

## THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE OF EMPLOYEES

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### ABSTRACT

*The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are still prevalent in the Hungarian labour market. With home office gaining ground, the traditional way of working before the pandemic was partially altered, for which neither employers nor employees were ready. Work-life balance was upset by the change in the daily routine. In our quantitative online questionnaire survey, we looked at whether this disruption and change had a greater impact on the older or younger generation and whether there was a discernible gender difference in home office work in Hungary. Before the questionnaire survey, two hypotheses were developed. One of our hypotheses was confirmed and the other was rejected after analysing the data. We demonstrated that older age groups – the Baby Boomer and Generation X – are more satisfied with their work-life balance than younger age groups – the Generation Y and Generation Z – using statistical methods (cross-tabulation analysis and chi-square test). We examine these possible causes and make recommendations for strategies to promote work-life balance in our article.*

Keywords: COVID-19, home office, work-life balance, labour market, generations

JEL codes: O15, M54, J81

### INTRODUCTION

Our daily lives, our lifestyles, our daily rhythms have been radically changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have experienced first-hand what it means when a country shuts down overnight and runs only the life-support systems. Despite previous pandemics, we had no such experience, we did not know how to act, we were guided only by our instincts. Schools and workplaces were closed, panic buying at shops began. Hundreds of thousands of children were left at home, with care, feeding and education to provide. The difficulties of reconciling work and traditional family roles are a stress factor in the lives of individuals, who have to cope with the importance of both areas of life and the many demands that have to be met. Women, mothers, have to fulfil both the female/motherly and the workplace roles, and it is therefore of paramount importance for them to reconcile these two areas. In addition to the

classic role of family provider, men should also strive to relieve the burden on mothers. Employers have already recognised that if a worker's private life is unstable or if she has to work a second job, does not get enough rest and therefore does not achieve a work-life balance (WLB), this has a negative impact on work performance.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought forced change to our lives, changing our habits, and the spread of the pandemic has also affected domestic economic sectors. The aim of our research is to analyse the work-life balance among home office workers, which has been altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on generational and gender differences. Therefore, we review the literature on the topic, summarise the rise of the home office in Hungary during the pandemic and describe its legal background. In the second part of the article, we present the research methodology we applied and the results we obtained and conclude with some useful advice for labour market participants.

### **The emergence and spread of the home office in Hungary**

Work has always played a key role in individual lives and in society as a whole. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, atypical forms of employment were not characteristic of the Hungarian labour market. New arrangements and forms such as flexible work arrangements and teleworking have affected work time and working hours, as well as the work-life balance and the relationship between employees and work (Vyas, 2022; Putri & Amran, 2021).

Teleworking can be classified as an atypical form of employment because of the unusual nature of the place of work and the non-standard way of working. Teleworking can also be considered as a modern form of work in modern times (Venczel-Szakó et al., 2021). The introduction of flexible forms of employment helps employees reconcile work and family life, making the workplace more attractive. Family-friendliness is also a cornerstone of building the employer's corporate reputation and enhancing social responsibility (Vámosi, 2020).

Home office is not just a “product” of the COVID-19 pandemic: it has been part of the corporate culture of larger companies for several years, but it was previously accepted either for disadvantaged workers (e.g., disabled or with young children, etc.) or for those in a specific job (e.g., managers). Later, this scope has been widened and the employer has come to have high expectations of the employee (Amin et al., 2020). Most of all, Generation Y and Z have come to expect flexibility from their employers. Recent research reflects the fact that physical presence in the workplace in the classical sense is becoming a thing of the past, the workplace is in fact becoming a client state and work-life balance is playing an increasingly important role (Sipka, 2021).

In principle, flexible forms of employment can increase worker productivity and work-life balance, and can increase workers' well-being, satisfaction, self-confidence and motivation, especially if expectations at the bottom of the worker needs pyramid are met (Ayar et al., 2022). The current labour market situation, with emerging labour shortages in particular, clearly favours the development of flexibility, but part of this is due to constraints, which employers do not always live well with. It also requires a change in corporate culture and attitudes (Vámosi, 2020, Czifrusz, 2021).

### **Work-life balance**

The term „work-life balance” appeared in the international literature in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, there have been many publications on grammatical correctness, consistency of translations, vocabulary and content. The English term „work-life” can be found in the Hungarian literature as a combination of „work-life” or „work-family”. The issue of work-life balance is becoming increasingly important today, as many employees spend far more time at work than is optimal or spend much more time at work in their free time (*Csebné & Varga, 2017*).

If we dissect the term itself further, we can assume that there is an ideal level that exists when there is a healthy work-life balance. The understanding of work-life balance (WLB) differs between employers and employees. For employers, the concept of WLB refers to an approach, a corporate culture whereby employees are provided with a fulfilling life outside work, while making a full contribution to the organisation's results during working hours (*Bocean et al., 2023*). Employees feel cared for by their employers, which increases their identification and loyalty with their workplace and improves their work performance. In any case, it is important to underline that there are many benefits for the company if it is mindful of its employees' social and family responsibilities. For employees, the concept of WLB means that they have more freedom in terms of where, when and how they carry out their work. In practice, the employee feels in control of his/her work, so that he/she can control certain events and life situations. Work-life balance can be achieved more easily and harmoniously (*Vámosi, 2020*). It is also a fact that only healthy people can do their jobs well, so employers need to care about the health of both their female and male employees (*Lehmann, 2016*). More and more companies are implementing these measures to promote healthy lifestyles (*Vámosi, 2020*).

### **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market**

In the pre-coronial period, globalisation, digitalisation and technological development, labour market diversity and the impact of growing economic, social and environmental challenges on labour markets and employment were identified as the most pressing issues facing the world of work in developed countries (*Zádori et al, 2020*). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major shock to the European and global economy (*Tóth et al., 2023*), as the new pandemic attacks two of the main pillars of the economy, one of which is the use of human labour. The number of registered patients worldwide reached 8 million. There was a growing demand among experts to understand the impact of the pandemic on the labour market (*Bagó, 2020*).

In the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, most employers put in place key measures early on: office rotation, travel bans, no client meetings. In practice, online communication has become the norm. In other cases, workers have been kept at home by reallocating working days, rest days and days off. In some organisations, holiday pay was imposed, in public institutions two-thirds to half of annual leave was compulsory, and in others, an agreement was reached with employees that they would simply not have to work, but that their pay would be lower.

If the circumstances were right, workers were ordered to work from home. Within a very short period of time, thousands of workers were able to work from home (or

home-working) as part of their daily routine. Most of them were programmers, IT specialists, marketing and journalism workers, teachers and trainers, translators, analysts, project managers, designers, e-commerce specialists, managers and administrative staff. Previously, this home office was the privilege of senior managers only. Today, this circle has widened considerably (Géra, 2020).

The pandemic has significantly changed the daily lives of employers and workers. Almost one in five workers were affected by teleworking/home office in May 2020 (KSH, 2020). As the intensity of the pandemic has increased or decreased, so has the proportion of people working from home. For example, in the months April-May 2020, 40-50% of teleworkers declared that they regularly worked from home, and in the following months the proportion of regular teleworkers fell to around 30% (Ignits, 2021).

In workplaces where the personal presence of the worker is essential (e.g., cashiers, public transport drivers, customer service staff), workers are provided with protection of the workplace, individual masks and/or face shields and protective gloves and may even be required to work shorter hours. In some cases, protective walls, goggles, and protective sheeting are installed to protect workers (Géra, 2020).

It can be predicted that with the end of the pandemic, the home office will also gain political and legislative support, as it can be said without further ado that it is the most environmentally friendly form of work, as it reduces the ecological footprint of both the employer and the employee (Herdon & Poór, 2020).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, home office working has increased significantly in our country. The aim of our research was to investigate which generation of home office workers and which gender is more satisfied with their work-life balance in Hungary. After reviewing the literature and internet sources, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1:** We assume that members of the older generation are more satisfied with their work-life balance than members of the younger generation.

**H2:** We assume that women are more satisfied with their work-life balance than men.

To test hypotheses **H1** and **H2**, quantitative research was conducted using an online questionnaire with 24 questions, based on the topics covered in the work-life balance and home office literature. Sampling took place between 20 September and 1 October 2022 via the Google Forms interface and spread by means of social media (Facebook). Our research was directed at such Hungarian employees who were working in home office. The non-probability sampling type is characterised by the fact that respondents can complete the questionnaire voluntarily. The results of the survey carried out in this way cannot be extrapolated to any larger population and are therefore not representative.

After the deadline, the opportunity to respond was closed. A database was created from the responses received and the data was summarised in tables. IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and Microsoft Office 365 were used to analyse the data. A total of 162

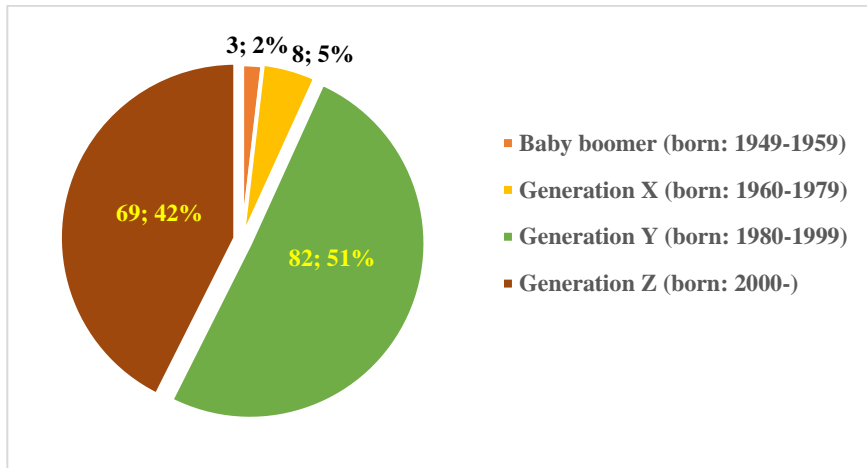
responses to the online questionnaire were received by the deadline, giving a quantitative sample of n=162, which is far from being representative, so no internationally relevant findings can be concluded here.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first stage of the questionnaire was to collect demographic data. The gender ratio of respondents was 64:36% in favour of women. 103 women and 59 men responded the questionnaire.

Our research also looked at differences between different generations. The majority of respondents (82–51%) were born between 1980 and 1999 (i.e., Generation Y). This is followed by 42% of respondents (69) from Generation X. Eight were born in 2000 or later (5%) and only 3 respondents - 2% of the total sample - were from the Baby Boomer age group (born between 1949 and 1959), which is again a very tiny pattern for making general conclusions. The distribution of generations is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

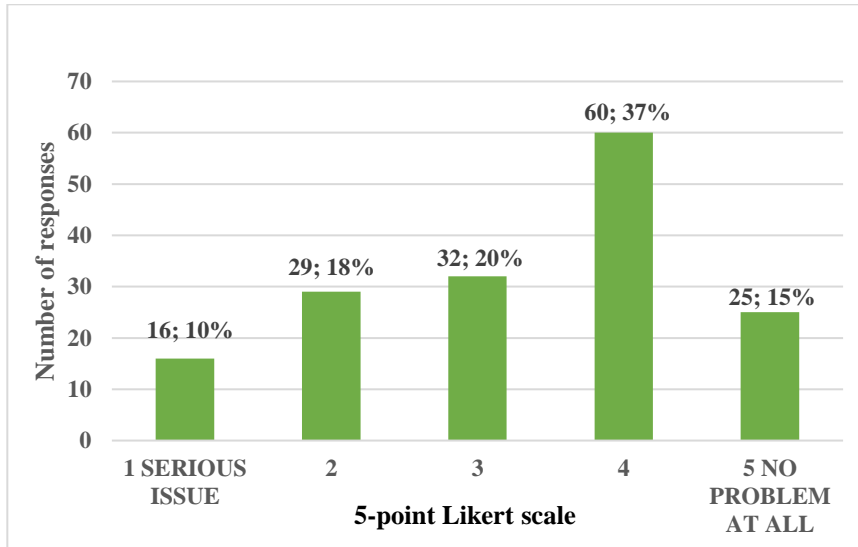
**Figure 1: Generational distribution of respondents to the questionnaire (n=162)**



We also asked about the respondents' place of residence, education, financial situation and the hours they work at home (home office) per week. We asked whether the employer was a family- friendly workplace, whether it was supportive of the WLB and how many children the employee shared a household with. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess self-reported satisfaction with the employee's own work-life balance.

*Figure 2* shows that 25 (15%) have no problem at all and another 60 (37%) have no problem at all in achieving a good work-life balance, 16 (10%) have serious difficulties and another 25 (15%) have difficulties in achieving a WLB in their daily life.

Figure 2: Self-reflection on work-life balance (n=162)



We also performed a cross-tabulation analysis using SPSS (Figure 3). We investigated whether there was a correlation in the work-life balance between generations. Due to the sample size (n=162), we pooled generations that were close to each other and created 2 new groups. A „senior” age group was created by merging the Baby boomer and X generations, and a „junior” age group was created by merging Generations Y and Z. The Pearson Chi-square test that was run confirmed the significant correlation, as the value obtained is 0.049, which is higher than the marginal estimate of 0.05.

Figure 3: Differences between senior and junior age groups in the context of work-life balance (n=162)

2generation \* How satisfied are you with your work-life balance? Crosstabulation

		How satisfied are you with your work-life balance?					Total	
		Not satisfied at all	Not satisfied	Partially satisfied	Satisfied	Completely satisfied		
2generation	Senior	Count	2	11	23	36	18	90
		% within XY generation	2.2%	12.2%	25.6%	40.0%	20.0%	100%
	Junior	Count	8	12	22	17	13	72
		% within XY generation	11.1%	16.7%	30.6%	23.6%	18.1%	100%
Total		Count	10	23	45	53	31	162
		% within XY generation	6.2%	14.2%	27.8%	32.7%	19.1%	100%

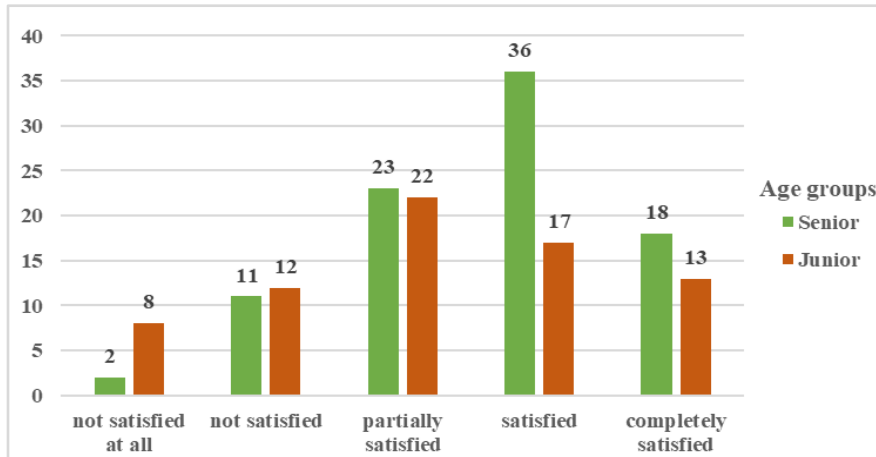
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.400 <sup>a</sup>	4	0.049
Likelihood Ratio	9.692	4	0.046
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.592	1	0.018
N of Valid Cases	162		

a. 1 cells (10.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.44.

The bar chart in *Figure 4* shows that the senior age group has a higher number of members who are partially satisfied (23-22), satisfied (36-17) and fully satisfied (18-13) than the junior age group. And there are fewer people (2-8) in the senior age group who are not satisfied (11-12) and not at all satisfied than those in the junior age group.

**Figure 4 Comparison of work-life balance (n=162)**



In the questionnaire, we tested whether there was a correlation between gender and work-life balance on a 5-point Likert scale. We also performed a cross tabulation analysis using SPSS software. However, the Pearson Chi test performed showed no statistically verifiable correlation between gender and WLB based on the sample. Therefore, due to the small sample size, it is not possible to clearly identify and state whether women or men are more satisfied with their work-life balance.

Workers who have no children or only one child living in the same household rate their work- life balance higher than those who have more than two children.

People with a higher level of education work much more in a home office than people with a lower level of education.

The higher someone's income, the more difficult it is to achieve an optimal WLB.

Representativeness was not an aim of the research, as neither the sample size nor the sampling allows it. The sample size is low (n=162), the number of individuals representing the generations is also low. In the online survey, territoriality was not explored in depth. When processing the data, we found that there were too many response options for the questions asked, which made it difficult to identify statistical relationships during processing. Nevertheless, we found some correlations between the results obtained, which could be the basis for further research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an emergency situation that has acted as a powerful catalyst in the labour market. In Hungary, the previously unprecedented home office has exploded regardless of gender and age.

Our research has looked at the impact of the pandemic on different generations, how it has changed their previous lifestyles and their work-life balance. To this end, we formulated two hypotheses. We performed a cross-tabulation analysis and then ran a Pearson Chi-square test to confirm a significant correlation.

Hypothesis H1 was confirmed. Our quantitative research investigated whether women or men are more satisfied with their work-life balance.

We rejected Hypothesis H2 because we could not provide statistical evidence that women are more satisfied than men.

Finally, we would like to make a few recommendations to improve the work-life balance of employees while agreeing with *Shirmohammadi et al.* (2022).

Let us first create balance within ourselves. Then focus on key tasks. Prioritise what is really important, reduce wasted time such as commuting to work (home office), shopping online, reducing time spent on social media, etc. Set boundaries: set precise working hours and avoid dealing with work tasks and problems in your free time. Do not read work correspondence at home, switch off the company phone and leave work problems at work. Then devote more time to rest and recreation. Rest and relaxation are the cornerstones of good health. Regular exercise, hiking, nature walks, me-time. Sport also helps us to refresh mentally. Remember that physical and mental health depends on getting enough and quality sleep.

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