

WORKING TIME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE POLISH MARKET

Roman Urban – Lukasz Chodkowski

Abstract

The pandemic and its associated restrictions have left their mark on global, as well as domestic markets. Managing working time, whether the employee is on the factory floor or working remotely, has become a great challenge for human resources (further HR) managers during the pandemic. More than ever, a task-based approach, emotional intelligence, good judgment and excellent interpersonal skills will be required by corporate HR departments. The basic research method was a qualitative analysis carried out at 124 companies.

HR projects carried out not only during the pandemic have made companies realise that working time is a fundamental part of working revolution that is permanently redefining the understanding of working time. From a position of a passive observers, we have now become active participants with a real influence on what shape these changes will take. This observation, supported also by a questionnaire survey, caused us to reflect and led to the results and statements of this paper. The synthesis of findings also shows that companies believe the pandemic is over, they will increase employment and recruitment will be easier.

Key words: working time, workforce management, flexibility, working challenges and solutions

JEL Code: J22, J53, J81

Introduction

In the field of workforce management, is always answered the general question “Why?” with “Because time matters.” Today, this statement is even more relevant than ever. The issue of working time (employer and employee flexibility) plays main role nowadays and has remained the domain of only a few departments in most businesses (Peterson, Wiens-Tuers, 2014). This challenge has gained many new dimensions over the past year (Boiteux, Corominas, Lusa-Garcia, 2009). HR projects carried out not only during the pandemic have made companies

realise that working time is a fundamental part of working revolution that is permanently redefining the understanding of working time. When planning shifts, legislation must be respected, but the results of collective bargaining must increasingly respect the individual needs of employees (Komarudin et al., 2020). A requirement even at a time when the pandemic was a motivational system and sustainable human resource planning to create unambiguous shift work (Kletzander, Musliu, 2020).

From a position of a passive observers, we have now become active participants with a real influence on what shape these changes will take. This observation caused us to reflect and led to the results and statements of this paper.

The original intention of the paper was to discuss only working hours during the COVID 19 pandemic, but it turned out that some approaches caused by COVID 19 will already be used in practice as a positive experience and new opportunities in human resources management. These include the introduction of the home office, but also new aspects of recruitment and staff turnover, including the monitoring of external staff.

If it is possible to draw any constructive conclusions from the experiences of recent months, one issue has certainly become clear, namely the growing importance of organisational flexibility (Garcia, Costa, Nadal, 2007). The ability to adapt to changing requirements due to restrictions in place at the various levels of a company's operations and to adjust the staffing, necessitates taking greater care of employees, which requires greater efforts from the entire organisation. Effective planning, also in terms of the how working time is organised, has a large input in achieving greater control over an organisation's performance (van Hulst, den Hertog, Nuijten, 2017). The pandemic has enhanced this view. We present this paper with the belief that its results and conclusions will not only enable a better understanding of today's convoluted reality but will also contribute to better preparations for the future. Companies have passed the first exam with flying colours, but further ones seem to be only a question of time (Goodell, 2020).

1 Research methodology

Analysis and comparison of data obtained based on a questionnaire survey, created a basic platform for scientific research. One hundred twenty-four companies that are operating in Poland participated in the survey which we ran in February–March 2021. We used the CAWI method – an electronic form requiring respondents to complete an online survey.

The guarantee of anonymity that was given to respondents was an important factor that increased the reliability of answers obtained through the questionnaire and was also a basic premise of the research (Plessz, 2020). The respondents were free to choose whether to provide the name of their company as a participant of the survey, and 16 companies, thus almost 13%, did so. However, this did not affect the fact that all the data from the companies was anonymised. The vast majority, namely 87% of the companies, were from the private sector, while the remaining 13% were public companies. There was a fairly similar level of representation of service companies (54%) and manufacturing companies (46%). Apart from one, all the companies at which the respondents were employed had been operating on the Polish market for over 3 years. The exception had been operating for 1–3 years. The surveyed companies had more or less equal numbers of employees working shifts (57%) and those not on shift work (43%). Of those companies, 19% employed less than 10 people, 42% had 10–250 employees, and the remaining 39% had over 250 employees. Trade unions (one or more) were operating at 28% of the companies, while the remaining 72% had none.

Tab. 1: Survey company sorting criteria overview

Type of company	Public		Private
	13%		87%
Operation time on the market	More than 3 years	Between 1 and 3 years	Less than 1 year
	98%	2%	0%
Manufacturing or service	Manufacturing		Service
	46%		54%
Trade union in company	Yes		No
	28%		72%
Level of employment	More than 250 employees	Between 10 and 250	Fewer than 10 employees
	39%	42%	19%
Shift work in company	Yes		No
	57%		43%

Source: own survey data

Only those effects that achieved a statistical significance of $p < 0.05$ are given below.

Pearson's chi-squared test was used for nonparametric tests in cross tables; the t-test for independent samples was used for quantitative variables and one-way ANOVA was used if factors were present at more than 2 levels (Hindls, 2007).

In addition, the fulfilment of this methodological procedure was supported by the following research question focused on the area of working time planning. How does Covid 19 affect the process of working time planning in companies?

1.1 Recruitment and turnover of employees during the pandemic

When the pandemic took hold in Poland in March 2020, no one knew how and to what extent it would impact the economy, including the labour market. After a year of having to operate under changed conditions, with many restrictions still in place on movement, interpersonal contacts, trading and services that are still being modified by the government, we asked companies about their experiences in recruiting and rotating staff from this perspective.

Compared to the period before the pandemic, 11% of companies gave recruiting during the pandemic an easier rated. For 54% of respondents, the pandemic had no impact on recruitment, while 35% of them described recruitment as more difficult during the pandemic.

As shown by the numbers, if the pandemic has affected recruitment, the impact has been relatively negative. Just over a third of companies surveyed stated that the pandemic had hindered recruiting.

There was an association between a company's size and difficulties with recruiting: small companies with up to 10 staff were least affected by the pandemic's negative impact, whereas 30% of companies believed that it was easier during the pandemic.

In order to better understand the scale of the pandemic's negative impact on recruitment, respondents were also asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the extent to which their company's operations were affected by problems with employee recruitment during the pandemic (where 1 meant "have no impact on the company's operations", and 10 meant "have a very negative impact"). The average for the whole sample was 4.3, indicating a moderately negative impact. As in the previous question, small companies (up to 10 employees) saw this as having the least impact (3.3) compared to other, larger companies. For them, namely companies with more than 10 employees, the average was 4.5. Two similar questions were asked of respondents with regard to employee turnover during the pandemic. For 61% of respondents, the pandemic had no impact on employee turnover, while almost exactly the same number responded that turnover under the pandemic had decreased (20%) as that it had increased (19%).

These data show that where the pandemic affected employee turnover, and almost 40% of the surveyed companies believed that it had, its impact was almost equally negative as it was positive.

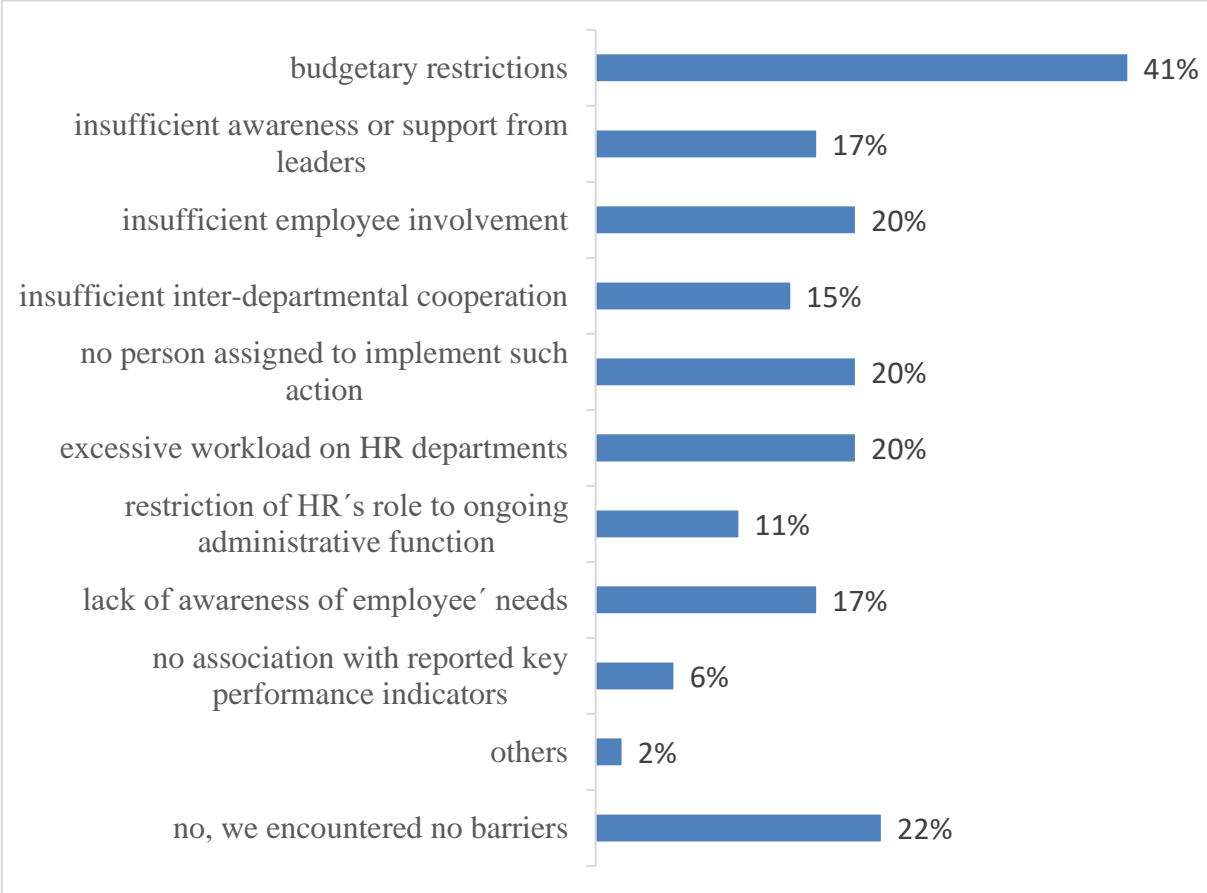
We asked respondents to indicate on the same scale as before the degree to which problems with employee turnover affected the company's operations. The scale of possible answers ranged from 1 meaning "no effect on the company's operations", to 10 "a very negative effect".

The average for the entire sample was 3.7, which shows that turnover had a relatively small negative effect on companies' operations. In the private sector, this impact was smaller (average 3.5) than for public sector companies, (average 4.6). The size of a company also had a role in the extent of the impact. It was smallest for companies with less than 10 employees (average 2.1), greater for companies with 10–249 employees (average 3.8) and highest for those with more than 250 employees (average 4.3). For companies without a trade union, turnover had less of a negative impact on operations (average 3.4) than for those with a trade union (average 4.5).

It is worth noting that the effectiveness of such key activities as recruiting and preventing employee turnover is not measured: in 98% of cases, companies do not measure the effectiveness of steps taken to improve recruitment, and in 91% of cases, they do not measure the effectiveness of steps taken to improve employee retention.

Respondents were also asked about barriers they found in trying to increase the effectiveness of recruitment or in retaining employees. More than one answer could be given.

Fig. 1: Survey question: Have you encountered any of these barriers when taking steps to increase the effectiveness of recruitment as well as staff retention?



Source: own data and processing

The previous chart shows that respondents mostly (41%) cited budgetary constraints. The next three mostly selected reasons with the same frequency (20%), were insufficient employee involvement, lack of a person assigned to carry out such duties and excessive workload of HR departments. Slightly over one fifth of answers stated that companies did not encounter any barriers when taking steps to improve the effectiveness of recruiting or retaining employees. Two companies stated that a significant barrier was the lack of employees with appropriate qualifications on the labour market.

1.2 Planning working time during the pandemic

Respondents were asked whether it became more difficult to schedule working time for employees during the pandemic than before it.

Although across the whole sample, 57% of respondents answered affirmatively, this percentage was 77% for companies using shift work. The size of company also mattered. The

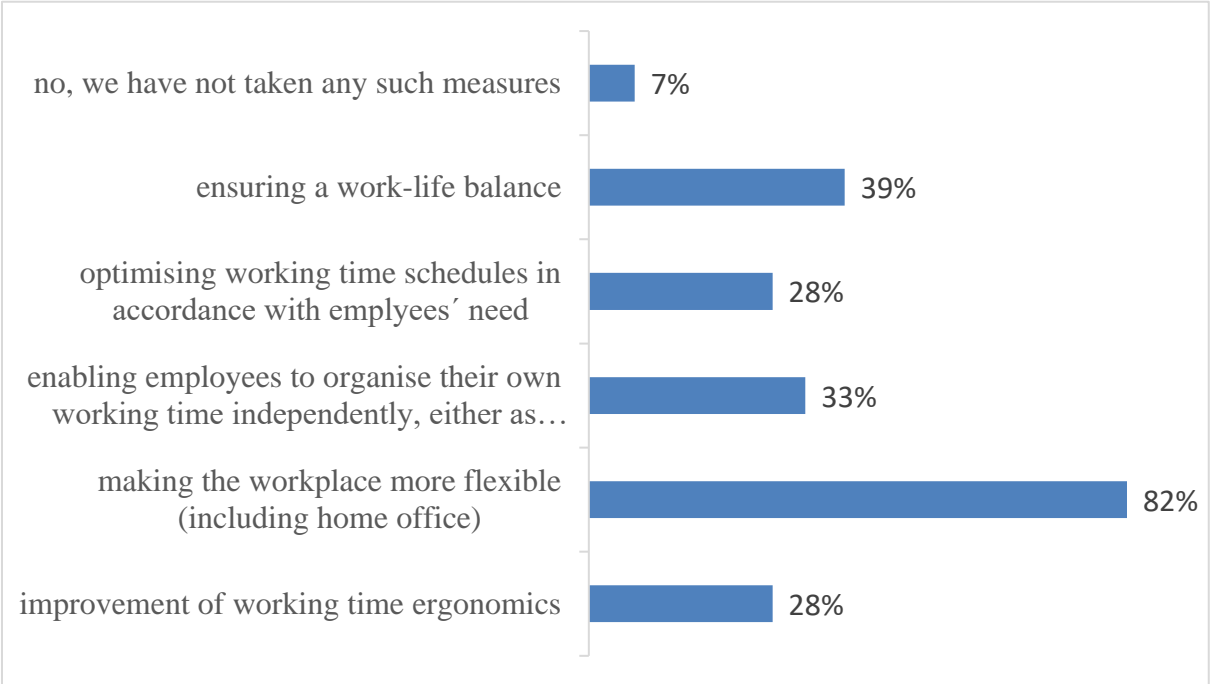
more employees at a company, the greater was the difference: from 30% for the smallest, through to 57% at companies employing up to 250 people, to 80% at the largest ones.

When asked if the company’s employees took a greater amount of sick leave during the pandemic, 41% of respondents said yes, but that the amount was not significant, and 20% that it was hindering duties. In 39% of cases, the pandemic had not increased levels of sick leave.

The increase in sick leave taken by employees as a result of the pandemic was greater in manufacturing companies and in those using shift work than in service companies. Moreover, this effect was greater in large companies and in those with a trade union.

The survey also asked respondents about measures taken to improve the quality of working time planning, but which were not directly associated with the state of pandemic. More than one answer could be given.

Fig. 2: Survey question: Which of the following measures has your company implemented?



Source: own data and processing

The above chart shows that the most frequently chosen option was greater flexibility with the location of work, which included remote working (82%). Then followed: greater work-life balance (39%), allowing employees to organise their own working time and the adoption of flexible working time (33%), optimisation of working time schedules to meet employees’ needs (28%) and improved working time ergonomics (28%). None of these measures were being taken at 7% of answers.

In a further question, respondents were also asked about measures that could be associated with the planning of working time but that were directly caused by the pandemic.

The most frequently chosen option (41%) was changes to working time schedules, which was followed by a reduction in working time (26%) and forcing employees to take holiday leave (22%). Almost a quarter of the companies did not find any association. Other measures included, above all, the adoption of remote or hybrid work, shortened deadlines for completing orders, increased flexibility as to the hours or location of work and limiting direct visits to clients.

1.3 Working time and managing people after the pandemic

When asked if companies were planning to change the number of employees working directly in manufacturing/service delivery, once the pandemic had ended, 65% of respondents replied that they were not planning to change the level of employment, and 33% stated that they were planning to hire new staff. Two companies were planning layoffs.

As regards anticipating how easy recruitment might be once the pandemic has ended, 30% of companies believed that it would be easier than currently (compared to 15% that felt it would be more difficult). The converse can be seen in prospects for retaining employees after the pandemic: 28% of companies believed that it would be more difficult than at present, and 9% thought it would be easier.

In both of the above situations, service companies thought that they would find it easier than in the view of manufacturing companies. Also, companies that make use of shift work believed that it would be easier than in the view of companies that have adopted shift working.

In the next question, the respondents were asked whether the pandemic would bring about a need to change their company's long-term strategy for managing human resources. Although respondents did not have an opinion in 44% of cases, in 33% they thought it would not, while 22% anticipated that it would be necessary.

Respondents were also asked whether, as a result of experiences gained from the pandemic, they intended to change how they planned working time. Most (57%) did not have such plans. A plan to link absenteeism with some form of remuneration (absenteeism/attendance bonus) was declared by 24% of respondents, while 17% intended to opt for a different working time system and a further 17% would seek to change the length of the settlement period. A few companies also cited changing the level at which working time is planned and allowing employees to have more influence on their own schedules.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a fairly large impact on how companies operate.

Recruitment has become more difficult for many firms than before the pandemic, and recruitment problems are having a negative impact on companies' operations.

It seems understandable that the pandemic has not had such a large impact on staff turnover. It has undoubtedly increased uncertainty about the future of the economic and professional careers, and many employees may see it too risky to leave a company during such times.

The fact that only a few individual companies measure the effectiveness of their attempts to improve recruitment and of steps to increase employee retention means that any attempt to increase the effectiveness of these efforts is more difficult. The main problem seems to be that these areas are insufficiently budgeted for.

The pandemic has also made it more difficult to plan the working time. Apart from the obvious reasons, such as having to respect a range of pandemic-related restrictions (e.g. physical separation of different groups of employees), the reported increase in employees' sick leave is also significant. It is possible that this factor is one of the reasons why the working time of remotely working employees has exceeded working time norms. Other conclusions in connection with research question (How does Covid 19 affect the process of working time planning in companies?) are stated in chapter 1.2 and 1.3.

Many of the above effects show that the size of a company is significant: small firms are managing better than larger ones. However, manufacturing companies and those that employ shift work have been harder hit by the increases in sick leave.

The vast majority of companies have responded to these challenges. Many have introduced greater flexibility into the workplace or brought in remote working, are promoting a better work-life balance, and have changed their working time schedules or reduced working time.

Although the current situation is difficult, the future outlook is not pessimistic (Padhan, Prabheesh, 2021). Many companies believe that after the pandemic is over, they will increase employment and recruitment will be easier. They also expect more turnover of staff, which also seems to mean that they are anticipating an economic recovery.

For some companies, the pandemic is an experience that will force changes in their long-term strategy for managing human resources. For example, as a way of dealing with sickness

absenteeism, companies are intending to introduce an attendance bonus. Also changes are being planned in the area of planning working time, such as choosing a different working time system or changing the length of settlement periods.

The above results give hope that if a new pandemic ever arrives, companies will be able to cope with it more effectively.

References

- Boiteux, O., Corominas, A., Lusa-Garcia, A. (2009). Production, staff, working time and financial planning. *Intangible capital*, Volume 5, Issue 3, page 259-277, ISSN: 2014-3214.
- Garcia, L., Costa, M., Nadal, O. (2007). Planning working time under flexibility. *Universia Business review*, Issue 14, page 10-25, ISSN: 2174-0933.
- Goodell, J. (2020). COVID-19 and finance: Agenda for future research. *Finance research letters*, Volume 35, Article number 101512, ISSN: 1544-6123.
- Hindls, R. (2007). *Statistika pro ekonomy*, 8. Vydání, Praha: Professional Publishing, ISBN: 978-80-86946-43-6.
- van Hulst, D., den Hertog, D., Nuijten, W. (2017). Robust shift generation in workforce planning. *Computational management science*, Volume 14, Issue 1, Page 115-134, ISSN: 1619-697X.
- Kletzander, L., & Musliu, N. (2020). Solving the general employee scheduling problem. *Computers & Operations Research*, 113. Article UNSP 104794. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cor.2019.104794>
- Komarudin, De Feyter, T., Guerry, M.A., & Vanden Berghe, G. (2020). The extended roster quality staffing problem: addressing roster quality variation within a staffing planning period. *Journal of Scheduling*, 23(2), 253-264. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10951-020-00654-7>.
- Padhan, R., Prabheesh, K. (2021). The economics of COVID-19 pandemic: A survey. *Economic analysis and policy*, Volume 70, Page 220-237, ISSN: 0313-5926.
- Peterson, J., Wiens-Tuers, B. (2014). Work Time, Gender, and Inequality: The Conundrums of Flexibility. *Journal of economic issues*, Volume 48, Issue 2, Page 387-394, ISSN: 0021-3624.
- Plessz, M. (2020). A protocol for an anonymous questionnaire survey according to European regulations. *BMS-Bulletin of sociological methodology*, Volume 145, Issue 1, Page 100-110, ISSN: 0759-1063.

Contact

Ing. Roman Urban, Ph.D.

Déhora Central Europe

Konviktská 24

110 00 Praha 1

Czech Republic

r.urban@dehora.cz

Lukasz Chodkowski

Déhora Polska

Nowy Świat 41A

00-042 Warszawa

Poland

l.chodkowski@dehora.pl