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## FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO FACE-TO-DISPLAY MANAGEMENT: AN ONLINE SURVEY

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### Abstract

Covid-19 forced managers out of cubicles into their homes – to a face-to-display environment. To provide an insight into managers' needs during the pandemic, the authors completed a survey addressing 900 Austrian, Czech and Slovak managers. A range of useful findings was uncovered, especially on how the managers approached the transition to e-working as well as their future perspectives after the epidemic. The results show favourable scores for e-management, modern technology and business communication, while maintaining informal communication seems to be problematic. Our data suggest that e-managers have come forward with novel and innovative types of collaboration. The data also reveal calls for better support. The greatest fear of managers, apart from concerns about families, friends, colleagues and acquaintances, is that their salaries may be cut. In general, they feel they can work at home as effectively as in the office. Women cope better with e-working than their male colleagues; parents and the young generation experience challenges working from home.

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### Key Words

E-working; e-management; manager perceptions; lockdown; Covid-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, an outbreak of illness caused by a novel coronavirus called Sars-Cov-2 was identified and labelled Covid-19 (WHO, 2020a). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus to be a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). On that date, the biggest global transition to working from home began. For many, working from home is the new normal and poses all sorts of new challenges (Roulet, 2020). There have been speculations about whether this will become the new post-pandemic standard (EY, 2020; Field, 2020; Hilton, 2020). Most companies have adopted remote offices and homeworking solutions as an emergency measure (Deloitte, 2020a).

Overnight, everyone in managerial positions lost many of the critical aspects of doing their jobs, particularly the non-verbal aspects of communication and the interaction in space and in person, which are essential for managers to remain attuned to the various personal needs of their colleagues at all times. It is worth mentioning that a changed culture requires the introduction of not only an appropriate communication and collaboration infrastructure, but also more subtle details, such as a room for informal social communication (Dávideková and Hvorecký, 2017). Also, the boundaries between work and personal life erode when work is done from home. All workers experience this situation in a different way, depending on their family situation, their dependants and the various dimensions of their personalities (Roulet, 2020). The ongoing global pandemic has presented a challenge in the change from face-to-face to face-to-display management (e-management). The authors of this paper understand e-management as the situation where managers put their trust in others to lead and to ensure business sustainability.

As a result of government-issued stay-at-home instructions, almost four in 10 employees in Europe started e-working (Ahrendt et al., 2020). A recent JCR study estimates around 25% of employment in teleworkable sectors in the EU as whole (Fana et al. 2020). On the contrary, e-working was increasing slowly in the nine years preceding the Covid-19 outbreak (Eurostat, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis presents not only negative effects, e.g. declining economic growth and unemployment (Saunders, 2020; The World Bank, 2020) but opportunities - especially in the emergence of a greener economy. It provides a boost for online communication and its supporting technologies (Cox and Piccolo, 2020; Henriques, 2020; Politico Magazine, 2020).

It is challenging to conduct a manager perception survey during a pandemic. At the same time, the survey carried out by the authors demonstrates that listening to managers' voices in similar unusual conditions has its value. From a managerial perspective, these perception surveys help to ensure open communication, building trust and connection with employees. The results reflect their handling of the crisis and their reactions. We were interested in their experience, attitudes and feelings in dealing with the realities of the new, virtual world. Furthermore, we inquired into the likely effects of the crisis on the world of work in the future.

In a time of crisis, people often call for strong managers. What does the Covid-19 shock mean for management in the change from face-to-face to face-to display work? Does it mean a call for managers who have trust, who protect their employees' interests, rather than their own or their friends' agendas? Employees generally would like to have managers who focus on practical solutions - beyond ideologies and political intrigues.

It is assumed that managers know their employees best. They probably know what works for them and what does not. They should know how their messages will be received and how to adjust their content and context appropriately. They should even be familiar with the unique challenges each employee is facing at work and at home. Based on the current reported findings, there are three important reasons for the fall in productivity related to e-working: 1) Providing childcare/home schooling, pet sitting and/or care for others while working (28.41%); 2) Work-from-home routine (26.13%); and 3) Having less work to do (21.59%) (Beno and Hvorecky, 2021). If this is so, they have a unique level of trust and understanding and a connection with employees that no one else at their organisational level and position probably has. Managers need to navigate their employees through these uncertain times with empathy. For this reason, employers need to arm their managers with the tools and communications to support the activities they will be experiencing in specific situations.

The focus of our survey was on mapping their impressions from the lockdown to the gradual relaxation of the contact restrictions. Nevertheless, managers are aware that this crisis will also have long-term effects. That is why we also asked what impact the crisis will have on the world of work in the future: Will the acceptance of e-working increase?

The following section provides an account of the theoretical background of the e-management concept. The third section briefly outlines the methodology used in this research. The fourth section gives an overview of the results. The next section presents our discussion. Then we present our conclusions, followed by a note on the implications of the study.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Every sudden event generates challenges and opportunities. The pandemic did not stop the transition from the industrial to the information society – it is giving it a new impetus. It only limited interpersonal contact, e.g. between managers/leaders and those whom they lead. It raises the question: Can people achieve the same outcomes without their face-to-face meetings?

Before answering this, some terms must be explained. Management includes leadership (leading people), control, planning and organising. In this sense, e-management represents a series of objectives and person- and goal-oriented tasks in a virtual workplace. The prefix “e-” expresses decentralised work processes not bound to any particular location. E-work

means the utilisation of ICT rather than commuting to work (Beňo and Ferenčíková, 2019). Traditionally this has been understood as working remotely, that is away from the office, usually from home, whether full-time or for part of the working week (WDC, 2017). The employees work at home full-time/part-time, on a hybrid basis or at a different place, but their managers are located at the company's premises. The epidemic has also changed the latter assumption.

There are several definitions of e-management (Alkhsabah, 2017). This author emphasises that e-management includes all components of management, including planning, implementation, follow-up and stimulation. At the same time, it takes the company's internal and external organisational processes to the next level: using software tools to centralise the data, to interconnect systems and customers and to use the feedback from those tools to take appropriate action (Maiorescu, 2008). The digital and paperless environment (Connolly and Kleiner, 1993; Okoro et al., 2013; Orantes-Jiménez et al., 2015) is one of the most important elements in e-working and in e-management.

Below, the authors of this paper understand e-management as managers putting their trust in others to lead and ensure business sustainability. Their role is to create a suitable work environment so that employees can stay productive, given adequate technology and remote access, and to expand the existing trust in the workplace to a virtual workplace, and to establish cooperation and communications strategies. The authors interpret this as a transition from managing by presence to virtual management. In a broader meaning, e-management refers to any situation where the supervisor and employees collaborate, but do not meet on a daily basis. In certain cases, such meetings may take place as rarely as on one or two occasions during the entire year (TTK.FI, 2020). Therefore, a well-defined virtual culture is just as important as the traditional team culture in cubicles. A virtual team climate creation and team coordination are the team leader's challenge (Krawczyk-Brylka, 2017). Bell and Kozlowski (2002) distinguish conventional and virtual teams. In their interpretation, virtual teams are not in physical contact but have the same tasks, goals or missions as conventional teams. The authors further add that virtual teams are more complex in comparison with face-to-face teams because they cross boundaries while using advanced communication technologies. Another key difference between a virtual and a conventional team is that e-working needs a flatter organisational structure. In other words, creating a virtual culture, regardless of the hierarchy, should encourage trust, creativity and collaboration targeted at delivering results. In a virtual environment, the team leader must support the members of the team and provide them with the required technology (Dávideková and Hvorecký, 2017). This position motivated us to study these factors.

## METHODOLOGY

The main research method resulting in this paper was quantitative research. The data were collected by questioning a target group of 900 out of 1680 addressed managers of multinational companies. The sample included managers from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria (all are member countries of the EU). All respondents were opinion leaders who manage and have a good level of knowledge of development in these countries. Hofstede's country-level characteristics, as well as their historical, political and social background significantly affected the responses (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Additionally, the field of the authors' research interest played a role in the selection of the target country sample.

There were 300 respondents from each country. Three out of 10 managers belonged to the top management. Men dominated at the top level, and women at the middle and low management level. Among the respondents, 18% were female and 82% male. In the age categories, Generation X dominated with 71% of respondents, followed by 16% baby boomers and 14% of Generation Y.

Our age groupings resulted from the generally accepted differences among the groups. According to Salahuddin (2010), baby boomers tend to be more positive about authority, hierarchy and tradition and are also optimistic, driven and team-oriented. They prefer a collegial and consensual style. They make efforts to turn the hierarchy upside-down (Zemke et al., 2000). Since they are less tech-savvy than other generations, the ability to keep up with technological developments sometimes hinders their job performance (Johnson, 2015). Gen Xers tend to be more individually motivated and self-reliant. Salahuddin (2010) describes their core values as diversity, global thinking, balance, technological, fun, informal, self-reliant and pragmatic. Those in this group are less bound by tradition and place more weight on independent thought (Williams and Page, 2011). They tend to want "action rather than talk and promises" (Hahn, 2011, p. 121). The essential work/life balance is attained thanks to technology (Crampton and Hodge, 2007). Generation X disrespects authority, as did past generations, but tends to be fair, competent and straightforward. There is a fondness for challenge, and they thrive on change (Zemke et al., 2000). Generation Xers do not value achievement as highly as other generations do. Generation Y has a "soccer mom" mentality, namely, it's all about the children. This shaped their core values of optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, diversity and being street-smart (Salahuddin, 2010). Many of them do not live to work but, rather, focus on their life outside the work situation. Millennials do not make good team players and their attention is rather easily distracted, however they are diligent and perform as well as earlier generational groups (Johnson, 2015). Millennials are also concerned about values, and they consequently like the assurance that their efforts are worthwhile and appreciated (Al-Asfour and Lettau, 2014). They prefer a polite relationship with authority and like leaders who pull people together. They believe in collective action and have the will to get things changed (Zemke et al., 2000). In our investigations, we looked for the following responses:

- Under what conditions is e-working a win-win-win solution (i.e. the optimum outcome for employer, employee and society)?
- Which factors should dominate in managerial solutions concerning e-working in the future?

The average age of respondents was 46 years. Female managers were more frequently single than their male counterparts: 71.4% were married, compared with 91.3% of men. Their average for number of children is also lower (0.74 versus 1.59). Data collection took place from 15 to 30 April 2020. All participating managers were informed of the purpose of the study. Their participation was voluntary, and they were assured that their responses would remain confidential.

The questions were posed using an online questionnaire, which was based on three levels (before and during Covid-19 and after the lockdown) to evaluate the impact of the coronavirus from the point of view of managers. The scale to measure the impact on managers in the different periods consisted of 10 items (namely, workplace flexibility, short-time versus lay-offs, salary decreases, preparedness for Covid-19, responding to the lockdown, measures taken, feelings, challenges of managing remotely, personal effect of the lockdown and impact of the lockdown on business in the next 12 months). Eight items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The remaining points made provision for expressing the following: 1) possible feelings, 2) affirmative or negative; and 3) uncertainty. A cross-tabulation analysis was used to examine relationships within the data obtained.

The respondents were accessed via online channels. Part of the questionnaire addressed potential cultural differences among the employees of the participating countries (in Hofstede's sense), while the other part investigated changes in their lives as a result of their (forced) home-office mode of work, and its advantages and drawbacks. Our results were then compared with the outcomes of other researchers in order to obtain a more global view.

The authors of this paper have assumed that there could be national characteristics in these Hofstede dimensions where they demonstrate the most significant differences, namely power distance, masculinity and indulgence – see Table 1.

**Table 1:** Hofstede dimensions

	<b>Power Distance</b>	<b>Masculinity</b>	<b>Indulgence</b>
Austria	11	79	63
Czech Republic	57	57	29
Slovakia	100	100	28

Source: Hofstede Insights, 2021.

The authors were interested in particular in the factors related to the participants' ability to adapt to a home-office and their readiness to continue with this arrangement after the end of the lockdown. The sample



was a heterogeneous group of professionals working in several areas, including customer services, accounting, electronic data processing, research and development, marketing and logistics. Responses to the questionnaires were anonymous.

Note that there is a reliability risk with e-mail questionnaires. It is more difficult to guarantee anonymity. The respondents may have concerns that the information they provide could be misused. To assure them that this would not happen, the authors proceeded as follows: First, the anonymity of their responses was emphasised in the questionnaire invitation. This also contained a description of the procedure which was then followed. Trusted software, which did not allow linking identifiers with their responses, was used. Their personal information and responses were stored in separate files. Then, the authors made certain that all IP addresses, e-mail data and other personal data were not archived.

## **RESULTS**

### **Analysis of the impact of cultural differences on COVID-19 responses**

The three countries are adjacent to each other in Central Europe and were formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Austria and the Czech Republic are similar in terms of geography, economics and demographics, while Slovakia and the Czech Republic are similar in terms of economics and history. Culturally, they are similar in some ways. They have medium scores for individualism and almost the same score for uncertainty avoidance. However, on four of Hofstede's six dimensions, there are significant differences. Slovakia scores much higher for power distance, masculinity and long-term orientation, and lower for indulgence. Also Austria scores higher for masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, indulgence and long-term orientation, but, very low for power distance. The Czech Republic scores higher for uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation, but lower for masculinity, power distance and indulgence (Hofstede Insights, 2021).

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (such as Austria and the Czech Republic) tend to act more quickly in a crisis, because they want to remove the uncertainty or anxiety that the crisis creates. Low uncertainty-avoidance cultures, such as Slovakia, tend to be more tolerant of the anxiety that uncertainty brings and are therefore slower to act in a crisis. But, compared with Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia acted more quickly than expected during Covid-19. Several countries of Eastern Europe were quick to impose lockdown restrictions, a move that allowed them to avoid the worst effects of the initial bout of the Covid pandemic. However, their success did not continue, and they suffered seriously under the second round of infections, a situation that is just the opposite of what happened in the rest of Europe (Stickings, 2020).

The authors are of the opinion that national culture and leadership explain how countries have dealt with Covid-19 differently. Fincher (2020) pointed out that women leaders have handled the crisis more effectively, e.g. in Taiwan, Germany, New Zealand and Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland). Nevertheless, the role of women is still underestimated in most countries. Fortunately, the issue of gender inequality is being solved by various institutions thanks to international projects. One of these is the Horizon 2020 project “Linking Research and Innovation for Gender Equality” (CALIPER). The duration of the project is 4 years, from 2020 to 2023 – see (Caliper-project.eu, 2020a) and (Caliper-project.eu, 2020b). The project team is composed of 12 partners: seven project research-performing organisations (RPOs), two research-funding organisations (RFOs), two small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and one professional association. The main aim of the project is to design and implement gender equality plans (GEPs) to influence structural changes that will bring gender balance and a greater engagement of female researchers to the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) research and innovation. The object of the RPOs and RFOs is to promote gender equality, which they aim to do by means of appropriate GEPs (Caliper-project.eu, 2020a). The implementation of GEPs will help to improve the gender balance in decision-making bodies, remove barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers and integrate the gender dimension in research and innovation content, improving the quality and societal relevance of produced knowledge, technologies and innovations (Caliper-project.eu, 2020b).

In all societies, there are social contracts that governs people's actions, which occur in two basic patterns, that is on the level of the individual or on the level of the group (for example in the US or in China respectively) or on some intermediate level (such as in Canada and France) (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020). Every country, nationality, race or ethnic group carries a self-coded formula of values that differs from every other country, regardless of geographical distance. Each country has its own customs, traditions, values and standards, and these differ significantly from one another. This is why multicultural differences arise (Cagáňová et al., 2019). One of the key lessons for a global response to a pandemic is that the cultural logic of different societies shapes and influences their prevention strategies. In collective societies, people accept the need for harsh measures like general tests for Covid infection and checking of temperatures amid universal lockdowns (CAI, 2020). Farrington (2020) indicates that individualistic societies are geared towards unsustainable consumerism, intellectualise away responsibility and are immune to shame, contributing to a tendency to disregard social-distancing measures. Pansini (2020) suggests that the Chinese collectivist model is better at coping with the virus than the Western model. He observes that while Westerners lay great emphasis on the free choice of the individual, people in the East set store by their role as parts of the greater society.

The milder impact of Covid-19 in Japan has attracted attention. Factors put forward to explain this phenomenon have ranged, for example, from



high levels of hygiene and health in the country and the higher regard for society than for the individual to the high level of internet use (Acar, 2020). The next dimension - unilateralism versus multilateralism - concerns the extent to which politicians seek to collaborate. Cultural determinants play an important role in controlling infection behaviour (Borg, 2014; Gaygısız et al., 2017). Unilateralism held sway when the world became fully aware of the seriousness of the problem, and countries looked to their own interests first. Some countries halted the exporting of personal protective equipment (PPE), others closed their borders. The US government reportedly even tried clinching a deal with a German enterprise for a consignment of vaccine (Sie Dian Ho, 2020).

People's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic depend on their cultural background (Van den Engel, 2020). Recent studies provide evidence that public health strategies and interventions should be immediately enforced to reduce social gatherings by raising the “*uncertainty avoidance*” factor (Huynh, 2020). Based on van den Engel (2020), we observe that Austria and the Czech Republic cope with the Covid-19 danger by avoidance. But we disagree that a medium score on the uncertainty avoidance index corresponds to a light lockdown in the case of Slovakia.

## Survey Results

Considering the previous analysis of cultural factors, the authors of this paper stress that during lockdown, the observed countries adapted the same cultural uniformity in workplace responses. Based on our data, collectivism (flatter hierarchy) produces better responses.

What stands out during lockdowns are results showing that e-working has increased as a result of the coronavirus crisis: The *Covid-19 crisis has revolutionised e-working*. Before the Covid-19 restrictions, managers and their teams preferred hybrid working for 1-2 days a week (more widespread in Austria than in the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Due to the exit restrictions, work largely shifted to the home office. After the lockdown, only a few managers returned to the office (e-working 3-4 days a week). Executives expect that in future they will work from home about twice as often as before the crisis (hybrid working 2-3 days) or will move to a 9-to-4 model instead of 9-to-5. According to data from a YouGov (2017) survey, two-thirds of British workers would prefer an earlier start and an earlier finish, that is the so-called 8-to-4 working model, rather than the traditional 9-to-5 model. It seems as if the 9-to-5 workday no longer meets the needs of the modern worker because times have changed. Generally, employees put in a considerable amount of work outside those hours, which can cause employee burnout. A Gallup study revealed that two-thirds of full-time workers experience burnout on the job (Wigert and Agrawal, 2018). For the employer, the cost of burnout is absenteeism and increased staff turnover. For the employee, it is frustration and health problems (Castrillon, 2020).

Covid-19 can be seen as a turbo-charging accelerant at the workplace. Both managers and employees will work in a more “hybrid” fashion, changing place, state and mode more often. A hybrid work model, in which

work is done at the home, at the office and elsewhere, will be the chosen model for employees who do not need to be physically present at their place of work.

Unsurprisingly 92% (n=828) of managers expect further increases in the acceptance of e-working. According to Bloom (cited by Wong, 2020), people live not only in an information and gig economy, but also in a new “working-from-home economy”. “Short-time working” is when employees are provided with less work and less pay for a short period (Tillvaxtverket, 2021). “Lay-offs” are when employees are not provided with any work or pay for a short period, but are kept on as employees (GOV.UK, 2021). According to the authors of that paper, managers were affected in different ways depending on their activities and sector. On average, about 15% of managers would agree with short-time working, but almost 85% are against lay-offs. Generally, once staff have been laid-off, they may not be available to return to work immediately when needed. It may incur costs to bring back staff after a temporary lay-off. The majority of managers (82%) believe that their pay should not be cut. Clearly, in these precarious and uncertain times, managers must think dynamically to formulate urgent continuity plans. These may include cuts to senior executives’ pay and/or wide scale redundancies, both of which require proactive analysis of the legal and commercial implications by managing directors in order to minimise otherwise catastrophic risks to their organisations.

When organisations are facing economic difficulties, they seldom propose pay cuts. The usual decision is to reduce staff because when salaries are reduced, the best workers inevitably resign and join the staff of another company in the field, thereby compounding the loss for the company. In contrast, if a company decides to reduce staff, the employer has control over who leaves—and can then capitalise on the advantage of removing less productive workers (Sandvik et al., 2018).

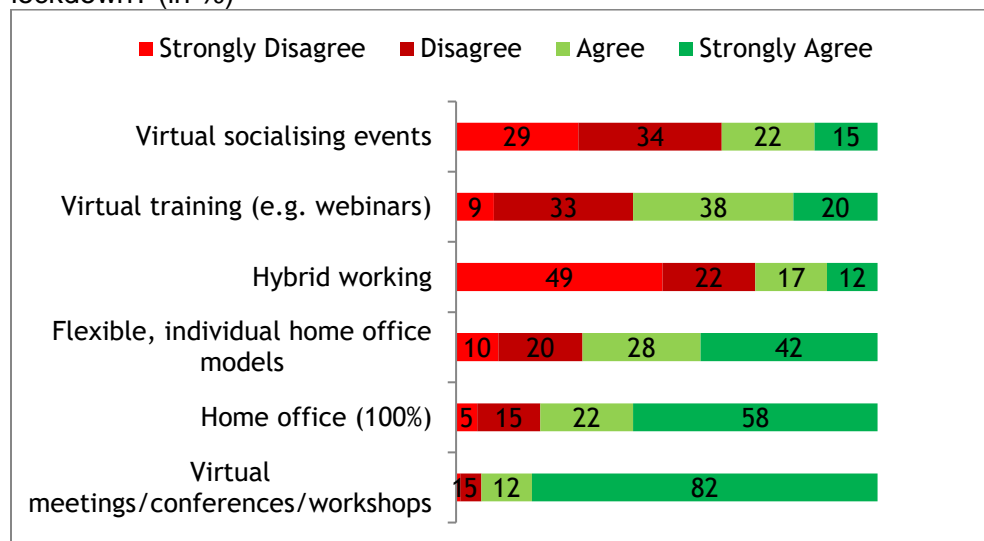
Some 25% said their organisation was “very” prepared for Covid-19, while 45% said they were “somewhat” prepared. Approximately half of them (48%), however, said that the possibility of an infectious disease occurring was not covered by their crisis planning. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents did not have a crisis communications plan at all. Almost two-thirds of managers said their organisation did not have a return-to-work strategy. According to recent survey data, more than 73% of companies have not yet developed a return-to-work strategy (Blankrome, 2020). A key element is the degree of flexibility with which organisations reacted to the coronavirus crisis. For a business to survive the Covid-19 crisis, flexibility in how they operate and work with their people is required. Overall, managers evaluate the reaction of their companies to the challenges of the crisis positively; 88% of managers stated that they and their employees received the best possible support (52% “strongly agree”, 36% “agree”). These figures show that a large number of companies were not fully prepared for the challenges, but were able to react flexibly. In 42% of the companies, the necessary IT infrastructure was fully available; with a further 30% this was true with minor restrictions. Among the respondents, 35% “strongly agree”

and 28% “agree” that their organisations have the necessary IT infrastructure for increased use of home offices.

It has been found (Mackenzie, 2020) that nine out of 10 managers keep workers up to date about the details of the coronavirus restrictions in the company and constantly weigh up the developing conditions and how they affect everyone involved in the business. This kind of approach has long-lasting rewards. Trust is the cornerstone of working relationships between employees and employers, colleagues and customers. And it is crucial to success. One of the easiest ways to rebuild trust in the organisation is to trust in return. Building trust means building relationships; managers must have confidence in their ability to ensure business success post-pandemic.

A home office can be a great advantage: No time is wasted on commuting, one has the opportunity to work on projects without any interruptions, and there is a change of environment. However, not having access to the physical tools and infrastructure is one obvious challenge. Digital platforms have been implemented to a greater extent than ever before (Holmberg and Petrelius, 2020). With 82% of respondents, virtual meetings, conferences and workshops were the tools most frequently used by managers to communicate with employees in their home office (See Figure 1). To help stop the spread of Covid-19, people were asked to stay at home and limit social interactions to an absolute minimum. Shifting to virtual working methods to keep things going during the lockdown was an absolute necessity. Based on our results, the home became the office for more than 80% of workers with different flexible, individual home office models (70%). Working from home is going to stay. Hybrid working was less popular during the lockdown (49% and 22%).

**Figure 1:** As a manager, what measures did you take during the lockdown? (in %)



Source: Own survey.

With many people now working from home, keeping the team spirit high is essential, for productivity and other reasons. Working from home means more distractions, fewer ways to interact naturally with fellow employees, and more social isolation — all of which can lead to less productivity (Workforce Africa, 2021). Tools to promote team spirit or loyalty to the company, such as virtual events for socialising, were used in only one-third of companies. But when a team has a strong culture and traditions, adapting to a virtual format of the original is one way to keep this aspect. Furthermore, casual conversations and even work-related discussions do not happen as spontaneously as when workers are sitting next to one other at work. Communication when working remotely is hard, but encouraging feedback and discussion minimise the margin for error. Technology is very helpful for improving communication in a remote arrangement, but care must be taken to ensure it is used properly, e.g. making sure the camera is on during a call.

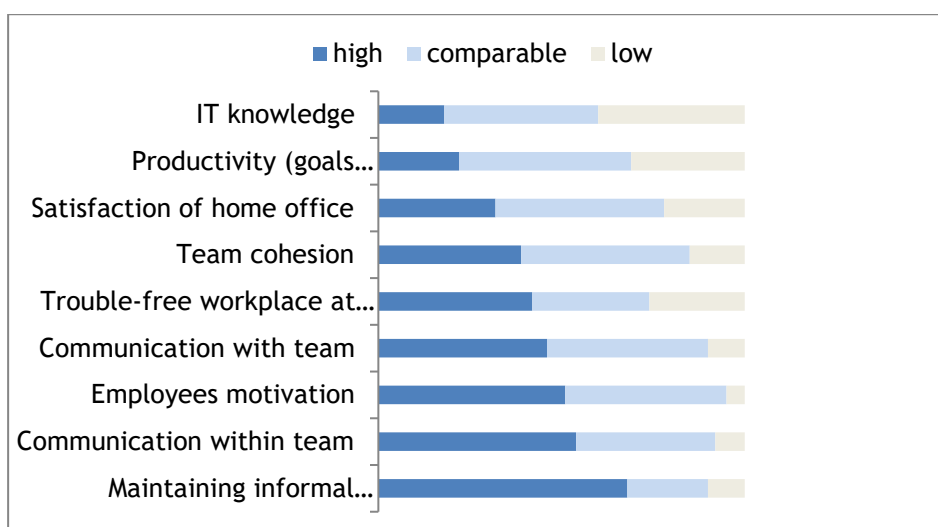
For 55% of managers, concerns about family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues are in the foreground, while concerns about their own health are almost the same (43%). The crisis is also making a large number of managers more resilient; 38% feel they have a greater belief in personal abilities. However, 16% of them have doubts about the future viability of the company. Furthermore, 14% were worried about losing their jobs and 5% had concerns about social insecurity.

The results also show the tone of less worrying by e-managers about losing their jobs (top-level managers (1.56% - 14), middle-level (3.89% - 35) and lower-level (8.56% - 77)).

The current turmoil is not a typical home office situation; many employees have children to care for after school, and employees do not necessarily feel like doing something relaxing, like going for a walk, during the lunch break. Note that not everybody can work remotely. Managers find it particularly difficult to maintain informal communication (68%).

It is unanimous across organisations that the biggest challenges compared with cubicles are the following: (formal) communication within the team for more than half of the managers (54%), motivation of employees (51%), communication between manager and team (46%), availability of a trouble-free workplace at home (42%) and the cohesion of the team (39%). Executives' satisfaction with the home office, productivity, target achievement and flexibility in processes and handling IT (digital maturity) are less problematic (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** To what extent do you perceive the following aspects as a challenge in managing remotely? (in %)



Source: Own survey.

Based on our results, the key factor to e-working success is clearly (online) communication (formal and informal). In pre-pandemic times, many people had the opportunity to communicate with colleagues and teams in person daily, but during and after the pandemic many people rely on online communication technology. A report by GWI (2020) shows that many people expect to continue using the new digital media even when this crisis is a thing of the past, but of course no one can foretell the future, and how behaviour patterns evolve remains to be seen.

Most managers are comfortable with working from home. So far, 89% of managers are good at motivating themselves. In particular, managers lack social contact with friends and colleagues (83%); 80% of them have a suitable workplace at home; 72% are able to separate their private and professional lives and are satisfied and balanced. As we have gained more experience of working from home, the authors have become more proficient at evaluating the pros and cons. Almost all respondents across the various managers want to continue doing some work from home in the post-Covid-19 period. More than half of them (52%) state that they work more efficiently at home compared with working in cubicles. However, there are clear differences between men and women: 41% (303) of men declare they have become more productive while working from home; 65% (105) of women say the same. Women manage the e-working (home office) set-up better. They are generally more flexible with the work situation in the home office and are often more responsive to events in their everyday lives. Managers who have children and who care for adult family members usually have more difficult working conditions in the home office than childless managers or those who do not have to care for adult family members (which means that they are more efficient).

Based on our results, the younger Generation Y (> 1980) managers find it much more difficult to work in the home office than their older colleagues. Generally, millennials struggle with remote work (Agovino, 2020; Arboleda,

2020; Nicholas and Guzman, 2009). Although tech-savvy younger managers are likely to be more familiar with the digital and technological challenges of the home office, they have some issues compared with their older colleagues. Some of them still live at home with their parents or have young families with small children or share with roommates. For this reason, they do not have a suitable workplace at home. Almost one-fifth of the younger managers can combine the requirements of the home office with the needs of their families. According to the latest results from Eurofound's Living, working and Covid-19 survey, however, young people and women are still the biggest losers. Women not only face greater job losses than men, but those who manage to stay in employment also experience major and disproportionate declines in work-life balance (Ahrendt et al., 2020). But the data in that paper show that women cope better with working in a home office than their male colleagues: 57% (92) (versus 47% of men - 347) have an adequate workplace at home; 54% (88) (compared to 40% of men - 295) can motivate themselves satisfactorily, and 48% (78) (compared to 30% of men - 221) are able to combine the requirements of the home office with the needs of their families, especially children. Female executives evaluate the work of their teams in a home office much more positively than their male colleagues do. Three-quarters of them think that their team reacts flexibly to the challenges. More than half said that their team was just as productive as usual. One-third estimate that their employees were positive and satisfied with their work in the home office. Accepting home office regulations will increase significantly as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Almost nine out of 10 managers estimate that the acceptance of home office regulations will increase significantly in the next 12 months. But more videoconferencing instead of business trips (87%), the greater importance of digitisation projects (75%) and the acceleration of change and innovation processes (65%) are also expected. The negative economic consequences of the crisis will undoubtedly lead to restructuring (62%), job insecurity (54%) and impending losses (51%). After all, more than two-fifths of managers expect that the coronavirus crisis will intensify sustainability measures. Furthermore, 38% of managers expect a downsizing of office space, almost the same percentage as in recent survey data from Ireland (Robert Walters, 2020). Organisational leaders must carefully consider Gen Y and Gen Z viewpoints in the workplace after the pandemic, according to Deloitte's report on its 2020 Global Millennial Survey (Deloitte, 2020b).

Looking further ahead, we see that the e-working concept will have an extensive impact on the future workplace. Workers' habits will change radically, and safety and security will become more important than anything else during the period of the virus. According to managers' perceptions, the e-working model will remain a lasting part of our working lives, even after the pandemic, and cybersecurity will be deemed an essential factor in the long term. Daily reports of cyberattacks received by the FBI's Cyber Division have recently climbed to 4 000 cases (Miller, 2020). Interpol (2020) is also seeing an alarming rate of cyberattacks aimed at major corporations, governments and critical infrastructure. Cybersecurity



companies have reported huge increases in hacking attempts since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis (Knowles, 2020; Microsoft, 2020, Panda, 2020).

## DISCUSSION

Our results call into question the function of organisations. Are they solely committed to the shareholders' interests? Should they, on the other hand, also be interested in matters that lie outside their balance sheets and assume responsibility for the interests of others, of employees, of dealing fairly with suppliers, of society around them and last, but not least, of the climate and the environment? After the financial crisis more than 10 years ago, turbocapitalism with its super-returns for corporations came under severe criticism, and the question was raised whether this economic order serves the people sufficiently. Now the question returns. Why can this gig economy generate high profits and stock market prices but not provide urgently needed medical equipment? Why is industry in many countries so dependent on foreign-supplier products?

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, the young generation desired more meaning and enjoyment from their lives and work than their parents' generation did. But according to a survey, nearly half of US workers believe they have gained weight at their present jobs, an indication of dissatisfaction (Careerbuilder, 2018). How have employers behaved in the uncertain coronavirus time? What has Covid-19 taught employers? Is more intervention by managers needed?

Generally, managers should be prepared for incidents, accidents and emergencies by having a magical "Plan B" in place. But when Covid-19 appeared, it became apparent there was no appropriate plan to fall back on. How could plans be made for something we knew nothing about? It was similar to earlier pandemics and their disastrous impact. We wish to emphasise that it is very important to think about what the work situation will look like once there is no longer any e-working (stay-at-home policies, temporary flexible work options) and the curve of death rates is sufficiently flattened. It is time to plan for when things start returning to normal, whatever normal will be (PWC, 2020). We are of the opinion that employers' response to the post-Covid-19 environment should be linked to good planning in the short term (what should be done now?) and the long term (what should the organisation look like?). Leaders have reacted by recognising the need to manage costs and the workforce, by settling into new ways of working and preparing for the return to the workplace (BDI, 2020). A very important issue remains the return-to-work strategy, including e-working options. Will the lessons learnt during Covid-19 (working and living under the same roof) be remembered after the crisis is over? Are we, post-Covid-19, able to create a strategy that will suit dedicated employees? Yes, we have an opportunity to emerge from this crisis with healthier and happier (more productive) employees.

We should start working on a new Plan B today that will even include the assumption that e-working might (for whatever reason) be impossible. Ask: In these circumstances, what will keep the organisation functioning and how can this be achieved?

## CONCLUSIONS

Managers are responsible for the productivity, progress and well-being of the team. The coronavirus has changed the way we work, and the manager's role has never before been this difficult and so important in order to ensure business goes on as usual. Today, managers are experiencing the same challenges as their employees, for example, both have to balance the needs of the business with the needs of their families and relations. The crisis will cost many people their jobs. That is an unfortunate fact that has to be accepted. Using a base level figure of 188 million unemployed people throughout the world in 2019, the ILO (2020) has made low and high projections of unemployment rates climbing by between 5.3 million and 24.7 million. It is interesting to compare this with the situation during the worldwide financial crisis of 2008-2009 when international unemployment rose by 22 million.

The aim of the authors of this paper was to provide an insight into how best to meet managers' needs during a pandemic. Data from 900 Austrian, Czech and Slovak managers provided a range of useful findings, especially concerning how they approached the transition to working from home and their future perspectives.

Our results show a more favourable score than expected. Our data suggest that e-managers have come forward with novel and innovative types of collaboration. It is also shown that the status of e-working is increasing and will probably continue growing with better support (relevant and necessary IT infrastructure). In view of these data, it is not surprising that 92% (n=828) of managers expect a further increase in the acceptance of e-working. The majority of managers (82%) believe their pay should not be cut. Managers feel they can work at home as effectively as in the office. The important key to success is communication, and here technology plays an important role. It makes managing, coaching and collaborating much easier. The majority of managers (90%) showed enough concern for the well-being of their employees to update them without delay about the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in their company (namely the lockdown restrictions, the required social distancing and the need to start e-working from home wherever possible). They reviewed the current arrangements regularly to address the evolving situation while managing the risks to their employees and customers and the impact on the market. The complex social changes (e.g. the necessity for homeschooling, reduced amusement activities) caused parents and the young generation to experience particular challenges with working from home. Women cope more easily with working in the home office than their male colleagues. The

biggest problem area seems to be how to promote informal communication among staff. Once employees have had the experience of this kind of work, it will have an extensive impact on the future workplace.

Our findings enabled us to give the following responses to our research questions:

- *Under what conditions is e-working a win-win-win solution i.e. the optimum outcome for employer, employee and society?* Firstly, face-to-display work keeps employees safe and reduces the risk of productivity decrease due to the virus. Secondly, it has benefits for employees (a happier and more productive workforce), employers (reduced costs) and the entire society (a healthier environment). Thirdly, it provides an example for other organisations by showing that working from home may have cumulative benefits for both employee and employer. In this way, it creates additional opportunities for the further spread of this kind of work.
- *Which factors should dominate in managerial solutions concerning e-working in the future?* Based on the data obtained, a revolution in managerial practices must come about. It is evident that changes in attitudes to work combined with modern ICT do not affect only employees, but managers too. In particular, maintaining informal communication seems to be problematic; the idea of a 9-to-5 model seems to be obsolete. The new approach to work should involve a substantial shift in control from managers to staff. Today, the managers themselves rely on results-driven measurement systems. The goal should be an autonomous working scheme with employees having more flexibility. According to our data, successful leaders lead by example, working in a virtual environment themselves. Outcomes are determined by productive results, not simply by being physically present.

Managing remotely has created many challenges. Recent generations have not experienced a pandemic. What we know about this kind of situation comes from research in the past into illnesses such as SARS, H1N1 and various lesser flu epidemics. We also learned something about returning to work after social upheavals in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. History has shown that society, organisations and managers need to anticipate workforce problems when people return to work. Covid-19 has not only economic but also psychological implications. Although managers are key to the recovery process, their subordinates have to play their role too. Intensive information flows, scenario planning and risk improvement are the principal requirements during uncertain times. Managers are in a unique position to provide calm leadership and recognise e-working challenges before complications arise.

Further research should be carried out with data from future lockdowns. This is needed in order to understand how additional data can throw further light on e-management. This research should involve a more thorough investigation of e-management because the future of management belongs to those who can manage remotely. This can be done both through

qualitatively focusing on case studies and through quantitative effect studies.

This research has highlighted some limitations. Firstly, data collection took place by means of e-mail questionnaires because of distance, financial aspects and Covid-19. There is no guarantee that the researchers obtained all the possible information from the participants that could be used in the analysis of the data and results. Also, the quality of the data depends upon the quality of the questions asked. Secondly, the sample does not reflect the population by sectors. Lastly, the researchers had no way of ascertaining whether the respondents replied honestly or not. It should also be stated that the results from this study do not necessarily reflect how the managers' way of going to work will change after the pandemic is over.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

A natural inclination when managing cubicles is to manage people (that is, as individuals). In a remote setting, management efforts focus first on the processes involved. In a tele-environment, when every member works outside the business premises, the manager has to manage the team collaboratively. In a hybrid tele-environment, the manager must manage the team both physically and collaboratively. This study shows that e-managers may perform as well as or better than they did before; but they will have the same concerns, such as dealing with employees. These results are useful as the Covid-19 pandemic may result in more widespread use of e-working in the post-Covid period. It is becoming increasingly clear that such willingness to offer e-working is more than just a good idea - it is a necessity. Even if managers had only a few employees doing e-work, they will also face supervision and communication challenges. And these issues are of course hugely magnified for organisations with no experience of people working remotely (Sharkey, 2021). Trust and non-micromanaging form the cornerstone of the remote worker-manager relationship. Managers and younger managers of the sandwich generation are likely to find it more difficult to manage remotely. This finding suggests that social learning processes in which managers learn how to supervise and deal with their staff should be incorporated in their training.

Our research insights can contribute to better organisational e-management of the challenges that managers face when working from home, and consequently they can help to create the preconditions for higher efficiency of managers and employees, higher levels of work motivation and greater efficiency of e-working.

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