attenuated or strengthened depending on the types of work-family interfaces. Generally, work-family interfaces can be distinguished into both negative and positive aspects. In the past, researchers have only focused their attention on the negative aspects of the work-family interface (Bellavia & Frone, 2005); however, over the course of the past 20 years, many studies have understood how important it is to place an emphasis on the positive effects of the work-family interface too (Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). It is critical to depict the complexities of the work-family interaction which comprises both negative and positive influences in both directions (Simone et al., 2018).

The negative aspects of work-family interfaces can be further divided into two categories namely negative work-family interfaces and negative family-work interfaces. A negative work-family interface refers to the detrimental impact that one's job has on their family life, while a negative family-work interface refers to the detrimental impact that one's family life has on their job. In other words, the employees unwittingly transfer their unpleasant emotions in their family life to work and vice versa. Studies have found that both negative work-family interfaces (negative work-family or family-work interfaces) affected work engagement negatively (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Sui & Ng, 2021). In particular, employees who experience negative work or family interfaces are more likely to withdraw from their work, resulting in a decline in work engagement. The fundamental relationship between negative work-family / family-work interfaces and work engagement can be explained via the role stress theory. The role stress theory describes managing multiple roles (eg, employee, spouse, parent) at once is a difficult undertaking (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This is because individuals have fixed amounts of scarce resources, which limit our capacity to exhibit multi roles. The fulfilment of multiple roles is likely to result in exhaustion, which will negatively impact our work performance (Kinnunen et al., 2006). In this regard, we postulate that when the workplace environment is bleak - when employees are worried about their jobs-the negative aspects of work-family interfaces are likely to exacerbate the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement as follows:

H2: Negative work-family interface strengthened the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement.

H3: Negative family-work interface strengthened the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement.

Positive work-family interfaces are further subdivided into two categories: positive work-family interfaces and positive family-work interfaces. A positive family-work interface refers to the positive influence that a person's family life has on their employment, whereas a positive work-family interface refers to the positive influence that a person's career has on their family life. In other words, the employees unwittingly transfer their joy from their family life to their work life and vice versa. Studies have found that both positive work-family interfaces (positive work-family or family-work interfaces) affected work engagement positively (Awan et al, 2021; Gopalan et al., 2021; Koekemoer et al., 2020). Specifically, employees who experience positive work or family interfaces are more likely to be engaged at work, resulting in an increase in job engagement. This phenomenon can be explained by role enhancement theory. The role enhancement theory posits that having multiple roles in life is advantageous rather than destructive to the individual. The advantages of holding multiple roles include improved self-esteem and social interaction opportunities (Bernett & Hyde, 2001). The social supports, skills, attitudes, or pleasure moods individuals gain in one role help them deal better in the other role (Kinnunen et., al 2006). In this regard, we postulate that when the workplace environment is bleak - when employees are worried about their jobs - the positive aspects of work-family interfaces are likely to attenuate the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement as follows:

H4: Positive work-family interface attenuated the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement.

H5: Positive family-work interface attenuated the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement.

Based on the previous studies and the theories discussed above, the following research framework was developed as shown in Figure 1, we propose that job insecurity is negatively associated with work engagement. However, the negative impact of job insecurity on work engagement will be strengthened by negative work-family interfaces and attenuated by positive work-family interfaces.

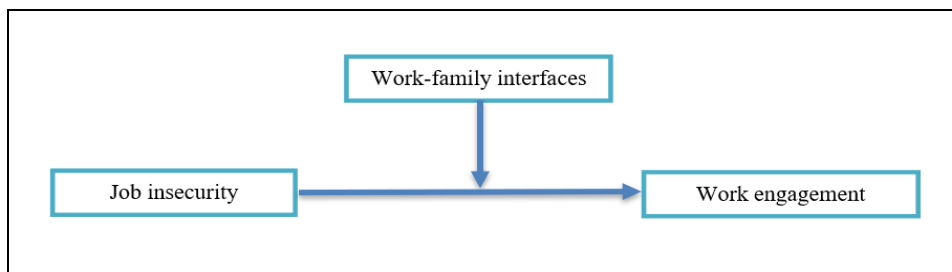


Figure 1: Research Framework

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 284 working adults participated in this study during the pandemic. The mean age of the respondents was 38.28 (SD = 11.49) from the range between 20 to 64 years old. More than half of the respondents were female (57%). In addition, more than 60% of the respondents were Chinese, followed by an equal sample of Indians and Malays (16.5%) and 2.9% of other ethnicities. About 60% of them were married, 37.1% were single, and 3.2% were separated or divorced.

Procedure

The respondents were approached using a purposive sampling method. The respondents must fulfil the criteria of being Malaysian and working adults who are currently working in Malaysia. A participant recruitment advertisement was made available on various social media platforms and the online survey link will be attached to the post and the advertisement. Individuals who fulfil the criteria and were interested in participating clicked the survey and were directed to the information sheet, which provided an explanation of the study's aim, privacy and confidentiality, respondents' rights, risks, and benefits. The respondents were then asked to provide their consent for their voluntary participation. A thank you note was provided at the end of the survey. The procedure for data collection has been approved by the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee.

Measure

Work Engagement (Jung et al., 2021) was measured using 5 items on a 7-scale point from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A mean score was calculated with higher score indicating a higher work engagement. The Cronbach alpha of .88, indicates good reliability.

The Job Insecurity Scale (Jung et al., 2021) was measured using 8 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A mean score was computed after reversing coding items 1 to 4. A higher score indicates a higher job insecurity. The Cronbach alpha reliability was .827 reported in this study.

Work-Family Interface Scale (WFIS; Kinnunen et al., 2006) consists of 14 items that measure the positive and negative spillover between family and work in both directions. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). WFIS consists of 4-subscales: which are negative work-family spillover (4-item), positive work-family spillover (3-item), negative family-work spillover (4-item), and positive family-work spillover (3-item). A mean score was computed for each subscale and a higher score corresponded to a higher work-family or family-work spillover respectively for each subscale. The Cronbach alpha reliability values ranged from .70 to .86 in this study.

Data Processing and Analysis Plan

IBM SPSS 23 and Hayes' SPSS Macro Process Version 4.0 were used to analyse the data of the study. Firstly, descriptive analyses were used to examine the distribution of the variables. Secondly, the association between the relationships was assessed using Pearson correlation analyses. Lastly, the Macro Process Model 1 was used to examine the moderation analysis, specifically for each of the subscales for work-family interface. Both age and gender were considered control variables in the moderation analysis. A significant moderating effect was assumed when the CIs were not across the zero point.

3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Relationship between Job Insecurity, Work-Family Interface, Work Engagement

Table 1 shows the results of Pearson correlation analyses. The results revealed that job insecurity was positively associated with the negative work-family interface ($r(282) = .26, p < .001$), and negative family-work interface ($r(282) = .22, p < .001$). In the opposite direction, job insecurity negatively correlated to positive work-family interface ($r(282) = -.17, p = .004$) and work engagement ($r(282) = -.31, p < .001$). Meanwhile, both positive work-family interface ($r(282) = .52, p < .001$) and family work interface ($r(282) = .43, p < .001$)

interface was positively linked to work engagement. In other words, hypothesis 1 - job insecurity is negatively associated with work engagement is supported.

Table 1. Descriptive and Matric Correlation between Variables ($n = 284$)

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job insecurity	3.27	1.13	1				
2. Negative Work-Family Interface	2.87	.90	.26***	1			
3. Positive Work-Family Interface	3.34	.72	-.17**	.15*	1		
4. Negative Family-Work Interface	2.65	.87	.22***	.74***	.14*	1	
5. Positive Family-Work Interface	3.44	.74	-.10	.17**	.62***	.16**	1
6. Work Engagement	4.94	1.16	-.31***	.07	.52***	-.01	.43***

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

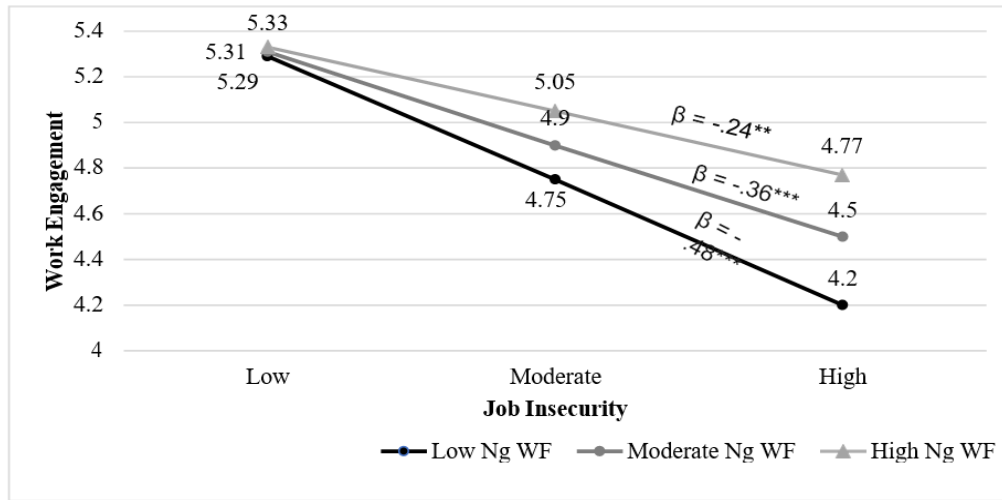
The Moderating Role of Work-Family Interface

Four moderating models were tested specifically for each of the subscales for the family-work interface. The results of each moderating model are summarised in Table 2. The results indicated that negative work-family interface, $b = .13$, $t(272) = 2.04$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [.01, .26], positive work-family interface, $b = .18$, $t(272) = 2.83$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [.06, .30], and positive family-work interface, $b = .13$, $t(272) = 2.00$, $p = .046$, 95% CI [.01, .26] significantly moderated the association between job insecurity and work engagement. On the opposite, the negative family-work interface did not significantly moderate the association between job insecurity and work engagement, $b = .02$, $t(272) = .25$, $p = .80$, 95% CI [-.11, .15]. Both age and gender were not significant in their association with work engagement after controlling its effect for all four models.

Table 2. Results of Moderation Analysis (n=284)

Work Engagement	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	.002	.006	.330	.741	-.004	.005	-.727	.468	.001	.006	.118	.906	-.002	.005	-.330	.742
Gender	.049	.132	.368	.713	-.006	.116	-.051	.959	.060	.135	.443	.658	-.021	.122	-.170	.865
Job insecurity	-.735	.189	-3.895	<.001	-.861	.223	-3.864	<.001	-.382	.176	-2.175	.031	-.754	.238	-3.172	.002
Negative WF	-.259	.233	-1.110	.268												
Job insecurity X Negative WF	.131	.064	2.041	.042												
Positive WF					.145	.232	.628	.531								
Job insecurity X Positive WF					.179	.063	2.829	.005								
Negative FW									-.014	.244	-.057	.955				
Job insecurity X Negative FW									.017	.067	.253	.800				
Positive FW													.179	.238	.750	.454
Job insecurity X Positive FW													.130	.065	2.003	.046

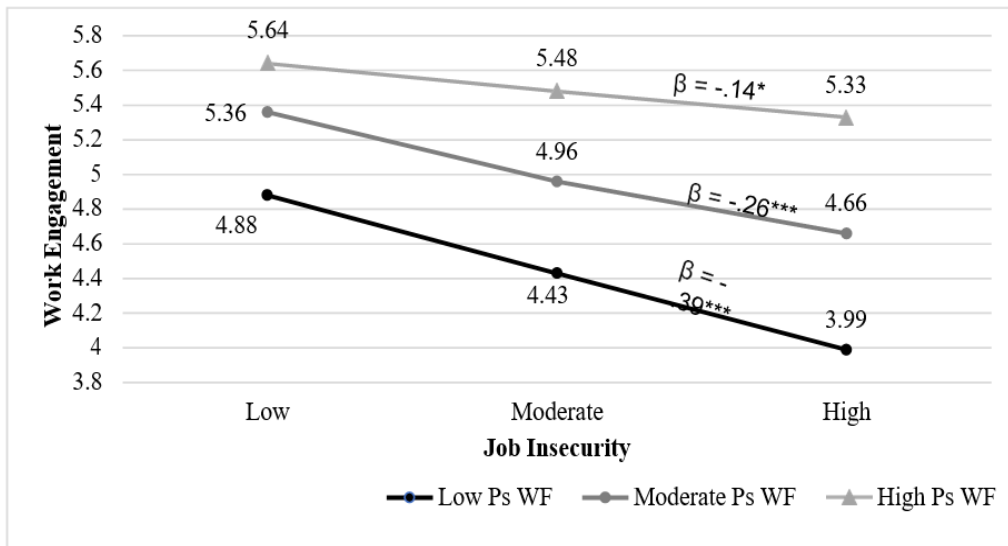
The standardised slope for relationship satisfaction was significant for all three levels of the negative work-family interface. Interaction results found that individuals with a low negative work-family interface tend to be more affected by the association between job insecurity and work engagement compared to individuals with a moderate or high negative work-family interface (see Figure 2). This is particularly apparent when they experience high job insecurity, individuals with a low negative work-family interface tend to report lower work engagement. In other words, hypothesis 2- negative work-family interface strengthened the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement is rejected.



Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$

Figure 2: Moderating Effect of the Negative Work-Family Interface in the Association between Job Insecurity and Work Engagement (n = 284)

The moderation effect of the positive work-family interface was significant in the association between job insecurity and work engagement (See Table 2). Interaction results found that individuals with a low positive work-family interface tend to be more affected by the association between job insecurity and work engagement compared to individuals with moderate or high positive work-family interface (see Figure 3). Compared to individuals with a moderate and higher positive work-family interfaces, individuals with low positive work-family interfaces have the lowest work engagement when they have low job insecurity. In addition, their work engagement further decreased when they experienced higher job insecurity. Hence, hypothesis 4 - positive work-family interface attenuated the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement is supported.



Note: *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

Figure 3: Moderating Effect of the Positive Work-Family Interface in the Association between Job Insecurity and Work Engagement (n = 284)

The moderation effect of the positive family-work interface was significant in the association between job insecurity and work engagement (See Table 2). Interaction results found that individuals with a low positive family-work interface tend to be more affected by the association between job insecurity and work engagement compared to individuals with a moderate or high positive family-work

interface (see Figure 4). Individuals with a low positive family-work interface tend to experience lower work engagement when they have low job insecurity. Moreover, their work engagement further dropped when they reported high job insecurity. In sum, hypothesis 5 - positive family-work interface attenuated the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement is supported.

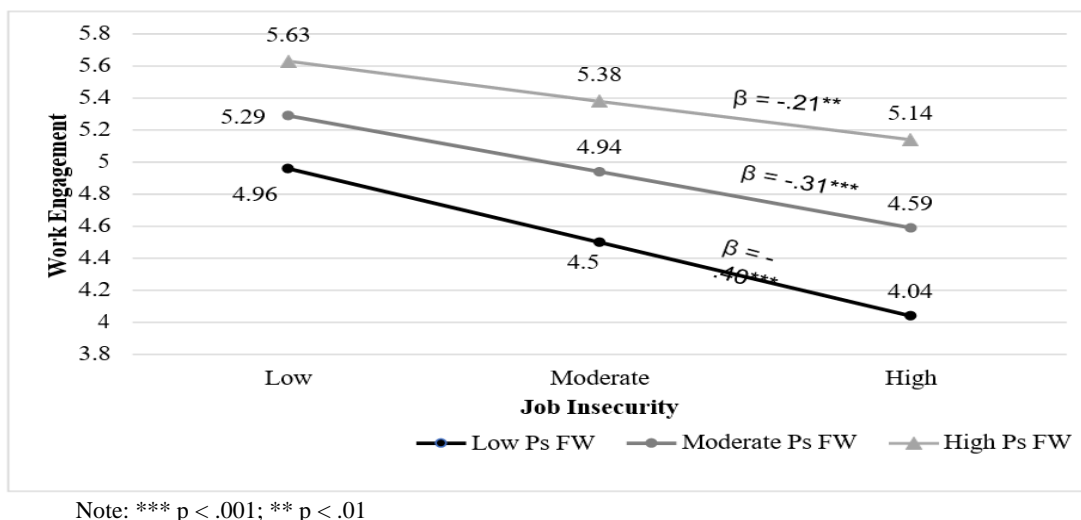


Figure 4: Moderating Effect of the Positive Family-Work Interface in the Association between Job Insecurity and Work Engagement (n = 284)

4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the aims of the present research was to inquire about the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result found there is a significant negative relationship between job insecurity and work engagement, which is in line with previous studies (Asfaw & Chang, 2019; Frare & BEUREN, 2021; Karatepe et al. 2020). If employees are insecure and fear losing their jobs, they are less likely to invest effort, energy, and time in achieving organisational goals because they may not believe it is worthwhile, thus decreasing work engagement.

In addition, our research also aimed to assess the moderating roles of family-work interfaces in the association between job insecurity and work engagement. Our study found that both positive work-family and family-work interfaces attenuated the negative effect of job insecurity and work engagement, which is in line with our postulation. This phenomenon can be further explained by Fredrickson (2001)'s broaden and build theory. The theory posits that optimistic experiences and positive emotions accelerate positive behaviour (Fredrickson, 2001). In other words, the positive emotions, and optimistic experiences the individuals gained from work will be transferred to their family domain and vice versa. The findings of the study is also in line with the role enhancement theory, which posits that multi-roles can generate positive spillover effects that enhance functioning in both work and family domains. Even when the work environment is discouraging, the beneficial effects (positive feelings, self-esteem, and social support) that individuals obtain in the family setting will help them be more resilient in the workplace.

However, our findings showed that the negative impact of job insecurity on job engagement can be attenuated but not strengthened by the negative work-to-family interface, which is not consistent with our postulation. In particular, we found that employees who experience negative work or family interfaces are more likely to engage themselves in work, resulting in an increase in work engagement, which is contradicted by the role stress theory. This could be because the employee was aware of the seriousness of COVID-19's impact on their job. Even though they felt insecure in their job, they remained engaged in their work and persisted in giving their best effort at work because they did not want to be out of work. Besides that, we have to take into account that cross-sectional study is weak in determining causal effects. Therefore, the moderator role of the work-family interface in the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement shall be further examined in longitudinal studies in the future.

It seems unlikely that the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts will be eliminated soon. In terms of practical implications for moderating the impact of job insecurity on work engagement. The findings indicate opportunities for supervisor training to establish a strong support system in the workplace and encourage employees to spend time with their family members. Despite the uncertainty and job insecurity experienced during COVID-19, good support given in both family and workplace settings will increase employees' work engagement. In other words, companies can reduce the effect of job insecurity and facilitate continued work engagement by providing a supportive environment for their employees at work and encouraging them to spend time with their family members.

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