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HOME OFFICE AND EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION DURING AND AFTER COVID

Abstract: The paper aims to demonstrate how employee satisfaction with the home office changed during and after Covid. The research question is how the home office's perception changed after the epidemic's end. The research had two parts. At first, during the examination, 600 Hungarian residents aged 18-64 who had ever worked at least for three months from home in home office were contacted with an online questionnaire. The survey took part at the end of the 3rd wave of the COVID pandemic, in May and June 2021. The second research phasis took part after Covid, in February and March 2022. During this research, we contacted 1000 Hungarian residents with an online questionnaire. The analyses found that employee satisfaction with the home office (satisfaction index) decreased, but the positive attitude increased. The research findings make it clear that the employees are open to the home office option, but they no longer see it as a reward but rather have higher expectations.

Keywords: Home office, Covid, employee satisfaction, atypical forms of employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an atypical form of work, the home office was present at a low level in Hungary before the pandemic. Still, during the epidemic, everyone became familiar with the concept of the home office, even those who did not work from home before. Even before the end of the epidemic, professionals began to be concerned about what forced work organization methods companies would keep and which techniques should be used in the future (Siklósi, 2021). From the perspective of employees, how employees experience working from home can significantly impact future work. If they were satisfied with it, they may be happy to work this way in the future, or they may have a direct need for this flexible way of working. Exploring employee satisfaction about the form of working at home provides essential information to employers since one of the means of retaining the attraction of talent can be to ensure this kind of flexibility for specific target groups (Venczel-Szakó, 2021).

Based on all these our research question is how the home office's perception changed after the epidemic's end. The research had two parts. At first, during the examination, 600 Hungarian residents aged 18-64 who had ever worked at least for three months from home in home office were contacted with an online questionnaire. The survey took part at the end of the 3rd wave of the COVID pandemic, in May and June 2021. The level of satisfaction with working from home was measured in this phase in a sample of 600 persons who had at least 3 months of experience with home office. For the definition of satisfaction with home office an individual research framework and a satisfaction index (SI) were created, built on the factors identified during the exploration of the literature. The second research phasis took part after Covid, in February and March 2022. During this research, we contacted 1000 Hungarian residents with an online questionnaire. During the online representative survey, we asked both those who have home office experience and those who do not; the existence of home office experience was not a condition. We were also interested in the attitude of those who did not have home office experience.

In the first part of the study, the focus is on the factors impacting work satisfaction and home office characteristics based on relevant academic publications. This section is followed by the definition of the hypothesis, the description of the

research methodology, and testing of the hypothesis, the presentation of the findings together with their managerial implications, as well as the limits and future directions of research.

2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The frameworks of the research are set by the literature review of scientific theories making the focus of the research (home office, employee satisfaction), referring to the most recent research findings of these fields. On the basis of previous research findings, the theoretical concept of the paper is defined, and the hypotheses are stated.

2.1. Home office as atypical forms of employment

The concepts of remote work and home office are often taken as synonyms, with the interpretations blurred (Ásványi, Venczel-Szakó, Szabó-Bálint & Kuráth, 2021).

There are several conceptual approaches to telecommuting. The definitions cover the place of work, the use of communication tools, and the way control is controlled. In connection with teleworking, intellectual activity, the employee's independent task-solving, the existence of an employment relationship, the importance of availability, and the condition that the task can be entirely performed remotely (Jarjabka, 2010) are also highlighted. According to Blair-Loy & Wharton (2002), telecommuting means working from home for all or part of the work week. Ásványi et al. (2021), however, the description used in the definition of teleworking, according to which working in a place separate from the employer's premises or headquarters, does not necessarily mean only working from home but can also mean another place designated by the employer (in contrast to the home office, which refers to working from home means).

Work done at home (home office) is the form of remote work, work that takes place away from the site, during which the work is done from home using info-communication tools (Hárs, 2012), about this formulation, the home office is a subgroup of remote work.

After the crisis, the home office was added to the labour code in Hungary by expanding the teleworking rules to such an extent that they became suitable to cover regular home office as well. As a result of the amendment to the law, in addition to work performed exclusively outside the employer's premises, it is considered remote work if the employee performs his work partly at the workplace and partly outside it, for example, from home - i.e. the home office (Szabó, 2022).

As regards remote work and home office, it must be mentioned that this kind of working is not suitable for all life conditions and for all personalities (Devine, Taylor, L. & Haryett, 1997). According to Kowalski & Swanson (2005), successful telecommuting is not only an option but also a smart strategic business decision on the part of the company. According to Omondi and K'Obonyo (2018), the necessary conditions for flexible working are quality communication, a supportive organizational culture, favourable working conditions, supporting legislation, employee commitment, and appropriate demographic characteristics of employees (gender, age, education).

Beauregard, Basile & Canónc (2019), the success of telecommuting depends on the characteristics and nature of the work, the employee, and the characteristics of the employee's manager. Adequate technological support is also essential. For the successful application of telework, two areas must be prioritized, the selection and preparation of employees for telework and the management of telework.

The situation brought about by the coronavirus gave a considerable momentum to the penetration of remote work both at international level (Gibson, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020; Kronblad, 2020) and in Hungary. Before the pandemic, remote work had been a curiosity in Hungary; the proportion of those working from home had remained below 5 per cent. According to the research of GKI this proportion grew to 20 per cent by early June 2000, which concerned approximately 800 thousand people (GKI, 2020). A survey carried out in March 2020 revealed that after the introduction of restrictive measures, only 27% of people did their work in a location other than their usual workplace (Ferencz, 2020). In November 2020, the proportion of those working in remote work or home office in Hungary was 8.2%, almost four times as much as one year before (KSH, 2020). Between February and April 2021 the proportion of those working in remote work or home office reached its peak: 5.7% of employees worked regularly and 7.3% of them occasionally in remote work or home office. In July–September 2021, the proportion of those employed in remote work or home office was 6.3%, 0.3 per cent above their proportion one year earlier (KSH, 2021). In July–September 2021, the proportion of those employed in remote work or home office was 6.3%, 0.3 per cent above their proportion one year earlier (KSH, 2021).

One year later, in July-September 2022, the proportion of those employed in remote work or home office was 7.0% (KSH, 2022). The proportion of people employed in remote work or home office therefore fell somewhat after the epidemic had subsided, but remained higher than before the epidemic. In a survey of 239 Hungarian workers in 2021 found that workers liked working from home and most of them would like to continue working in hybrid work arrangements (Jenei & Módosné Szalai, 2022). This finding may be related to the results of Niebuhr, Borle, Börner-Zobel, & Voleter-Mahlkencht (2022) survey of German workers and Kowalski, Aruldoss, Gurusurthy, & Parayitam (2022) findings that working from home increases job satisfaction, autonomy, work-life balance and that working from the office can increase stress levels. According to research by Pogácsás & Szepesi (2022), managers in the Hungarian SME sector who introduced home

offices during the epidemic were also satisfied with this type of working, as employees tended to work more hours than if they had been in the office, and office rents were reduced.

The number of those employed in remote work or home office has been increased significantly not only in Hungary, but also in Europe and the rest of the world during the pandemic. According to Eurostat (2021), the share of home-based workers in the EU was 14.6% in 2019, rising to 20.9% in 2020 and 24.4% in 2021. Between 2019 and 2021, the share of home office or hybrid workers increased in all EU countries, with Ireland (from 20.3% to 40.6%) and the leading country, the Netherlands (from 39.7% to 57.6%), showing the largest increase. However, the share of people working in home offices or hybrid forms also increased severalfold in Bulgaria, which is in last place, from 1.1% to 6.5%, still the lowest in the EU. While in 2019 only four countries (the Netherlands, Sweden, Luxembourg and Finland) had a share of home-based or hybrid workers above 30%, by 2021 the share had risen to over 40% in all of these countries, with Ireland, Belgium, Denmark and France all having figures above 30%.

2.2. Employee satisfaction

There have been thousands of publications on the international level regarding the approach and definition of job satisfaction. However, satisfaction cannot be treated objectively; it may differ from individual to individual as to what causes satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Sipos, 2016).

Employee satisfaction is a significant organizational success factor and also an indicator of organizational efficiency. Satisfied employees can also be a competitive advantage for the organization (Ouedraogo & Leclerc, 2013; Izvercian, Potra & Ivascu, 2016). Dhamija, Gupta & Bag (2019) emphasize that, on the one hand, it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that the employees he employs "feel good" at the company and achieve their goals (for which they joined the organization). Satisfaction, commitment and a good workplace environment affect the performance of employees, competitiveness and the organization's effectiveness, so it also represents an economic advantage. Among dissatisfied employees, performance remains low, turnover increases, and it can lead to the loss of talent. According to Brunelle & Fortin (2021), taking labour market trends into account, the attitude of employees towards employers will change in the future, mainly due to the spread of atypical forms of employment. According to him, the motivational methods that promote employee engagement will fundamentally change and also differ among office workers and those working from home.

Locke (1976) describes satisfaction as a kind of feeling with which employees relate to their work. Vroom (1964) also formulates satisfaction as happiness that comes from work. Brief (1998) also links satisfaction to an internal state, a feeling. To interpret satisfaction, Shaffer & Harrison (1998) already includes needs and their satisfaction (or non-satisfaction) in the analysis. According to them, satisfaction is related to whether the needs that can be satisfied by work are satisfied or not. Greenberg & Baron (2000) considers satisfaction an intellectual, emotional and behavioural reaction that the individual triggers in relation to his work.

In the view of Noé (2004) and Becker & Kaerkes (2006), the combined effect of three groups of factors can be seen in the employees' satisfaction model:

- Conditions of satisfaction with work (recognition of work by society, career opportunities, physical conditions of work, recognition of abilities, appreciation of work performance, safety of work)
- Conditions of general satisfaction (family life, entertainment and sports facilities, housing conditions, position and function in society)
- Individual features (age, personality type, health condition, desires, endeavours).

Ineson, Benke & László (2013) say that trainings, skills development, working time, the diversity of work, and the safety of the workplace are factors contributing to satisfaction.

In Yang's (2010) view, satisfaction is impacted by role conflict, misunderstandability of possible roles, overburden, work and family conflict, burnout, socialisation, independence and autonomy.

Van Saane, Sluiter, Verbeek, & Frings-Dresen (2003) used a meta-analysis to define those work-related areas that have an effect on employees' satisfaction. These are the following:

- character of work (work that requires diverse skills, complexity of work, challenges posed by work of routine tasks),
- autonomy (individual responsibility, control over decisions made on work),
- career/development (personal growth and development, training or education),
- financial incentives (wage, fringe benefits),
- promotion (possibility of career-building or getting promoted),
- supervision (support by the superior, recognition and fair treatment),
- communication (consultancy possibilities, feedback),
- work relation with the colleagues,
- sensibility of the job,
- workload (subjective feeling or lack of time, monotony, social problems, personal conflicts or stress),
- strain by work (compulsory extra work, complexity of the job, uncertainty of the position, or emotional commitment).

Kozák & Sönperger (2019) draw attention to the fact that employing organizations also have a great responsibility to create a friendly workplace climate that encourages individual performance, with which they can contribute to the preservation of the mental health of their employees, which entails the increase in their self-esteem and self-efficacy. The following factors influence the effectiveness of remote work and home office and its perceptible effects in the organization - such as retention, loyalty, turnover - is the work organized around individual or common interests, the degree of individual or collective responsibility, does one feel like a member of a cooperative community. Whether the employee himself should work as an employee or entrepreneur, whether the employee's personality matches the expectations of the job, individual characteristics (time management competencies, independence, age, career aspirations), the manager's attitude, and most importantly, the role of trust on the part of both parties. Usually, this type of atypical work works very well when the employee has more professional experience and special knowledge. At the same time, it is also important to emphasize that the relationship between the employee and the employer can be realized in many ways, and the effectiveness of the cooperation does not depend on the means (Venczel-Szakó, Balogh & Borgulya, 2021).

One of the essential aspects of workplace research is exploring employees' job satisfaction in connection with the study of teleworking (Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). Initially, there was a general belief that telecommuting employees are more satisfied with their work, but later this was not substantiated with sufficient grounds (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive & Heelan, 2010). Golden and Veiga (2005) grasped the problem of the intensity of telework and examined the effect of the intensity of telework on job satisfaction among white-collar employees. According to their results, telework has a positive effect on job satisfaction up to a certain level. In contrast, beyond a certain point, it has a negative effect (the authors set the threshold at 15.1 hours per week). The authors hypothesized that for high-intensity remote workers, "the negative effect of increased isolation and decreased interactions with managers and colleagues probably negatively affects job satisfaction."

Gajendran & Harrison (2007) developed a theoretical framework for the impact of telework. He examined the relationship between working from home and perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, the quality of the relationship with the manager, the quality of the telecommuter-colleague relationship, job satisfaction, work performance, stress, and perceived career prospects. Based on their results, telecommuting had a beneficial effect on perceived autonomy and resulted in less work-family conflict.

According to this, we formulate the following hypothesis.

H1: Significant decrease can be identified concerning satisfaction with working in home office over time.

3. METHODOLOGY

The section focuses on the sampling methodology, the basic characteristics of the respondents and the applied statistical methodology.

3.1. Method of sampling

We conducted two online questionnaire surveys between May and June 2021, and February and March 2022 using random sampling based on preliminarily defined quotas (Table 1).

In the former case, 600 respondents, whilst in the latter one 1,000 respondents data was collected (of whom 540 are in one of the quotas, the rest still doesn't have any home office experience).

Table 1: Quotas used in the research

	Before the COVID pandemic, had worked in home office at least 1 day a week for at least half a year	Before the COVID pandemic, had not worked in home office at least 1 day a week for at least half a year
Since the start of COVID, has worked in home office at least 1 day a week for at least 3 months	QUOTA 1	QUOTA 2
Since the start of COVID, has not worked in home office at least 1 day a week for at least 3 months	QUOTA 3	QUOTA 4

Source: Own research

It is important to understand the differences alongside the quotas as well as the purpose of this distinction, which is intended to discover the satisfaction changes according to the hypothesis. As a result, we can identify home office-related satisfaction in four different categories, all with various backgrounds and experiences with the home office itself. As the initial fears related to Covid and the novelty of home office as a response, we expect to have lower levels of satisfaction in general.

3.2. Characteristics of the sample

The joint dataset has 1,140 respondents. 37% is part of Quota 1, 42% is in Quota 2, while for Quota 3 (5%) and Quota 4 (16%) relatively lower percentages can be seen. The genders are equally represented (as the majority of the respondents works, this meets the representativity criteria). The territorial distribution is balanced (with the dominance of Central Hungary), the family status is also well distributed (single 20%, married, 70%, divorced and widow, 10%), with 27% of respondents with children under 12 years old. The workplace size is also alongside the general characteristics as the SMEs represent 65% whilst the large companies 35%. Tertiary education background characterises 66% of the respondents, while 33% have a secondary education and only 1% at maximum primary education background. 34% is 35 years old or younger.

3.3. Description of the applied statistical methodology

The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions focusing on the different aspects of work-related satisfaction, all of them is measured on a 1-10 Likert scale. The factors identified are as follows:

- Home office work (11 elements)
- Communication (3 elements)
- Organisation integration (7 elements)
- Commitment (3 elements)
- Responsibility/autonomy (3 elements)
- Attitude (3 elements)

Naturally, we measure even the full satisfaction index, which is the mere sum of the subindices. This means that the minimum value is 30, whilst the maximum is 300 considering the full satisfaction index. We measure the change in the satisfaction levels with One-Way ANOVA, where those differences are considered statistically significant where Levene $p > 0.05$ or Welch $p \leq 0.05$ and ANOVA $p \leq 0.05$ (Pituch & Stevens, 2015).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research was focused on demonstrating how employee satisfaction with the home office changed during and after Covid. The analyses found that general employee satisfaction with the home office (satisfaction index) decreased (caused by a decrease in communication, organisation integration and commitment), but the positive attitude and responsibility/autonomy increased. The research findings make it clear that the employees are open to the home office option, but they no longer see it as a reward but rather have higher expectations.

Looking in the details, it can be seen that for the significant cases, no opposite effect can be seen in any of the quotas. The least significant change occurred in Quota 3 and Quota 4 (partly probably due to their relatively smaller sizes). Interestingly, work-related satisfaction did not result in a significant change, while communication decreased slightly, but to a significant extent only in the case of Quota 1. It is also clear that satisfaction, in general, is the biggest in both cohorts for Quota 1, the lowest for Quota 4, while Quota 2 and Quota 3 are placed in the middle. In terms of decrease, Quota 3 faced the biggest drop, which might be caused by feeling excluded from the home office benefits after the pandemic. (Table 2)

As a result, Hypothesis 1 is *accepted*, as except for some minor satisfaction elements, the home-office-related, Covid-situated satisfaction decreased in one year.

Table 2. Home office-related satisfaction values, 2021-2022

	2021	2022	Levene	Welch	ANOVA	Sign.	
Quota 1	Satisfaction Index	211	200	0.000	0.001	0.002	**
	Home office work	76	77	0.088	0.797	0.802	
	Communication	22	21	0.000	0.009	0.011	*
	Organisation integration	45	41	0.031	0.000	0.000	**
	Commitment	21	19	0.082	0.003	0.001	**
	Responsibility/Autonomy	23	24	0.166	0.134	0.099	
	Positive attitude	16	21	0.071	0.000	0.000	**
Quota 2	Satisfaction Index	199	186	0.000	0.000	0.000	**
	Home office work	72	72	0.000	0.563	0.569	
	Communication	22	21	0.032	0.622	0.624	
	Organisation integration	42	38	0.072	0.000	0.000	***
	Commitment	21	18	0.000	0.001	0.000	***
	Responsibility/Autonomy	20	23	0.043	0.001	0.001	**
	Positive attitude	15	19	0.137	0.000	0.000	***
Quota 3	Satisfaction Index	203	187	0.010	0.096	0.076	
	Home office work	74	71	0.044	0.560	0.543	
	Communication	22	21	0.895	0.292	0.319	
	Organisation integration	42	39	0.565	0.192	0.182	
	Commitment	23	19	0.452	0.091	0.122	
	Responsibility/Autonomy	21	21	0.547	0.628	0.623	
	Positive attitude	14	21	0.979	0.002	0.004	**
Quota 4	Satisfaction Index	183	178	0.512	0.338	0.328	
	Home office work	68	69	0.229	0.643	0.623	
	Communication	19	19	0.496	0.730	0.742	
	Organisation integration	39	39	0.454	0.877	0.882	
	Commitment	19	17	0.020	0.011	0.030	*
	Responsibility/Autonomy	19	21	0.118	0.063	0.087	
	Positive attitude	12	17	0.362	0.000	0.000	***
Total	Satisfaction Index	203	188	0.000	0.000	0.000	***
	Home office work	73	73	0.000	0.549	0.554	
	Communication	22	21	0.002	0.001	0.001	**
	Organisation integration	43	39	0.002	0.000	0.000	***
	Commitment	21	18	0.000	0.000	0.000	***
	Responsibility/Autonomy	21	23	0.029	0.004	0.003	**
	Positive attitude	15	19	0.273	0.000	0.000	***

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Own research

A limit of the research is that only the employees' side was analysed in the survey, and the opinions, experiences and top-down driven employee judgment of employers could not be identified. Also, it is clear that a lot of other elements influence the changes (such as the socio-demographic factors), which were not considered in this analysis. Furthermore, the satisfaction-related literature on the home office topic is scarce and index-creation validity should be further controlled by repeated surveys even in and outside Hungary.

We are planning to conduct the research on a regular (annual or biannual) basis to examine the change in the opinions and satisfaction concerning the home office of employees and employers as an effect (or irrespective of) the pandemic. Regular surveys, attitude surveys and the recording of tendencies may help us understand and map the future penetration of home office, the exploitation of the possibilities it offers, and the limitations of its use. We conducted this research in 2021 and 2022 but plan to continue in 2023.

Potential future research is to extend it to an international level with other countries both in and outside of Europe.

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