

## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN WORK-LIFE BALANCE ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the employee productivity experience of the business managers from CEE countries with the worldwide home-office phenomenon in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative method with an exploratory approach is used, especially a phenomenological design was adopted for this study. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the specific experience of managers was examined and subsequently an effort was made to understand the situation. Findings explain that working from home has provided advantages and disadvantages for organizations as an essential part of sustainable human resource management. The interviews showed that it is possible to manage and evaluate employees according to their performance, not according to attendance at the workplace, and that their productivity has not declined significantly. However, this current situation offers a unique vision of the pros and cons of working from home and may play a vital role in future strategies that will reshape the existing structure of working hours, possibly allowing for more flexibility.

**Keywords:** Human resource management, work-life balance, Covid-19 pandemic, interpretative phenomenological analysis

### 1 Introduction

The whole world is currently facing the consequences of a coronavirus pandemic in various areas. Its spread significantly affects the economy and companies face serious problems. On the downside, companies tend to cut costs and keep operations at least under certain conditions and survive, but many have had to lay off some employees, and some have ended up altogether. As far as consumers are concerned, their priorities have changed significantly. However, some of the changes that have taken place in relation to Covid-19 may be positive in some ways – such as the digitization of businesses and the growth of online work. Businesses that previously could not imagine it now allow their employees to work from home (WFH), e-commerce is experiencing a huge boom, video conferencing is used in meetings, etc. Recent studies about the effects of work from home adoption on work productivity in the context of the pandemic have been published (Mendes et al., 2020).

It is currently work from home or home office that is a very common term in connection with the situation associated with the spread of coronavirus, not only in the media, in everyday interpersonal communication, but also in professional contributions of lawyers and other experts on this issue. The contributions focus on various aspects that are associated with work from home, i.e. the possibility of control of the employee by the employer, reimbursement of employee costs associated with work from home, health and safety at work, communication security and data protection, etc. The above components are part of the personnel policy of the employer and at the same time fall into the area of social performance, specifically into the area of work-life balance. Work from home began to expand along with the development of information and communication technologies, and in the past it was provided to employees more as one of the benefits offered. Everything changed with the time of coronavirus, which made the home office a standard and used affair. Whether or not the home office suits employees is a question, given that one is a social creature and needs to see others and communicate tasks or projects live, this style of work may be unsatisfactory for some groups of employees as their productivity deteriorates, work ethic and concentration. For others, however, commuting to work or, for example, effective harmonization of house-hold care is eliminated. Most companies say that home office is the style of work of the future and they are already preparing for the offices to be vacated and employees will not return to them (Lippe, 2019; Talib et al., 2017).

The WFH practices have been employed widely, as can be seen in the U.S., where studies show in May 2020, 35.2% of the

workforce worked from home, an increase from 8.2% in February. Furthermore, 71.7% of workers that WFH found that they could work effectively (Bick et al., 2020).

Systematic/research literature review was used for collection theoretical data focusing on their quality using the Primo database, which is a unified search interface that allows you to search most of the information sources available within the Brno University of Technology, including full-fledged databases (e.g. Web of Science or Statista). Several links were used to search, which are based on the topic of this article and as can be seen in the number of reviewed articles, the area of human capital, Covid-19, human resource management is still a topic for discussion. Here are the number of articles on the topic or link: human resource management: 124.069, social performance: 23.053, Covid-19: 5.346, work-life balance: 30.890, Covid-19 and social performance: 8, work-life balance and Covid-19: 44.

The aim of this paper was to understand the impacts that working from home (one part of work-life balance) during the COVID-19 quarantine period had on the human resource management conflict, from the managerial view.

### 2 Literature review

At present, a company's survival depends not only on money competitiveness, it is equally important for organizations to be able to prove their worth position vis-à-vis the various stakeholders that are activities affected by the business. In other words, it is a fact that companies are facing a growing one pressure their surroundings to act in a socially responsible way (Bučiūnienė, Kazlauskaitė, 2012).

The performance of any organization is largely related to the quality of delivery products and services that are significantly affected by the social climate in the organization. For sustainable business, the company should focus on the long-term profitability while maintaining suitable conditions not only for today's life, but also for the life of future generations. Therefore, society must pay due attention not only economic side, but also other aspects – environmental protection, health and safety at work and social responsibility. Businesses that do not care about the inclusion of socially responsible behavior (i.e. are not socially responsible) into their strategies, systems and procedures, likely to lag behind the competition. Increasingly, customers, employees, stakeholders, investors, government, business partners and society chooses not to support societies that have little interest in the planet and happy life of its inhabitants. Being social responsible business also brings a number of benefits, including: reduction operating costs, increase corporate image and improve reputation, increase customer loyalty and sales at the same time (Boyd, Gessner, 2013; Blowfield, Murray, 2008).

For the definition of social performance can be used states of Spriig (2006), who understands this concept as "social impacts on stakeholders". Social impact is perceived as the result of social activities and behavior of the company and stakeholders can be considered as customers, employees, government agencies, the media, suppliers, NGOs, etc. In general, it is possible to identify social performance for human resources in relation to liability.

Social responsibility should therefore be a part of the corporate strategy as it expresses voluntary commitment of the company, contributing to a better society. Socially responsible businesses are characterized by a pro-active, not just a reactive policy, as their management actively applies new and positive trends (Boyd, Gessner, 2013). Over the past few decades, corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities have become increasingly essential to a firm's performance activities. Prior literature has defined CSR as a set of voluntary corporate actions beyond legal

requirements designed to improve social conditions and social goods (Choo, Lee, 2019; McWilliams, Siegel, 2001; Mackey et al., 2007). Thus, it is necessary to introduce sustainability as a concept associated with the long-term maintenance of systems, taking into account economic, social, and environmental aspects (Crane, Matten, 2010; Freitas et al., 2013; Jabbour, Santos, 2008; Parente, Fischer, 2014).

### 2.1 Sustainable human resource management

The concept of Sustainable Human Resource Management is the result of linking the concept of sustainable development with human resource management in an organization (Mazur, Walczyna, 2020). According to Ehnert and Harry (2012) "HRM could play a vital role in implementing a sustainability mindset in business organizations". And Ehnert (2009) also states that sustainable management of human resources means undertaking such activities that enable achieving the organization's goals in the long term and demonstrate care for the employees at the same time.

As we can see, results of the literature review indicate that Sustainable HRM plays a significant and positive role in achieving organizational out-comes. Moreover, via the strength of the HRM system, it exerts an additional impact upon employees and external stakeholders (Karman, 2020).

Sustainable HRM practices enhance profit maximization for the organization and at the same time reduce the negative influence on employees, their families, and communities (Karman, 2020). Sustainable HRM is beneficial for the organization and for the employees, but it also positively affects other stakeholder groups. The general effect Sustainable HRM has on the society as a whole can be characterized as a contribution to the activities of the societies. Sustainable HRM incorporates activities directed towards improving communities and neighborhoods. Additionally, it al-lows creating sustainable career pathways for the younger generations to become transitional on the job market and secure a better future (Scavarda, 2019).

Sustainable HRM supports the organization's sustainable expansion strategy, cares for the development, health, and well-being of employees, supports environmentally friendly organizational practices, assumes the development of employees' competences, and promotes work-life balance. Moreover, it relates to the social performance that contributes to the long-term development of the organization, that is, to a sustainable organization. At the same time, sustainable human capital management allows for the maximum work efficiency, taking into account the well-being of not only employees but also other participants of the organization. Maintaining a balance between work and life for employees not only improves the quality of personal life, but also creates a competitive advantage for a company and promotes continuous growth (Mikolajczyk, 2021). The implementation of the concept of a sustainable organization in the area of human capital management draws attention to the need to achieve not only the economic goals of the enterprise, but also meeting and balancing the needs of employees (Mikolajczyk, 2021).

### 2.2 Work-life balance

Work life balance is a concept that encourages employees to find a balance between spending time at work and spending time with other activities. The term work-life balance first appeared in the 1970s in the United States and initially referred to various family-related initiatives. This was linked to the crisis of the male breadwinner model as a result of the massive entry of women into the labor market. Starting from the 1990s, this term refers to initiatives aimed at providing support in the field of balancing professional and non-professional roles for all employees, regardless of their family situation (Harris, Foster, 2008).

Work-life balance is directly related to social sustainability. Sustainable development of human capital is a complex concept

that covers the areas of human activity on many levels of human life, both on a micro and macroeconomic scale (Ferreira, 2020).

The essence of work-life balance is defined in the literature as the subject of focusing attention on maintaining balance between work and private life, thus allowing the individual to strive for self-fulfillment in non-work aspects of life while maintaining understanding of the multidimensionality of the situation (Kaliath, 2008).

Consequently, companies undertake various activities to improve positive empowerment and balance between personal and work life. These are activities both at the employee level (e.g., creating attractive working conditions) and the organizational level (e.g., introducing specific solutions in terms of working time and its control) as well as at the level of the entire society (e.g., providing assistance with dependent care of children or family members). One of the practical ways to achieve work-life balance is to accept that these two spheres are extremely important to a person, and that many values and other resources can permeate from one area to another. However, you should be aware that the work-personal life relationships are so complex that it is not always possible to achieve these goals (Mikolajczyk, 2021).

Employers can support work-life balance in several ways. A common helpful step is to allow partial work from home, perhaps only once a week or even monthly. Some work is performed almost exclusively externally – e.g. copywriting. Many are also helped by flexible working hours. If the nature of the job allows it, it is probably not a problem if the employee takes care of his personal affairs in the morning and engages in work duties in the afternoon or evening. So work life balance includes: Flexi-time, staggered hours, time off in lieu, compressed working hours, shift swap-ping, self-roistering, job sharing, term-time working, work from home, tele-working, breaks from home.

With the work-life balance is very often associated a concept of Work From Home (WFH). However, WFH is not new and has been brought to the attention of several schools of thought for many years. The WFH concept was initially mentioned by Nilles (1988) dating back to 1973, known as "telecommuting" or "telework" (Messenger, Gschwind, 2016; Vyas, Butakhio, 2020).

It is the subject of discussion and global study theme by researchers in the past 10 years, but this global phenomenon begins to emerge at the coming of the COVID-19 attack and becomes an alternative strategy for many organizations. Thus it is clear that WFH is a strategy for many organizations with all the advantages and disadvantages that must be received by both the organization and its employees. Flexibility, trust, life balance between work, social, and losses that must be received such as lack of trust, additional costs and also multitasking of employees who are certainly different in gender is an interesting phenomenon to be studied so that the development of the WFH concept becomes wider and contributes to increasing the productivity of human resources work in organizations (Krasulja et al., 2015).

A recent study by Dingel and Neiman (2020) uncovered that 37% of the job could be completed at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., such as financial work, business management, professional and scientific services. Some jobs, especially those related to healthcare, farming and hospitality cannot be performed at home. Although the acceptance of WFH has increased worldwide, academics argue regarding its pros and cons.

As mentioned Uqwu et al. (2016) concern for work-life balance and the impacts of imbalance continues to gather momentum in research. There is ample confirmation that, on one hand, work-life imbalance impacts physical, mental and general health, and wellbeing (Carlson et al., 2011; Frone, 2000; Rantanen et al., 2008; Shockley, Singla, 2011) and, on the other hand, work-life

conflict undermines productivity and performance in the workplace (Zheng et al., 2015). Some studies point out that telework can decrease turnover rate and increase employees' productivity, job engagement, and job performance (Collins, Moschler, 2009; Delanoëje, Verbruggen, 2020).

Similarly, e-working can increase productivity, flexibility, job satisfaction, work-life balance, including reducing work-life conflict and commuting (Grant et al., 2019). Additionally, Purwanto et al. (2020) argued WFH could support employees in terms of flexible time to complete the work and save money for commuting to work.

### 3 Methodology

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. In the context of the abovementioned theoretical premises, it seemed important research to recognize, identify, and evaluate selected human capital management practices conducive to the sustainable development of an individual. Due to the researched area and finding out the experience of managers in the balance between work and private life, it is used qualitative method with an exploratory approach, especially a phenomenological design was adopted for this study. This approach is phenomenological by trying explore a particular perception or explaining events, situations and human experience. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the specific experience of managers was examined and subsequently an effort was made to understand the situation. IPA gives flexibility by staying open to theory and literature, but also to new ideas and clusters of meaning (Maxwell, 2005; Miner-Romanoff, 2012; Igwu et al., 2016).

The requirement for respondents was to have worked in a managerial position for a minimum of 5 years. The reason for this was that managers already have some experience (both negative and positive) with their subordinates and can therefore be a useful source of information. For this study the 10 managers (all men) were drafted, they were willing to be interviewed, but with a COVID-19 outbreak, direct interviews (face to face) were very unlikely to be done so interviews via online plat-forms were used. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

A semi-structured interview schedule on the basis of key themes was prepared, the most common method of data collection in this type (qualitative) of research. This approach includes a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, extended by any questions and comments. The researcher is then allowed to examine the participant's thoughts on a specific subject (DeJonckheere, Vaughn, 2019). Berg (2001) lists 4 types of questions that should be included in this type of interview guide: Essential questions are directed to the central theme of the research, can be grouped and asked at once, or can appear throughout the interview. Extra questions are questions equivalent to the core questions. They may be alternative expressions of the basic questions that the study participant did not understand in the original wording. Throw-away questions are used to build rapport at the beginning of the interview. They are used to set the pace or to change the topic during the conversation. Probing questions are designed to get respondents to elaborate on their answers to the questions asked.

The topic for interview was built for the aim of this paper – to understand the impacts that working from home (one part of work-life balance) during the COVID-19 quarantine period had on the human resource management conflict, especially from the managerial view. For interview were used these questions:

- It was common in your organization to work at a home office (HO) before the Covid-19 pandemic? How often? Did employees use this opportunity?
- What impact (positive or negative) does the current HO have on the work of your subordinates? Meaning, for example, in the following areas: morality, concentration, productivity, loyalty.

- Positive vs. negatives (advantages vs. disadvantages) HO from your point of view – within your activity?
- In the future, our organization is or is not inclined to use HO and why?

The detailed results obtained from the respondents are presented in the following chapter: Results.

### 4 Results

Sociodemographic profiles of the interview participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sociodemographic profiles of interview participants

Respondent	Gender	Age	Years of manager	Area
1	Male	43	7	IT
2	Male	40	6	E-commerce
3	Male	34	5	IT
4	Male	37	6	Transport
5	Male	56	10	Automotive
6	Male	43	7	IT
7	Male	58	9	Energy
8	Male	62	20	E-commerce
9	Male	39	6	Wholesale
10	Male	47	12	Automotive

Source: own processing based interviews

All survey respondents were men from management of businesses that operate in Central and East European countries. In terms of the area in which they act as managers, information technology (IT) – software services, automotive, energy, engineering and sportswear (e-commerce) were the most represented. The age of the respondents varied from 34 to 62 years old. In the field of work from home, employees have been using this form of work life balance for a year, some have not been at work for a whole year and remain at home. As regards the professional profile of participants, they are working in different industries.

In the first question, it was found that HO could be used rather exceptionally before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, employees used it to a lesser extent, it was rather an exception (e.g. once a month). Only one respondent (6) stated that it was a common matter and HO accounts for about 15% of the total working time fund. It is interesting to mention that one respondent (3) from a large international IT company states this fact:

- HO did not work at all before the pandemic, given that our corporate culture is based on personal contact. For us, the value is in meeting people.

The focus of the second question was on the impact of HO on the work of subordinates. There was a considerable discrepancy in the answers. Some respondents (2, 3, 9) stated that the productivity of their subordinates in-creased (compared to the previous situation). One of these states:

- Labor productivity, which increased by 20 % in the first months and fell to 15 % after about half a year, remains at this value to this day. One of the reasons may be that responsible and hard-working col-leagues work more than before, because, for example, they also use productively the original time spent on the way to work (respondent 10).

Another part of the managers (1, 4, 5) considers the impact of HO as neutral, or it was added that it is "without effect" due to the fact that they cannot compare the option of better working conditions at home due to the fact that currently parents also have their children at home. One respondent () added that they consider the impact to be neutral, given that both customers and suppliers are on HO. The last group (6, 7, 8) took this way of doing work as negative. Worse motivation, concentration and

productivity play a role. There are two specific answers from respondents:

- Extra time spent setting up and running the process + absence of personal contact in the office, during this situation is need to adapt to the online style of communication (respondent 7).
- Work ethic and productivity is not as it could be, we have a lot of un-necessary phone calls, loss of contact with production and testing department (respondent 1).

The summary on this topic could be the answer of the respondent (9) who also evaluates loyalty and concentration in more detail from his point of view:

- Employee loyalty affects his productivity at HO. In terms of concentration, the employee is influenced by the situation at HO. If he is in a separate room, his concentration can be compared to an office. If the employee is not in a separate room and is affected by normal home noise in the presence of small children, the concentration decreases. Morality as such is good from my point of view, only practices have changed. For example, employees take longer free time at lunchtime or suspend work in the afternoon. They work on it in the evening. So they use daylight for outdoor activities and then work out the missing hours in the dark.

The third question concerned to advantages and disadvantages of HO in general (within this "new" experience during the Covid-19 pandemic). I.e. how respondents understand them, how they take HO in the performance of their position, the current functioning of the organization, etc. Here, compared to the previous question, respondents agree mainly on one thing, when HO sees an advantage in greater flexibility and time savings (e.g. when traveling to work), or the opportunity to better plan your time according to your needs. The research stated that HO is taken by employees as a bonus provided by the employer. One of the answers due to greater flexibility was from respondent (3):

- Nowadays, employees do not have a problem meet during a conference, for example, at 17:00, which was inconceivable when they went to the office to stay in the workplace for such a long time. They also do some work early in the morning or on the weekend (when, for example, the weather is not good) and then use it during the day or another working day to relax or resolve personal matters (doctor, authorities, etc.).

Other benefits were the change to digitization, greater peace of mind and greater health security at this time. The last one is taken as the only way to keep the team functioning. This is associated with a lower rate of absence, given that the increasingly widespread "open space" workplaces carry a high risk of transmitting infectious diseases, which may result in a high absence of a large proportion of workers. But people working from home easily avoid such a risk (respondents 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9).

Within the disadvantages, there was also some agreement and that is mainly the impossibility of personal contact with the customer, the impossibility of spontaneous discussion of the problem (everything needs to be planned), the loss of perception of the work team, the absence of social contact and the associated greater spending time at PC (addressed at the meeting today must be "spoke" by email, communicators or teleconferencing). With regard to the focus, it was also stated that, for example, technical matters are poorly explained via Teams / Skype, etc. (respondents 2, 3, 4, 8, 10).

The last question was about the future and whether the organization plans to continue to use the established HO or whether this option is out of the question. In this case, all respondents stated that the possibility to work from home will remain, but it is not clear, yet, to what extent or how this possibility will be addressed, because now it is required mainly by employees. For the most part, however, managers were

inclined to maintain HO, but not as often as they do now. Other justifications were as follows:

- For positions where it makes sense, there is more flexibility and the ability to use people around the world (respondent 9).
- Yes, we consider a regular home office, e.g. 1-2 times a week. At the same time, however, it may mean the introduction of floating jobs, which will increase the capacity of offices (respondent 6).
- In the past, we tended to avoid HO. The reason was that no one could imagine how it could work. The pandemic has shown that it is possible. This is more often related to questions from employees as to whether it will be possible to have HO more often even after a pandemic. So we are currently working on this idea to set reasonable rules, taking into account something like a "shared workplace" in offices (respondent 2).

## 5 Conclusions

The current Covid-19 pandemic has consequences in many areas, not just in health issues. The aim of this article was to find out how it manifested itself in the social performance of companies, given that in the Czech Republic many employees have moved to their homes for more than a year and have used home offices more than ever. Social performance is associated primarily with the satisfaction of the company's employees. If employee satisfaction increases, they will have greater work productivity. With higher labor productivity, there will also be an increase in social performance. I.e. employers, hence managers, have to monitor and evaluate social performance because they do not currently have direct supervision over their employees. This raises the concern that when working from home, the manager does not have the opportunity to personally supervise the work attendance and performance of employees, and thus there may be a delay in teamwork.

The research identified interesting information that can help other managers in deciding whether home office and teleworking can be a strategic tool in the future within human resource management.

The interviews showed that it is possible to manage and evaluate employees according to their performance, not according to attendance at the workplace, and that their productivity has not declined significantly. Employees working from home have the opportunity to schedule their own working hours, and this can lead to the employee trying to work out the assigned tasks in less time in order to have more time for personal activities. Thus striving for a balanced work-life balance. In the field of HRM, there is a real possibility in the future of recruiting the best employees from basically all over the world, because if an employer chooses a home office for his employees, where the employer is based no longer plays a big role. He therefore has unlimited possibilities, which is a strong competitive advantage for him, because, as mentioned in the previous text, human resources are basically the most valuable item a company has. More frequent use of teleworking in the future, it is also an opportunity for organizations to save money on office operating costs, as they can build a lower-capacity location where real offices can operate in a certain hybrid mode. For companies, this is an opportunity for the future to invest these savings in the development of organization.

However, the disadvantage is the worse building of the so-called "team spirit", which is an important part of the corporate culture and helps to create a strong manager. And following it a stronger and more competitive company.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AE, AH**