

286 Changes in the World of Work since the COVID-19 Epidemic in Rural Areas in Hungary

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Abstract

The epidemic spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in Hungary in the spring of 2020 has significantly changed the way people used to work in a mostly traditional, personal way. The changes have created the possibility of separating the workplace from the task at hand, and of creating a more optimal working environment for the employee in the form of a home office. The process of change, which has been a major challenge for some business organisations, varies from country to country and from job to job, as not all jobs are suitable for working from home. The use of the home office in Hungary has so far been significantly underdeveloped compared with other European countries, but the coronavirus has forced many companies to adopt this solution. Teleworking has many advantages and disadvantages. Its advantages are primarily felt by employees. This form of work offers a greater degree of freedom, allowing workers to work from the comfort of their own home, and would be a good way of increasing the population in rural areas, given the declining population of rural areas. Using a questionnaire survey, the author analyses the opinions of 341 Hungarian workers on the home office according to the type of municipality where they live. The aim of the study is to explore the relationship (considering the limitations due to the small number of items) and the perception of home office work by the type of municipality of residence of Hungarian workers. It is hypothesized that there is a difference between the opinions of teleworkers living in the capital city, city or village. The calculations show that there is no significant relationship between the perception of home office and the type of municipality where the respondent lives. Among the employee opinions on the home office, the most important factors were the absence of stricter rules on dress and the reduction of travel time.

Keywords

Home office, COVID-19 pandemic, workplace, Hungary

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to present the increasing prevalence of home offices as the number of cases of coronavirus disease increases, and the opinions of employers. A distinction must be drawn between home office and teleworking as a form of atypical employment. In Hungarian terminology, in lay and often in professional language, home office is often used as a synonym for teleworking. However, the two terms are not identical, the difference lies in the function. Teleworking is an atypical form of work that requires the active use of a computer and other ICT tools. Teleworking takes the form of a permanent employment relationship, typically carried out from home. Home office means working from home, the employee may use ICT tools while working from home, but this does not automatically make the employee a teleworker. Working from home is usually temporary, as opposed to teleworking, where work is done permanently away from the workplace. The home office is a typically unregulated area in the domestic legal system, while teleworking is covered by domestic legislation (the Labour Code) (Bankó, 2014; Bankó - Ferencz, 2015; Karoliny et al, 2017) In January 2021, I conducted an online questionnaire survey using the snowball method, asking Hungarian employees' opinions on the home office. The coronavirus epidemic also put employers in a difficult situation, as they had to react quickly to the changed working conditions and rules, with

no choice but to learn new ways of working (Kane et al, 2021). The increasing spread of atypical forms of employment may be a partial solution to the labour market difficulties in Hungary (Mélypataki et al, 2020). The question is whether, as the viral situation subsides, the home office will remain a sustainable employment and work organisation option in the future or whether everything will revert to the more traditional employment of the past. The present study cannot answer this question, but it does provide an assessment of the situation and a status report on the perception of the home office by employees.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the emergence of the coronavirus, the share of teleworkers in Hungary was relatively low (3.7% of employees, or 144,000 people, worked telework in Q1 2018, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office) compared to the total number of employees. In the European Union before the coronavirus epidemic, nearly 20% of workers were teleworkers (Eurostat). Teleworking is a type of atypical employment, where work is carried out at a location other than the workplace (Belzunegui-Eraso - Erro-Garcés, 2020). Typically, work is carried out in a home environment, so home office is considered as a way of organising work. The rapid shift to the home office in spring 2020 in several countries around the world was aimed at reducing the spread of the virus and the potential risks and burden on the healthcare system (Mouratidis - Papagiannakis, 2021).

The successive closures during the COVID pandemic changed everyone's lives. In the labour market, the relationship of most workers to work has been significantly reshaped in time, space and work organisation. The key adaptation to this shock was the home office. The home office is defined as working away from the traditional office, from home, using computers or other digital devices to maintain contact with the office (Bélanger, 2008). The concept of the home office is often associated with other related concepts such as teleworking, working from home, mobile working, flexible working hours, satellite office. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the home office was seen as the future of work organisation (Illegems, 2001). At the time, it was also argued that it was becoming increasingly feasible thanks to the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The home office has many advantages and disadvantages at both organisational and individual levels. Among the advantages are that home office practices help productivity, profitability and flexibility. This is accompanied by a reduction in absenteeism and employee turnover (Frolick, 1993). Some authors highlight the improvement of remote collaboration, yet most authors emphasise the lack of collaboration and team spirit as a disadvantage of the home office. At the employer level, the disadvantages of the home office are administrative and legal, and the reduced control can lead to a reduction in working time and increase the risk of cyberslacking (employees using company internet and e-mail services for personal activities during working hours). At the same time, the home office has offered employees greater flexibility in terms of work schedules and use of time and energy, contributing to better job satisfaction and quality of life. The home office also offers autonomy and greater concentration (Rupietta, 2016).

Waizenegger and colleagues used affordance to investigate the sudden problems caused by COVID-19 and the technological tools that workers were forced to use to achieve their goals of group collaboration. In particular, they highlighted that achieving business goals should also be a priority, even during the period of working from home. In the post COVID-19 period, businesses can evaluate how to preserve the benefits generated during the COVID epidemic, such as increased productivity, reduced communication barriers and the integration of teleworkers (Waizenegger et al, 2020).

Feliciano and colleagues' research aimed to explore the difficulties of maintaining productivity and team engagement in the home office system. They concluded that managers still need to evolve to this working arrangement in order to lead their teams remotely, focusing on results rather than process-focused leadership (Feliciano et al, 2021).

Herdon et al. pointed out that the Labour Code does not contain any provision for home office as a home-based work arrangement, but it does mention two legal arrangements - teleworking and the employment relationship - that allow for working from home. By contrast, the concept of the home office, which was created by the business sector and exists in the legal literature, was created

precisely to allow temporary, irregular home working instead of the atypical legal relationships that are based on regularity and permanence. However, it should be stressed that a specific legal regulation of the home office is considered indispensable (Herdon et al, 2020).

In their study, Moretti and colleagues highlighted those workers perceived working from home as less productive and stressful. They particularly valued the travel time saved to work but were not happy about the isolation from colleagues (Moretti et al, 2020).

Using factor analysis, they found that the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking and working from home were clustered around six factors during the pandemic. Work-life balance, work efficiency and control of work were highlighted as advantages, while limitations associated with working from home, job insecurity and inadequate tools were highlighted as disadvantages (Ipsen et al, 2021). Exploring new digital tools was found to be more difficult for older and less skilled teleworkers (Martin et al, 2022).

Some organisations have raised concerns about productivity loss, the maintenance of corporate culture and health and safety at work as a result of the rise of home working, while workers were more concerned about social interaction, internet connectivity and increased workload (Marzban et al, 2021).

Virtual offices may pose new threats to workers and organisations, but these threats can be managed with proper planning and training. Virtual offices also have the potential to provide positive challenges for employees, making them places where employees feel comfortable and perform well (Stich, 2020).

Workers spent less time in meetings per day post-closure, and a significant and sustained increase in average workday length and a short-term increase in email activity were also highlighted (DeFilippis et al, 2020).

Based on the experience of working from home during the coronavirus epidemic, the literature typically identifies two segments of workers: one segment of workers who would like to return to the office and one segment of workers who would prefer to stay at home in the future and work in a home office. The first segment comprised relatively more male, highly educated, full-time workers with better communication skills, while the segment of workers preferring to work from home comprised relatively more women, part-time workers, administrative workers, and workers with more individual work responsibilities, focused work and long commutes (Appel-Meulenbroek, 2022).

In the period of the COVID pandemic, the relationship of most workers to work has changed in time, space and the way work is organised. The home office was one of the most important forms of adaptation, in which achieving business goals remained a priority. It became clear that managers still needed to evolve to this working arrangement and to lead their teams remotely, focusing on results rather than process-centred management. Employees perceived the home office as less stressful and particularly appreciated the time saved in commuting to work, but were unhappy about being isolated from colleagues and were most concerned about social interactions, internet connectivity and increased workload. Although the home office is not fully regulated in Hungary, the concept of the home office, created by the business sector and existing in the legal literature, was created precisely to allow temporary, irregular home working rather than atypical employment relationships that presuppose regularity and permanence.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

To confirm or refute what I read in the literature, I conducted primary research among people living and working in Hungary. The questionnaire survey was conducted in electronic form. The data collection was carried out online using Google Form and the processing was done using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24. Data were processed anonymously. The data collection phase of the research was conducted in the month of January 2021 using a snowball method and targeted Facebook groups. In addition to demographic data, I also investigated the conditions of home office, the process of transition to telecommuting, advantages and disadvantages. In the present study, I formulated the following research questions.

After cleaning and checking the data, a sample of 341 respondents was available (Table 1), but the sample is not representative, and the results should be treated with reservations. This is a small sample compared to the total number of people employed, but the results show interesting correlations.

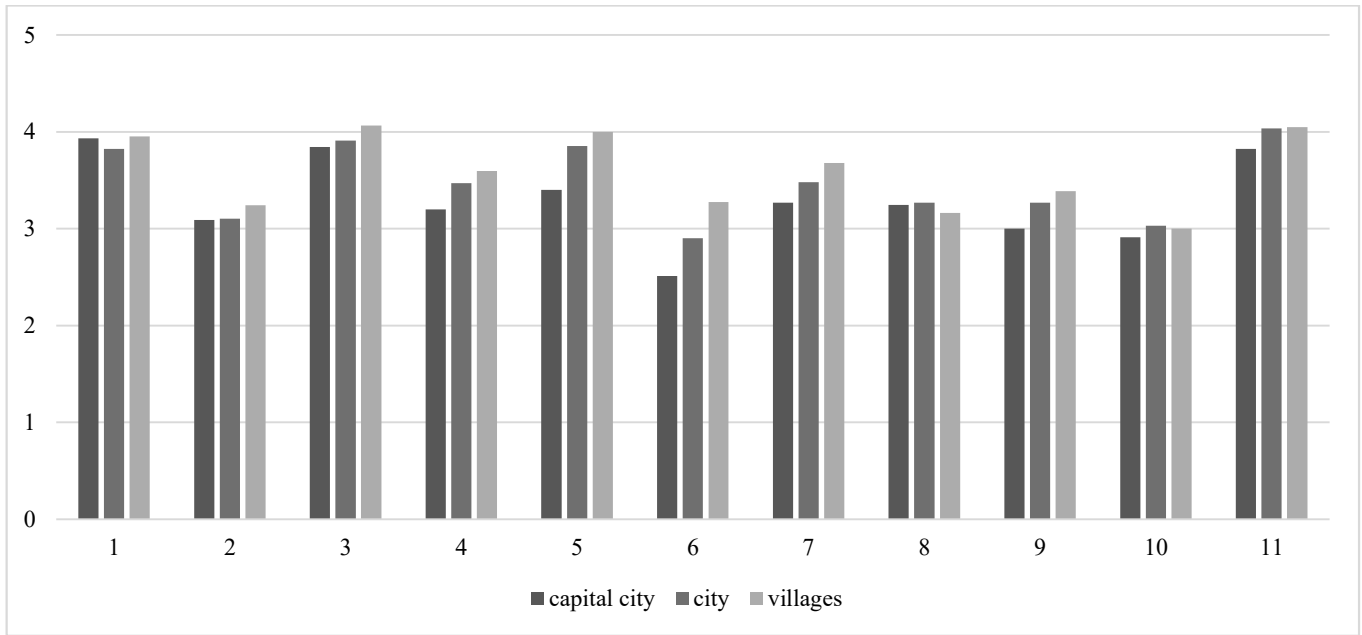
Table 1. Composition of the sample

Featured	Title	Item number
Gender	female	283
	male	58
Age	15-29	87
	30-39	117
	40-49	95
	50-59	38
	60-	4
Marital status	Married	144
	In a relationship	121
	Divorced	17
	Widow	2
	Single	57
Education	Primary school	0
	Secondary school	7
	High School	109
	College/university diploma	207
	Ph.D. or other academic degree	18
Permanent place of residence	Municipality, village	62
	County seat, other town	234
	Capital city	45

Source: Own compilation.

293 people (85.6%) had worked in a home office in the year before the survey and 48 (14.4%) had not. Only 95 people had ever worked typically from home before the COVID-19 virus outbreak, but these experiences were negligible, only one or two days per week. Only 63 people had a new type of work contract in spring 2020 when the home office was imposed, this could be explained by the fact that the transition took a few days and everyone was confident that it would be a short period. The survey found that 22% of respondents have been in a permanent home office since spring 2020, and the summer suspension of the state of emergency did not give them the opportunity to return to their jobs. The persistent home office can be explained by the fact that some employers perceived significant cost savings from the home office, as when an entire corporate division or department can be assigned to work from home, it results in a tangible reduction in overhead costs.

I asked employees for their opinion on each of the home office factors (they were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5). Figure 1 shows the average scores per factor based on the type of municipality where the respondents live.



Source: Own compilation

Note: 1: it gives me more freedom, 2: I am free from the daily working hours and the constraints of being tied to a particular place, 3: I don't have to look fit and dress nicely, 4: human relations are broken down, 5: I miss personal meetings with colleagues, 6: loneliness, 7: I can spend more time with my family while telecommuting, 8: I am more productive now that I telecommute, 9: I work much more than I used to in the traditional way, 10: household overheads are much higher, 11: travel time and costs are reduced.

Figure 1. Employee reviews of the home office

Those living in a village gave the highest scores for not having to look fit (4.0) and reduction in travel time and cost (3.9). For those living in the city, the highest scores were given to the reduction in travel time and cost (3.8), while for those living in the capital, the factors not having to look fit (3.9) and lack of personal contacts (3.8) were the highest scoring factors. The factor of loneliness received the lowest average score (2.5) in all municipal categories.

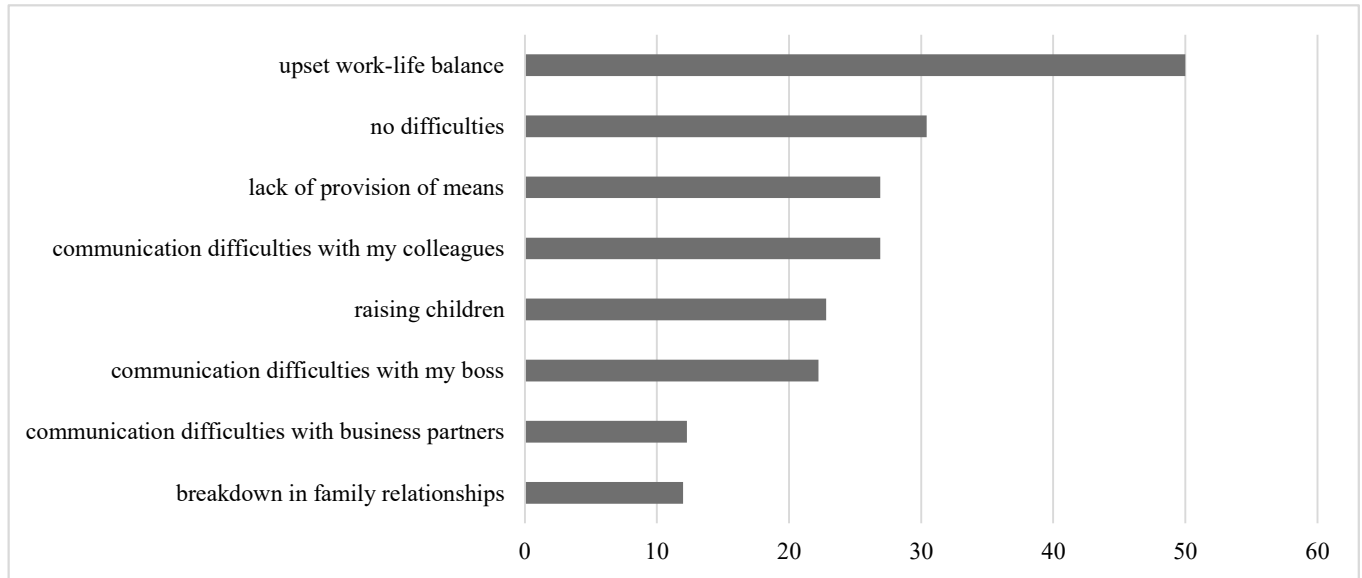
In the case of the settlement structure, I have examined independence. These showed a weakly significant non-significant relationship between home office characteristics and settlement structure. Following the independence test, I also conducted an analysis of variance. I tested for homogeneity, Levene's Statistic showed that the homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's Statistic 0.440, $df_1=1$, $df_2=216$, $p=0.725$). The ANOVA table showed that the significance level of the home office factors was greater than 0.05 so there was no relationship between the factors and settlement type. For those living in the county seat and other cities, the most important factor was that travel time and cost were significantly reduced during the home office. For those living in the capital city, getting rid of the fit appearance and the increased freedom from the home office were the most important, while for those living in a village or hamlet, the reduction in travel time and cost and the lack of personal contact with colleagues were the most important. Loneliness was the factor with the lowest average score, regardless of the type of settlement. It can be concluded that the type of municipality in which respondents live determines to a small extent the evaluation of the factors of working from home.

50% of the respondents experienced difficulties in the home office due to a lack of work-life balance (Figure 2). This is confirmed by the literature (Musinszki et al, 2020) by identifying the problem of work-life balance, that a common problem in teleworking and working from home is that the duration of work is not separated from household and other tasks, but can continue continuously from morning until late evening or with small or large interruptions, which clearly leads to a blurring of the boundary between work and private life. In the long term, this causes stress and strain for the worker and their family members.

29% of respondents complained about the lack of adequate tools, often having to work on their own computers, using home printers. This in no way motivates the worker to work efficiently and the

increased demands that arise mean that the assets are worn out more quickly. Any repair costs were also borne by the workers in this case.

Communication difficulties with colleagues were complained about by 26% of the respondents, which is also quite high. Presumably, the employees did not have a high enough proportion of soft skills (e.g. good communication skills, curiosity and critical thinking). The demand and expectation for soft skills is increasing in the case of employer needs (Horváth-Csikós - Juhász, 2021).



Source: Own compilation

Figure 2. Difficulties encountered during the home office based on the proportion of respondents (%)

Another difficulty mentioned was the difficulty of raising minor child(ren), as parents with young children had to manage the care and supervision of their children at home during this period due to the temporary closure of nurseries, kindergartens and schools. If the parent was working in a home office at the same time, the extra burden caused real problems. Of the respondents, 174 (51%) had no children, 57 (17%) had one child, 86 (25%) had two children and 24 (7%) had three or more children. 75% of respondents with no children would still prefer to remain in a permanent home office after the ageing situation. Among those with one child, this proportion is only 45%, and 23% for those with two children. This of course depends on the age of the children. Under normal working conditions, a permanent home office can help women's participation in the labour market if nurseries and schools are available for children.

4. SUMMARY

The aim of the study is to analyse the perception of the home office from the employees' side and to analyse the difficulties they encountered and how they experienced working from home. A questionnaire survey was conducted, as the sample was not representative, and the results should be treated with reservations. The survey could be repeated in the future by selecting a specific age group or a specific job to meet the representativeness requirements. The results of the present survey show a very mixed perception of the home office among employees. Parents with young children (typically mothers) found it difficult to reconcile work and private life and to care for children. Workers mostly used their own devices when working from home. Some workers received help only from their employer. Due to the relatively short time, it was not possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the home office in this study.

A future research direction could be to further analyse the home office through another questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with employers. I believe that in the current sensitive labour market situation, the period of the coronavirus has given a lot of experience to employers and

employees, perhaps a change of attitude and a greater use of this atypical form of employment in the future. As the virus situation subsides or diminishes, perhaps the use of a partial home office (1-2 home working per week) will become common practice in jobs where the nature of the work allows it. I believe that it is important to analyse the experience to date and the effectiveness of employees working from home, so that employers can gain a clearer picture of the situation.

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