



Working During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Views of Customer Service Personnel and University Lecturers in the Republic Of Bulgaria

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Abstract

Working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic had different specifics, depending on the constraints in the different countries, as well as on the degree to which different employment sectors were affected. In the field of HR management, attention had been paid to some innovative strategies needed to manage and stimulate human capital to increase productivity in general, and in crisis conditions. Customer service personnel and educators are traditionally two of the occupations having higher rates of burnout. The purpose of this study was to account for the responses and views of customer service employees in the telecommunications sector and university lecturers on their work experience over the entire period of hardship related to the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted a cross-sectional study which comprised a randomized convenient sample of 945 volunteers and employed quantitative-qualitative design. Of all respondents, 237 people were telecommunications sector employees and 708 were university lecturers. The results revealed both differences and similarities in the responses of the two groups of respondents but in general, we can identify some common, universal needs. These common implications highlight some important issues concerning organizational measures promoting the work-life balance.

Keywords: *Burnout, perceived stress, remote work, COVID-19, work-life balance*

1. Introduction

In the field of HR management, attention has been paid to some innovative strategies needed to manage and stimulate human capital to increase productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic [1], and the need to be flexible in general [2]. Overall, it can be noted that an attempt is made to generate a useful model which takes into account the potentials of knowledge-based HR management in general, and in crisis conditions [3]. There are numerous studies which cover different standpoints in search of useful practices and new approaches. In a period of crisis there is greater emphasis laid on effective HR management, given the multiple and individual specifics in the adaptation period [2]. A meta-analysis of research on HR management in the pandemic period tracked journal publications in indexed databases and described specifics and challenges in the crisis period [4].

In the field of education, some studies focused on adapting the online environment to teaching [15] so that it could best reflect the essentials of the subject taught, for instance, music, while also accounting for the experiences of music teachers [6]. Other studies examined teachers in general, focusing on their typical professional burnout syndrome and burnout syndrome during the pandemic [7]. In addition to the outlined increase in perceived stress levels, occupational aspects of poor physical and mental health, eating and sleeping disorders, increased alcohol use, decreased job satisfaction, including consideration of a career change, have been reported in surveys among teachers [8]. Increased levels of anxiety in relation to teaching and interacting with students and parents have also been registered among teachers [9] and perceived psychological crisis [10].

Numerous publications report on the mental health risks of remote working [12; 13; 14] and job satisfaction [15]. In organizational aspect job satisfaction and support by managers traditionally predict lower levels of perceived stress and burnout [16; 17; 18] and the importance of carefully designed and implemented human resource management strategies is highlighted as key to the employees' well-being, satisfaction, productivity, motivation, and health safety at the workplace [19].

Overall, it can be seen that both in HR management and education, there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing the specific challenges and needs that arise during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations and educational institutions are being called upon to



implement flexible and innovative strategies to support and empower their human capital. Additionally, there is a clear emphasis on the vital role that HR management plays in promoting employee well-being, productivity, and overall organizational success. By considering the unique circumstances and stressors that individuals may be facing, organizations can craft effective policies and practices to navigate through uncertain times and emerge stronger on the other side.

2. Research Design

2.1. Design

The two categories of respondents were chosen as representatives of polar patterns of employment (business and education) and because of the very different constraints imposed on them when working online. In Bulgaria, businesses had one main lockdown period which lasted from 8 March to 15 April 2020. Higher educational institutions on the other hand were the only establishments which remained in telework mode (or working from home) for the entire pandemic period of two years (from 9 March 2020 to 1 April 2022). Telework terms were applied to university lectures and all other activities at universities, i.e. meetings (team meetings, management meetings, etc.), public lectures, conferences, seminars, scientific juries and academic councils. This not only placed new demands on the educators in their transition to a new working environment and mode of communication, but also presented many challenges in the area of HR management. On the other hand, the degree of readiness for remote and hybrid work at technology and business companies and in education was different, with a corresponding lack of established and validated platforms for remote work. The lack of clarity, rules, guidelines and resources, as well as the lack of control over the entire process and work staff at the outset, outlined a line of HR management that can best be described as highly stressful and uncertain. Gradually, different dimensions of the pandemic were accounted for, appropriate measures were taken, new work rules were adopted, and resources for remote work in an electronic environment were made available. In the meantime, HR management also began to be implemented in that new, continuously changing environment.

The pandemic period highlighted the importance of HR management in ensuring the well-being and productivity of employees in both business and education sectors. The challenges faced by businesses and educational institutions in transitioning to remote work highlighted the need for clear guidelines, resources, and support for employees. HR managers had to adapt quickly to the changing circumstances and implement new policies to support employees in a remote working environment. In addition, the pandemic period has shown the importance of HR management in supporting employees during times of crisis. It has also highlighted the need for ongoing adaptation and flexibility in HR practices to ensure the well-being and productivity of employees in a rapidly changing work environment.

That is why the aim of the present study is to answer three important research questions:

RQ1: What is different in the perceptions of the business and education employees?

RQ2: Are there common points in the perceptions of business and education employees?

RQ3: Can some universal needs and good practices be outlined?

The survey instrument was developed specifically for the purpose of the study. It is a battery of questionnaires which include: a stress scale; a scale to assess general health; a scale to assess job burnout; a scale to assess job satisfaction; a scale to assess communication in a telework setting; a scale to assess the general change brought about by the coronavirus stay-at-home. The survey was conducted online using the <https://survs.com/> platform [between February and April 2022](#).

2.2. Sample

The survey instrument was administered to 708 university lecturers in Bulgaria. Of all lecturers, 269 (38%) are men; 420 (59%) women; and 19 (3%) did not wish to disclose their gender. In terms of age, 17 participants are under age 30 (2%); 168 (24%) are ages 30 to 40; 240 (35%) are ages 40 to 50; 195 (28%) are ages 50 to 60; and 88 (13%) are over age 60. The distribution of lecturers in different scientific fields is as follows: 175 (25%) social sciences, 182 (26%) humanities, 13 (2%) biological sciences, 56 (8%) mathematical and computer sciences, 68 (10%) medical sciences, 20 (3%) earth sciences, 23 (2%) agricultural sciences, 139 (20%) technical sciences, 14 (2%) physical sciences, and 18 (2%) chemical sciences. The distribution of respondents by years of their work experience is as follows: 88 (12%) up to 5 years, 124 (17%) between 5 and 10 years, 116 (17%) between 10 and 15



years, 92 (13%) between 15 and 20 years, 81 (11%) between 20 and 25 years, 85 (12%) between 25 and 30 years and 122 (18%) over 30 years. Of all participants, 79 (11%) conduct lectures only; 92 (13%) conduct seminars only; 512 (72%) conduct both lectures and seminars, and 25 (4%) conduct practical trainings only.

The survey instrument was also administered to 237 employees of the telecommunications operator. Of all telecommunication employees, 70% are women and 30% men; 49% have and 51% do not have children, 90% live in the capital or other big cities. In relation to age distribution, 45% of them are ages 26 to 35; 32% are ages 36 to 45; 23% are over age 45. Most (82%) have a spouse or partner. In relation to their financial circumstances, 60% participants describe their income as "around average", 19% think they earn "below or way below" the national average, and 21% put themselves in the "above or way above" the average category. The majority of the participants (87%) are operational employees, with the remaining 13% holding managerial positions. More than half of them (63%) work directly with customers at various organisational levels (Hotline, Technical Services, Complaints & Grievances, Telemarketing, etc.), followed by Expert Unit Representatives (17%), Backoffice (11%) and other roles (9%). In relation to their work experience, 14% of all have less than 1 year of experience; 14% have 1 to 3 years of experience; 23% have 4 to 6 years of experience; 14% have 7 to 10 years of experience; 19% have 11 to 15 years of experience and 16% have over 15 years of experience.

2.3. Instruments

1) *The Perceived Stress Scale* [20] comprises 10 items with a 5-point response scale and reliability coefficient is $\alpha = 0.901$.

2) *Health Status Scale* (PROMIS Global Health Short) [21] is a 9-item scale for measuring subjective assessment of different health components - physical and mental health, fatigue and pain for the previous period with a 5-point response scale; $\alpha = 0.902$.

3) *Psychosomatic Symptoms Scale* is a 6-item scale created for the purpose of the present study with a 5-point response scale and $\alpha = 0.881$.

4) *The Professional Burnout Scale* [22] with 22 items that form three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced work capacity and 7-point self-response scale. The obtained reliability coefficients are Emotional exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.918$); Reduced work capacity ($\alpha = 0.811$), Depersonalization ($\alpha = 0.776$).

5) *The Job Satisfaction Scale* is an adaptation from the Burnout Self-Test [23] and [24; 25] and Teacher Job Satisfaction Scale, Eighth Grade [26] and covers 15 items with a 5-point response scale. There are three subscales on the job satisfaction scale, which comprise assessments of overall satisfaction with pay and relationships with colleagues and management ($\alpha = 0.871$); work load ($\alpha = 0.838$) and job satisfaction in respect to occupation ($\alpha = 0.595$). The last part of the survey included open questions for disadvantages and advantages, perceived by the telecommunication operators and university teachers during the pandemic time.

It should be noted that during the pandemic all of the university lecturers (100%) worked remotely, whereas for A1 only 8 % of the employees worked remotely during the entire period. The rest of Telecom employees worked predominantly remotely (18%), in hybrid mode (25%), predominantly in the office (32%) or only in the office (17%).

2.4. Data analysis

Data processing was done using SPSS v.25: reliability analysis, analysis of variance, t-test, ANOVA, and effect size analysis were applied. The qualitative component, free responses, were processed with expert judgment and content analysis.

In the results presented, a comparison is drawn between the quantitative responses of the respondents in the two groups as well as the ranked data from their free responses. The comparisons are partial as the scales are adapted to the specifics of each occupational group and only matching components are compared and presented here.

3. Results



Participants' responses on their preferred mode of work were collected after the imposed COVID 19-related constraints had been lifted and respectively referred only to their preferences for their work in the future (table 1).

Table 1. Summary of responses on the preferred form of work after removal of restrictions in %

| | HEIs % | A1 % |
|--|-----------|---------|
| In person only (in office) | 40 | 24 |
| In hybrid form (mixed mode) | 25 | 48 |
| Remote only (remote) | 22 | 28 |
| No specific opinion / unclassified / no answer | 13 | - |

A comparative analysis of values for psychosomatic expressions of perceived stress was performed. It should be noted that in both groups the score is below the theoretical mean value of the scale, but noticeably more problems are expressed by educators. Sleep and appetite problems had low effect size, but the effect size was very high in terms of unreasonable irritation and experienced apathy among lecturers. There is no difference registered in the frequency of headaches experienced by the participants in the two groups (table 2).

Table 2. Answers to the question "To what extent do the statements apply to you in recent months?"

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation | 95% CI t; p; Cohen's d |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-----|-------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| I could not sleep well | lecturers 708 | 1 | 5 | 2.93 | 1.16 | t = -5.419 |
| | telecom employees 237 | 1 | 5 | 2.47 | 1.04 | p = 0.0001 d = 0.417561 |
| I had a headache | lecturers 708 | 1 | 5 | 2.69 | 1.19 | |
| | telecom employees 237 | 1 | 5 | 2.69 | 1.08 | |
| My appetite has changed | lecturers 708 | 1 | 5 | 2.23 | 1.18 | t = -4.059 |
| | telecom employees 237 | 1 | 4 | 1.90 | 0.72 | p = 0.0001 d = 0.337615 |
| I felt a gratuitous irritation | lecturers 708 | 1 | 5 | 2.51 | 1.20 | t = -10.417 |
| | telecom employees 237 | 1 | 5 | 1.62 | 0.93 | p = 0.0001 d = 0.829047 |
| I felt apathy | lecturers 708 | 1 | 5 | 2.29 | 1.20 | t = -9.558 |
| | telecom employees 237 | 1 | 5 | 1.49 | 0.81 | p = 0.0001 d = 0.908933 |

For the two groups, the values on the burnout scales are below the theoretical mean of the scale, but there are significant differences between the groups. Reduced performance is more pronounced for telecom employees with moderate effect size, while depersonalization is more pronounced for university lecturers with low effect size; emotional exhaustion is higher for educators than for Telecom employees, with high effect size (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of burnout rates among university lecturers and Telecom employees

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation | 95% CI |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|------|------|-------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| depersonalization | telecom employees 237 | 1.00 | 3.50 | 1.37 | 0.45 | t = 3.185 p = 0.0015 |
| | lecturers 708 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 1.55 | 0.83 | d = 0.23901 |
| reduced work capacity | telecom employees 237 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.45 | 0.90 | t = -5.872 p = 0.0001 |
| | lecturers 708 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.06 | 0.88 | d = 0.440654 |
| emotional exhaustion | telecom employees 237 | 1.00 | 4.00 | 1.97 | 0.59 | t = 8.140 p = 0.0001 |
| | lecturers 708 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.64 | 1.22 | d = 0.699189 |

In terms of job satisfaction, respondents' responses on perceived relationship with management, remuneration and job prestige, career development opportunities, unclear organisational goals, and difficulties related to bureaucratic requirements, internal rules and procedures have been registered in the two groups and compared (Table 4). The strength of the effect is medium to high.



Table 4. Comparison of satisfaction scores for university lecturers and Telecom employees

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | 95% CI t; p; Cohen's d |
|---|------------|---------|---------|---------------------|----------------|---|
| career development opportunities | 237 708 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 3.26 2.38 | 1.16 1.29 | t = -12.386 p = 0.0001 d = 0.717358 |
| the management does not show enough understanding | 237 708 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 1.51 2.52 | 0.88 1.28 | t = 11.285 p = 0.0001 d = 0.919551 |
| lack of prestige and recognition of work | 237 708 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 3.95 2.79 | 1.07 1.39 | t = -11.735 p = 0.0001 d = 0.93521 |
| problems related to bureaucracy | 237 708 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 3.41 3.13 | 1.17 1.30 | t = -2.941 p = 0.0034 d = 0.226407 |
| internal rules and procedures making work difficult | 708 237 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 3.14 3.20 | 1.30 1.13 | |
| misunderstanding of the organisation's objectives | 237 708 | 1 1 | 5 5 | 4.03 2,10 | 1.11 1,17 | t = -22.261 p = 0.0001 d = 1.692397 |

Telecom employees see fewer opportunities for career development. They are more likely to feel that their work does not receive the recognition it deserves and are more likely to complain about bureaucratic measures. It is particularly striking not only that they are less aware of the organization's goals than university professors, but also that the mean value for their group misunderstanding of the organization's objectives is $M=4.03$ (out of a maximum value of 5) on the scale. University lecturers, on their part, feel they receive less management support and understanding compared to telecom employees. All effect sizes are large. Small effect size is accounted for higher complaint of bureaucracy related problems among telecom employees.

Comparison of reported difficulties and advantages (positives) during the pandemic period

The free responses in the two groups of respondents were ranked with expert evaluation and ranging responses into semantic categories. The bottlenecks are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Ranked main difficulties related to teleworking

| University lecturers (838 responses) | Telecom employees (231 responses) |
|---|---|
| lack of live contact (361) | lack of live contact with colleagues (96) |
| decline in the quality of the learning process (85) | sedentariness/more fatigue (31) |
| greater workload (73) | social isolation (30) |
| physical and mental health implications (67) | worse technical support / less comfortable workplace (25) |
| see no negatives (61) | limited opportunities for emotional and instrumental support in the office (22) |
| lack of technical and resource support (59) | impaired concentration/distraction/scattering (12) |
| a decline in motivation (52) | loss of work habits (10) |
| difficulties in control (over colleagues and students) (28) | poor balance of personal and work tasks (3) |
| uninformative answer (27) | higher costs (2) |
| difficulties with work-life balance and organizing space (25) | |

It seems that regardless of the different characteristics of the work, universal factors matter. The lack of live contact was ranked first in both groups. Despite the difference in the number of responses and ranking of difficulties, it will be fair to conclude that they are identical for both telecommunications and university employees. The main problem participants faced was the change in the working conditions (lack of preparedness) and the great amount of workload stemming from restructuring the work process. This also applies to the reported positives (Table 6), which are identical and concern work aspects which are reported as facilitating and enhancing the control. These factors are, indeed, important to be considered when striving to meet the needs of human resources to the maximum extent possible.

Table 6. Ranked positives related to teleworking

| University lecturers (854 responses) | Telecom employees (317 responses) |
|--|--|
| higher student participation, flexibility in both teaching, planning and communication (209) | better concentration / lack of noise (53) less costs (transport, food, clothing) (42) |



| | |
|---|--|
| time saved (167) | reconciling personal and work tasks (21) |
| peace and comfort (132) | flexibility (mobility, on-call) (20) |
| see no positives (112) | working when unwell (19) |
| ability to work from any location (119) | reconciliation with childcare (15) |
| the comfort of home (67) | comfort and coziness (11) |
| savings (including student and employer) (43) | health and better eating habits (11) |
| newly acquired knowledge (33) | freedom and autonomy (8) |
| | time for family and friends (4) |
| | rolling (3) |
| | others (stress from traffic jams, more rest) (5) |

Discussion

The experience of HEIs lecturers and personnel working with clients in telecom operator determines their preferred way of working. The most preferred form of work by university lecturers (40%) is attendance-only. In comparison, half of Telecom employees ranked the hybrid form first. Interestingly, a very similar percentage, of lecturers (22%) and telecom employees (28%) prefer to telework in the future. One-quarter (25%) of the lecturers (25%) would choose hybrid employment and the same amount of telecom employees (24%) would choose office work. This indicates an adaptation resource, a drive to 'return to the known' of the HEIs lecturers who show an inclination to return to the familiar way of working after a 2-year period of telework. It also reveals a tendency among the telecom operator employees to reap the benefits of the flexible hybrid form to a greater extent compared to the university lecturers. Telecom employees are more critical of the disadvantages (negatives) which define the living context. Psychosomatic expressions of stress experienced during the pandemic were higher among teachers than among telecom employees, but both groups scored below the theoretical mean on the scale. Sleep and appetite problems had low effect sizes, but the effect was very high on unreasonable irritation and experienced apathy among lecturers. Both groups were below the theoretical value on burnout scales. Interesting details emerged on the subscales. Impaired performance was more pronounced in telecom employees, while depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, in particular, were more pronounced in HEIs lecturers. This designates that different expressions of working conditions depend on the characteristics of the activity exercised. Regardless of the field of employment, burdensome work, rules and procedures create difficulties for employees. In the customer service sector, there are fewer perceived opportunities for career development; there is a stronger perception that work does not get the recognition it needs, and there is a higher degree of reported burden of workload felt due to the introduced bureaucratic measures. Both groups share equal lack of understanding of their organizations' objectives. Lecturers, on the other hand, feel less understood by the management. Universal factors are still dominant and influential. This is best revealed in the qualitative component of the study, which we consider particularly important for collecting freely generated information by the participants on their perceptions of the environment and its characteristics. As stated earlier, some of the difficulties which all respondents experienced were the lack of live contact and preparedness to work in the new conditions, and the enormous workload caused by restructuring the work process. The two groups of employees also reported some advantages (positives) which were matching in content. These are some of the important implications for HR experts to consider at present and in the future. Furthermore, the generated responses on telework as a preferred way of working and the shared benefits of incorporating a hybrid form justify the need for further research and analysis which will be beneficial to HR management in their endeavor to optimize the work processes. Seeking stability while taking advantage of opportunities for flexible solutions is a challenge to researchers and stakeholders alike. At the same time, the results of the research allow us to give answers to the three tasks that we set ourselves at the beginning of this article.

RQ1: *What is different in the perceptions of the business and education employees?*

While both university lecturers and telecom employees have faced challenges during the pandemic, their preferred ways of working and experiences differ based on the nature of their roles [1; 2; 3; 15; 19; 24]. HEIs lecturers show a tendency to return to traditional ways of working, while telecom employees prefer the flexibility of hybrid work. Both groups experience stress and difficulties, but in different ways, with telecom employees facing more performance-related challenges and lecturers experiencing more emotional exhaustion [7; 8; 16]. The findings suggest that the context and demands of the job play a significant role in shaping the experiences and preferences of employees in different sectors [12; 14].

RQ2: *Are there common points in the perceptions of business and education employees?*



Overall, it is clear that both university lecturers and telecom employees have faced challenges and stress during the pandemic, with different expressions based on the nature of their work [6; 21]. Despite this, they both show a willingness to adapt to new ways of working, with some differences in preferences between the two groups. It is important for organizations to consider these preferences and challenges in order to create a supportive and effective work environment for their employees. Communication, understanding, and recognition are key factors in improving the well-being and performance of both groups.

RQ3: *Can some universal needs and good practices be outlined?*

Universal factors such as the lack of live contact, preparedness for new conditions, and the workload caused by restructuring are still significant challenges for employees in various work environments. These factors transcend specific industries or job roles and can impact employees across different sectors [1; 18; 20]. Furthermore, the shared advantages of teleworking and hybrid work arrangements suggest that these are preferred ways of working for many employees. This underscores the importance of further research and analysis in understanding the potential benefits of these flexible work solutions for HR management [1; 12; 15; 18]. Overall, it is essential for HR experts to consider these universal factors and the implications they have on employee well-being and productivity. By seeking stability while also exploring opportunities for flexible solutions, organizations can better support their employees and optimize their work processes. This calls for collaboration between researchers, stakeholders, and HR professionals to address these challenges and find effective solutions for the future of work.

We hope that this initial summary is the first step towards integrating the relevant findings into effective solutions which could be made use of not only in a specific situation or in periods of crisis, but in the optimization of processes in the long-term, ensuring a stable, yet flexible working environment, i.e. the balance sought by employees. We view the designated groups of factors as the foundations of a model for a more flexible and effective management of the work processes not only in a particular instance but in a continuous development at the level of HR administration. In summary, the results show that flexibility and accounting for universal needs of employees which alter in accordance with their age, gender, work experience, work duties and activities, and place of work, could allow the development of general frameworks with distinct indicators, which can be easily adapted by HRM professionals in stable conditions and in crisis. Preparedness and stability of employees when they are facing external challenges and enduring changes are the foundations of their security and a prerequisite for maintaining their mental health.

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