The 3rd ASEAN School of Business Network International Conference 2026
www.aseansbn.org August 6-7, 2026 Pathum Thani, Thailand

Self-Discipline in Work From Anywhere: A Qualitative Study of Indonesian Gen Z Students

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has reshaped global work systems, accelerating the adoption of Work From Anywhere (WFA), which offers flexibility but requires stronger self-regulation. This study explores how Indonesian Gen Z students understand and practice self-discipline in flexible work settings, addressing a gap in research within developing and collectivist contexts. Using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Gen Z students (aged 18–25) who had experienced WFA. The findings reveal four key themes. First, a paradox between autonomy and structure: although participants value flexibility, they create "self-imposed structures" such as time-blocking, changing work locations, or using routines to sustain productivity. Second, digital boundary management is critical, as participants must manage distractions and avoid technostress caused by constant connectivity. Third, self-discipline is shaped by social context; in Indonesia's collectivist culture, managing boundaries requires negotiation with family and the home environment. Fourth, discipline shifts from external control to internal integrity, where performance is measured by output and consistency rather than working hours. These findings indicate that success in WFA depends less on technical skills and more on self-regulation, including attention control, boundary setting, and emotional management. The study contributes to self-regulation theory in flexible work contexts and offers practical implications. Higher education institutions should integrate digital self-management and boundary management into career preparation, while organizations should adopt output-based performance systems and support employee well-being.

Keywords: work from anywhere, self-discipline, Gen Z, self-regulation, technostress

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64458/asbnic.v3.133

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the global work paradigm. Advances in cloud-based technologies, online collaboration platforms, and the widespread expansion of internet access have enabled work to be performed without dependence on a fixed physical location. The concept of Work From Anywhere (WFA) has emerged as an evolution of remote working, allowing individuals not only to work from home but also to carry out professional tasks from various locations as long as they remain digitally connected. This phenomenon has intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic and is now an integral part of the future of work landscape (Kniffin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). While this flexible

work model offers a high degree of autonomy, it simultaneously demands greater self-management capabilities from individuals. In the Indonesian context, Generation Z—those born between 1997 and 2012—represents the group most affected by and most adaptable to these changes. Having grown up in a highly connected digital environment characterized by multitasking and extensive social media exposure, Gen Z tends to be more comfortable with technology-driven flexible work arrangements compared to previous generations (Seemiller & Grace, 2022). However, increased flexibility does not necessarily correspond with psychological readiness. Several studies indicate that remote working can elevate the risk of digital distraction, mental fatigue, and difficulties in maintaining boundaries between personal and professional life (Carillo et al., 2021; Taser et al., 2022).

In traditional work models, organizational structures and direct supervision function as external control mechanisms that support discipline. In WFA settings, such structures are significantly weakened. As a result, individuals are required to develop strong self-discipline and self-regulation to sustain productivity in the absence of direct oversight. Self-discipline extends beyond time management to include impulse control, the ability to delay gratification, goal consistency, and the management of digital distractions (Duckworth et al., 2019). Thus, the effectiveness of WFA largely depends on individuals' self-regulatory capacity. Indonesian students who simultaneously assume the roles of learners and remote workers face unique complexities. On one hand, they benefit from greater flexibility and broader employment opportunities; on the other, they must navigate academic demands, professional responsibilities, and digital social pressures within environments where boundaries are often blurred. While prior research has extensively examined productivity and job satisfaction in remote work contexts, limited attention has been given to the internal psychological processes—particularly self-discipline—among Gen Z students in developing countries.

Most WFA-related literature focuses on formal organizational contexts in developed countries (Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Studies specifically addressing students engaged in flexible work remain scarce, particularly within collectivist cultures such as Indonesia. In such contexts, social interaction and social monitoring play a crucial role in shaping individual behavior. When external supervision diminishes in WFA environments, the dynamics of self-control may shift significantly. In response to this gap, the present study aims to explore how Indonesian Gen Z students interpret and practice self-discipline in the context of Work From Anywhere. This research contributes novelty by capturing the subjective experiences of Gen Z students in developing and maintaining self-discipline within flexible work environments. A qualitative approach is employed to gain deeper insight into their lived experiences, self-regulation strategies, and the challenges they encounter. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of self-regulation literature in flexible work contexts, as well as to provide practical recommendations for higher education institutions and organizations in preparing an adaptive and sustainable Gen Z workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformation of Work From Anywhere in the Digital Work Landscape

The emergence of Work From Anywhere (WFA) is closely linked to the rapid acceleration of global digitalization and the restructuring of organizations following the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Kniffin et al. (2021), the pandemic functioned not only as a health crisis but also as a catalyst for transforming global work systems, shifting remote work from an optional arrangement into a structural necessity. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2021) emphasize that the effectiveness of remote work is strongly influenced by individual characteristics, particularly the ability to manage time, workspace, and domestic distractions. Recent studies indicate that while spatial flexibility enhances individual autonomy, it simultaneously increases the demands for self-regulation (Allen et al., 2021; Gajendran & Harrison, 2022). Within the WFA framework, individuals are no longer confined to working from home but may operate from various locations such as co-working spaces, cafés, or other public environments.

Although this model broadens flexibility, it also reduces the stability of traditional work structures. Choudhury et al. (2021) conceptualize WFA as a truly location-independent work model, distinguishing it from conventional work-from-home arrangements. Their findings suggest improvements in productivity across certain sectors, yet also highlight the growing need for stronger self-regulatory capacity. Similarly, Ipsen et al. (2022) report that remote workers experience increased autonomy alongside heightened psychological demands.

Self-Regulation and Self-Discipline in Flexible Work Contexts

Self-regulation theory provides a critical framework for understanding individual behavior in low-supervision environments. Bandura (1991) and Zimmerman (2000) describe self-regulation as encompassing planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's actions in pursuit of goals. In flexible work settings, self-regulation effectively replaces external organizational control mechanisms. Contemporary research demonstrates a strong association between self-discipline and remote work performance (Toscano & Zappalà, 2022; Molino et al., 2020). Individuals with higher levels of self-control are better equipped to sustain productivity in unstructured environments. Duckworth and Gross (2020) further argue that self-discipline is closely tied to the ability to delay gratification and manage distractions. In addition, Sonnentag (2021) highlights the importance of psychological detachment, emphasizing that the inability to separate work from non-work time increases the risk of emotional exhaustion. For Gen Z students managing dual roles as learners and workers, self-regulation becomes even more complex, as they must simultaneously balance academic and professional responsibilities.

Digital Distraction, Technostress, and Fragmented Attention

The digital environment introduces significant challenges to maintaining self-discipline. Carillo et al. (2021) find that telework increases exposure to digital notifications and multitasking, leading to phenomena such as digital distraction and attention fragmentation. Tarafdar et al. (2020, 2022) conceptualize technostress as the psychological strain resulting from intensive technology use. Taser et al. (2022) further demonstrate that remote work can contribute to emotional exhaustion when individuals lack effective self-management strategies. In addition, Becker et al. (2022) show that social media use during working hours is associated with decreased focus and increased procrastination. Although Gen Z, as digital natives, tends to adapt quickly to technological environments, they are also more susceptible to digital overstimulation (Seemiller & Grace, 2022). Montag et al. (2021) reveal that younger generations exhibit a high tendency toward habitual smartphone checking, which can disrupt concentration in flexible work contexts.

Boundary Theory and Role Conflict Among Working Students

Boundary theory explains how individuals create and manage distinctions between different life domains. Research by Allen et al. (2021) and Shockley et al. (2021) indicates that remote work exacerbates role blurring between professional and personal spheres. In the absence of clear physical boundaries, individuals must actively construct psychological boundaries. For working students, this creates significant role conflict. Kossek et al. (2022) demonstrate that individuals with strong boundary management skills tend to experience better psychological well-being in flexible work environments. In the Indonesian context, where many Gen Z individuals live within extended family settings, unclear spatial boundaries further intensify the need for internal self-regulation.

Gen Z, Autonomy, and the Discipline Paradox

Gen Z is often associated with a preference for flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work (Seemiller & Grace, 2022). However, research by Schroth (2019) and Francis & Hoefel (2018) suggests that this generation still requires clear structure to achieve optimal performance. More recent findings by

Brougham and Haar (2023) indicate that younger workers are more vulnerable to work-related anxiety in flexible work arrangements when they lack adequate coping strategies. This highlights a central paradox: while flexibility is highly desired, it simultaneously increases the need for stronger self-discipline.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how Gen Z students subjectively interpret and practice self-discipline in Work From Anywhere (WFA) settings. Participants are students aged 18–25 with at least three months of WFA experience, selected through purposive sampling, with a target of 15–25 participants or until data saturation is reached. Data are collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes), focusing on self-discipline, self-regulation strategies, digital distractions, and time management. All interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis follows IPA procedures, including iterative reading, coding, theme development, and interpretation. To ensure credibility, the study applies triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail, while maintaining ethical standards such as informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. The study is expected to produce a conceptual model of self-discipline in WFA among Indonesian students, providing a basis for work-readiness interventions and future quantitative research.

RESULTS

Through an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, the results reveal how self-regulation is both practiced and meaningfully constructed by Gen Z students in flexible work environments.

Background & Participant Profiles

The five informants represent diverse professional and academic backgrounds. NAR is a young entrepreneur in the creative services industry, managing a decoration and hampers business independently. MH is a final-year student undertaking an internship as a designer in a creative agency, balancing academic and professional demands. SA is also a final-year student interning in customer service and academic development, working in a hybrid system requiring intensive coordination. SD is a professional freelance graphic designer relying on portfolio-based work with highly flexible schedules. MF is a fresh graduate working fully remotely as a content writer, focusing on meeting daily writing targets. This diversity highlights that self-discipline is shaped by different work contexts and responsibilities.

Work Routines and Patterns

Participants demonstrate varied work patterns, ranging from highly structured (SA) to highly flexible (SD). NAR's schedule depends on client events, often peaking on weekends. MH follows daily task targets, while MF applies time-blocking strategies to optimize productivity. Despite these differences, all participants actively construct their own working rhythms, indicating the need to replace formal structures with self-created systems.

Meaning of Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is interpreted differently across participants. For NAR, it is the *"lifeline of the business,"* closely tied to maintaining reputation. MH views it as *"honesty with oneself,"* emphasizing personal integrity in the absence of supervision. SA associates it with formal professionalism, while SD defines it as output-oriented productivity rather than time spent. MF emphasizes consistency in maintaining

quality. These perspectives reflect a shift from externally enforced discipline to internally driven values and identity.

Self-Management Strategies

Participants employ various strategies to regulate their work, including digital tools, prioritization techniques, and focus methods. NAR uses Google Sheets and task delegation, MH applies a "priority 1–3" system, SA relies on alarms and reminders, SD uses project management and time-tracking tools, and MF practices deep work by minimizing distractions. These strategies illustrate practical manifestations of self-regulation in daily work.

Motivation

Motivational drivers vary but extend beyond financial incentives. NAR is driven by financial goals and customer satisfaction, MH by portfolio development and responsibility, SA by performance evaluation, SD by financial freedom and flexibility, and MF by self-actualization. This indicates that meaningful work plays a critical role in sustaining discipline.

Distractions and Technostress

Participants face multiple challenges, particularly digital distractions and psychological strain. MH struggles with social media distractions, SA experiences technostress due to constant notifications, SD faces social isolation, and MF reports burnout from being continuously connected. NAR, meanwhile, deals with physical fatigue and domestic distractions. These findings highlight the psychological costs of flexible work arrangements.

Boundary Management

Managing boundaries between work and personal life emerges as a crucial strategy. Participants adopt various approaches, such as spatial separation (NAR), changing work locations (MH), strict working hours (SA), symbolic cues like dressing professionally (SD), and communicating boundaries with family (MF). These practices demonstrate that self-discipline is also socially negotiated, particularly in collectivist environments.

Challenges and Reflections

Common challenges include maintaining consistent energy, resisting procrastination, and dealing with technical issues. Participants' reflections reveal deeper insights: NAR recognizes the difficulty of self-leadership, MH highlights independence as a critical skill, SA emphasizes the importance of empathy in digital communication, SD values leisure as something earned, and MF underscores the importance of mental health in WFA.

Overall, these findings reinforce that the primary challenge in WFA lies not in technical capability but in the ability to manage oneself effectively. The results align with the self-regulation framework underlying this study, demonstrating how internal discipline, attention management, and boundary-setting are enacted in the everyday experiences of Indonesian Gen Z students.

Discussion

The discussion of these interview findings reveals that flexible work experiences (WFA, freelance, hybrid, and entrepreneurship) among Gen Z students and fresh graduates are not merely technical shifts in how work is performed, but rather a profound transformation in how they interpret self-discipline, motivation, and the relationship between personal and professional spaces. Insights from the five

informants indicate that self-regulation emerges as a core competency that determines their ability to adapt successfully within a work landscape characterized by minimal direct supervision.

Substantively, a paradox emerges between freedom and the need for structure. Informants such as SD and MH enjoy temporal flexibility and work autonomy, yet simultaneously construct *"artificial structures"* to substitute for the absence of external control. Practices such as working from cafés (MH), dressing formally while working from home (SD), or organizing work into time blocks (MF) demonstrate that autonomy does not automatically lead to productivity. Without strong internal structure, flexibility may instead trigger procrastination and loss of direction. This reinforces self-regulation theory, which posits that individuals require control mechanisms—whether internal or symbolic—to sustain consistent work behavior.

Furthermore, digital boundary management becomes a central issue in technology-driven work environments. Informants MF and SA demonstrate adaptive strategies such as deep work and the use of alarms to regulate digital distractions. Conversely, MH, SA, and MF also experience technostress arising from social media (e.g., TikTok/YouTube), overwhelming work notifications, and the expectation to remain constantly online. This indicates that in digital work contexts, self-discipline extends beyond time management to include attention management. Failure to regulate digital exposure directly contributes to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and declining work quality.

Within the Indonesian context, cultural and domestic dimensions further complicate these dynamics. Strategies such as communicating boundaries with family (MF) and separating functional spaces (NAR) illustrate that self-discipline is not purely individualistic but socially negotiated. Home environments that are not fully designed as workspaces compel individuals to create symbolic boundaries to maintain focus. This underscores that in collectivist cultures such as Indonesia, the success of flexible work is also shaped by family support and shared understanding. Moreover, there is a clear shift in the meaning of discipline—from external control toward internal integrity. MH frames discipline as *"honesty with oneself,"* while SD emphasizes output-based productivity rather than time spent working. NAR even associates discipline with sustaining business reputation. This reflects a transition from a traditional presence-based work paradigm to an output-based one. In this context, self-discipline becomes a form of personal integrity that replaces direct supervisory control.

From a motivational perspective, drivers extend beyond financial factors to include psychological dimensions such as self-actualization (MF), customer satisfaction (NAR), and portfolio development (MH). This suggests that Gen Z is oriented toward meaningful work, which plays a crucial role in sustaining discipline amid flexibility. However, significant challenges persist, particularly in maintaining energy consistency, managing distractions, coping with social isolation, and preventing burnout. SD experiences isolation due to limited social interaction, while MF struggles with blurred boundaries between work and rest. These findings highlight that flexible work carries psychological costs that must be actively managed through effective self-regulation strategies.

The implications of these findings are multidimensional. For higher education institutions, there is an urgent need to integrate digital self-management, emotional regulation, and boundary management into curricula, particularly as part of career readiness preparation. For organizations, performance management systems should shift toward output-based evaluation while safeguarding employee well-being, including managing digital communication loads to reduce technostress. For students and Gen Z individuals, it is essential to consciously build routines that create psychological transitions—such as changing locations, attire, or work rituals—to maintain focus, productivity, and mental health. Overall, these findings affirm that success in flexible work systems is not determined solely by technical competence, but fundamentally depends on self-regulatory capacity, encompassing internal discipline, attention management, and the ability to establish and maintain boundaries across life domains.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the transition toward Work From Anywhere (WFA) not only reshapes work patterns but also redefines the meaning of self-discipline among Gen Z students in Indonesia. Discipline is no longer understood as compliance with external rules, but rather as an internal capacity to independently manage time, energy, attention, and emotions. In contexts with minimal direct supervision, self-discipline functions as the primary control mechanism that determines both sustained performance and individual well-being. The findings reveal a paradox between flexibility and the need for structure. Although WFA offers high levels of autonomy, individuals still require *"self-created structures"* to maintain work consistency. This indicates that success in flexible work systems depends heavily on an individual's ability to develop adaptive self-regulation systems. Moreover, the primary challenges lie not in technical aspects of the job, but in managing digital distractions, technostress, and the blurring boundaries between personal and professional life.

Within Indonesia's collectivist cultural context, self-discipline is also shaped by social dynamics and the domestic environment. Therefore, it is not purely individualistic but emerges from the interaction between individuals and their surroundings. Overall, this study highlights that the success of WFA is strongly determined by the integration of self-regulation, boundary management, and the ability to maintain psychological balance amid the pressures of flexible work. Organizations need to shift their management paradigm from process-based control toward output-based performance. Performance evaluation systems should emphasize quality and goal achievement rather than working hours or online presence. In addition, organizations must manage digital communication loads—such as through *"right to disconnect"* policies—to reduce technostress. Providing self-management training, particularly in time management, attention control, and digital discipline, is also essential. Furthermore, fostering a work culture that respects personal time boundaries and offering psychological support programs (well-being initiatives) are critical for remote and hybrid workers.

Higher education institutions play a strategic role in preparing students for flexible work environments. Universities are expected to integrate self-regulation, digital well-being, and boundary management into curricula or career readiness programs. Strengthening experiential learning—such as internships and project-based learning that simulate flexible work conditions—is equally important. Additionally, soft skills such as independence, self-discipline, and stress management should be positioned as core competencies rather than supplementary skills.

Students must recognize that work flexibility demands greater personal responsibility. Practical strategies include: a) Establishing consistent daily routines, including *"transition rituals"* (e.g., changes in location, attire, or work schedule); b) Managing digital distractions through techniques such as deep work and limiting social media use during working hours; c) Setting clear boundaries between work and personal time, including communicating expectations with family or surrounding environments, and d) aintaining mental health through energy management, adequate rest, and social activities to prevent isolation. In conclusion, the implications of this study emphasize that the success of WFA implementation depends not only on technological readiness but, more importantly, on human readiness—particularly in terms of self-discipline, emotional regulation, and the ability to sustainably manage life boundaries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OR NOTES

The author would like to thank to The Center for Development of Management Studies or Pusat Pengembangan Management (PPM), Department of Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Islamic University of Indonesia, for sponsoring this study.

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