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Gaining trust and remaining mentally sane while working from home: The importance of employee wellbeing[1]

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit us hard. It is not only difficult in terms of psychological and medical issues, but it has turned into an economic crisis as well. One of the most significant 'side effects' of the first wave was widespread remote work, which was not regular – many people had to work from home while also taking care of their loved ones (be they children or other family members, or friends). Our research – part of an EU-funded project on sustainable mobility – was carried out in the city of Szeged (Hungary) among seven companies/employers. As the project was strongly affected by the crisis, the research focused on the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on remote work. How did remote work affect employees' mental, physical, and social wellbeing? How did employers and employees deal with the new situation? What can we learn from this crisis regarding the relationship between remote work and mental health? To find answers to our questions, we used mixed methods, i.e., combined qualitative with quantitative methodology. This case study analyses the related difficulties and challenges from the employee point of view and sheds light on some of the good practices and measures which can be applied by other companies.

Keywords: mental wellbeing, remote work, organizational sociology, COVID-19, Hungary

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global economic and social crisis: it is not only that over one-and-a-half million people have died of the virus, and more than 72 million have been infected thus far,[2] but millions have lost their jobs and their loved ones. Many countries introduced partial or complete lockdowns during the first wave – and the crisis is not yet over. Several pieces of research (Brooks et al., 2020; Trougakos et al, 2020) have shown that the social and psychological impacts are long lasting. For example, one of the former – carried out by the ELMA Institute in six European countries with six thousand respondents – found that 58 per cent of respondents suffered from psychological symptoms which lasted longer than 15 days,

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2   This article was submitted in December 2020.

such as insomnia or other sleeping disorders, weakness, sadness, anxiety, a lack of interest, etc. (hvg.hu, 2020).

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 reached Hungary as well, leading to a declaration of a state of emergency by the Hungarian government on 11 March. This was followed by the closure of schools: teaching continued in the digital world, and soon after kindergartens and nurseries were shut down. Regarding workplaces, the subsequent measures differed by company: while some switched completely to remote work[3] (even before the state of emergency was declared), there were many places where this was not a possibility due to administrative or data protection issues, or simply because the given platforms remained open to the public (such as shops, public transport, hospitals, etc.).

This paper focuses on the city of Szeged, where research[4] was conducted within a project called Smart Alliance for Sustainable Mobility (SASMob[5]). This EU-funded project has currently seven partners: mostly large companies and municipal and state institutions; and several potential partners (see more below). The goal of the project – among others – is to increase sustainable workplace mobility with the active cooperation of employers. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the focus has somewhat changed: while some outputs of the project had to be postponed because most employees were not going to work at all for several months, there was an opportunity to implement a small piece of research among partners' employees about this period. From the perspective of the project, the importance of the lockdown period is that it will have a long-lasting impact on both working and mobility habits. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the outcomes and learn from good practices and challenges. The main questions – which are analysed in this paper – were:

1. How did actual and potential partners react to remote work, and how was the latter implemented?

2. How did the lockdown period affect employees' physical, mental, and social wellbeing?

3. What kind of good practices can be identified from this period?

As the research was carried out during the summer of 2020, the results refer only to the first wave of the pandemic. The goal of this paper is to contribute valuable results to the relevant literature.

2. Theoretical background

Maintaining the good health and mental wellbeing of employees is also in the interest of employers: fulfilling basic psychological needs is not only good for employees but can strengthen their attachment and involvement at work (see more about self-determination theory in Deci et al., 2001). When employees are more stressed and less involved, the impact can spread throughout the workplace, creating a negative workplace culture (Hellebuyck et al., 2017). Furthermore, mental wellbeing also increases work-related performance (Redekopp & Huston, 2019). Mental and medical issues can cost companies a lot; therefore, it is worth investing in improving workers' situation rather than paying for their sick leave. Since being on sick leave is due to work-related stress in 50–60 per cent of cases (Eurofound, 2012), it is responsible for a one per cent loss in the GDP of the EU. Thus, more and more workplaces are

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3   This term is used throughout the sample to refer to the situation when an employee works from home (equivalent to the widespread Hungarian term 'home office').

4   The research was carried out with the collaboration of two project partners: the University of Szeged – Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, and Mobilissimus Ltd.

5   http://sasmob-szeged.eu/en/

introducing programs centred on physical and mental health which enhance workers' psychological wellbeing. However, this is still not a mainstream approach: according to research carried out by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 79 per cent of managers surveyed in 27 EU countries were affected by work-related stress and less than 30 per cent of companies were dealing with this issue (Eurofound, 2012). According to another piece of research carried out by the Gallup Institute, those employees with good wellbeing are less likely to miss work than those with poor wellbeing – even if the latter are strongly committed (Witters & Agrawal, 2010). Mental issues are difficult to talk about for many, therefore the topic is often swept under the rug. Furthermore, half of the ten leading causes of disability are mental health problems, on a global basis. Mental illnesses can affect anyone, regardless of economic status, age, gender, etc. (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000). This fact underlines the importance of mental health in general.

More recent studies related to the pandemic have stated that personality plays an important role in how one's mental health is affected by (remote) work (Wilhelm et al., 2004). Other studies have confirmed this by concluding that remote work has had both positive and negative effects on mental health (Galanti et al., 2021; Ogbonnaya, 2020). Since it is possible that many companies will introduce remote work even after the pandemic, it is of utmost important to study the potential outcomes of this.

Focusing on working parents, one study found that flexibility and a positive attitude at the workplace towards parenthood positively affect working parents' wellbeing (especially that of mothers), while offering tangible benefits has less impact (Eek & Axmon, 2013).

All this proves that mental wellbeing and health are strongly intertwined, and that workplaces must pay attention to both. At the end of this paper some good practices and policy implications are suggested that can be applied by companies to improve their employees' situation at work. While many tips, mostly by HR representatives, can already be found on the internet regarding the crisis created by COVID-19 and how to handle mental health,[6] the relevance and the additional value of this paper is that it is based on research in Hungary that inquired about such issues directly from employees both qualitatively and quantitatively.

3. Research method

Mixed methods were applied, wherein the qualitative phase preceded the quantitative one. A sequential exploratory model allows the researcher to embed the results of qualitative data analysis into quantitative studies and base hypotheses on them, which can then be tested (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, the first part included four focus groups, followed by the second wave, when – based on the results of the focus groups – a survey was sent out to all employees who work for the current and potential partners. In both cases, the employees were asked how remote work functioned, how they felt during the period of quarantine, and whether there were any good practices which could be introduced as new habits at work.[7]

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6 https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/07/19/remote-work-and-mental-health-how-to-maximize-your-time-for-micro-self-care/?sh=550f81fe4a7b
   https://www.thepolyglotgroup.com/blog/how-remote-working-can-impact-employees-mental-health/
   https://desktime.com/blog/working-from-home-mental-health/
7 During the focus groups and in the survey we ensured anonymity for participants, and further ethical considerations were taken into account.

3.1 Sampling and its limitations

The population from which the sample was taken consisted of those employees who work for the project partners and who do intellectual work, which is approximately 3,500 people. Those who do manual labour had to be excluded as they did not have an opportunity to do remote work, which is the focus of this research. Unfortunately, there was no further sampling process in relation to the survey – the link was sent out to all employees by the project coordinator of the company/workplace, accompanied by several reminders. As the population cannot be considered representative, the results reflect neither the national situation, nor that of employees in Szeged. Nonetheless, some of the findings coincide with other results, and the recommendations may be found useful by any company regardless of the methodological limitations. Furthermore, while most of the research conducted thus far has focused mainly on statistics and big data, this paper utilizes qualitative data – which sometimes does not correspond with the survey results.

The sampling of the focus groups involved purposive sampling, aiming for maximum variability (Patton, 2002). In this case, it meant that – insofar as information was available – the participants were chosen according to gender, age, and family status, with a focus on co-habitants: i.e. those who stayed at home alone or with their partners or flatmates, and those who were home with their children (under age 12), as living circumstances can influence responses.

3.2 Focus groups

Focus-group discussions followed predefined guidelines with respect to the research questions, and all three researchers were present (one of them being the moderator, the other two observers). The discussions were 1–1.5 hours long and took place partially in the digital and partially in the offline world[8] because of the lockdown (at some companies the lockdown period was extended by mandatory remote work). As Table 1 shows, the focus groups were set up based on the company profiles. Unfortunately, not all categories were represented because of the timing (it was summertime) and the willingness to participate of the companies.

Table 1: *The sample of the focus groups*

Company profile / Marital status	Lives alone or with partner		Lives with children under age 12	
Office workers and teachers from municipal/state institutions	5 people		6 people	
– gender	4 females	1 male	3 females	3 males
National and multinational IT companies	6 people		4 people	
– gender	3 females	3 males	2 females	2 males

The focus groups were recorded, and the material was – individually – analysed by all three members of the research group. For the analysis, the team members agreed on a common analytical framework which they used. The results were then compared and discussed in detail.

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8   This means that some focus groups were conducted personally, while some involved online discussions with video recording.

3.3 Survey

The online survey was sent out to all project partners and potential partners. It was the mobility managers'[9] responsibility to send out the link to all their employees. The respective Google Form was available for five weeks. There were a total of 343 respondents. Table 2 shows the composition of the sample[10]:

Table 2: *The sample*

Gender			Categories/companies' profile	
Male	44%		Municipal institution	25%
Female	56%		Education and R&D	6%
Family circumstances			Production and trade	29%
Lives with children	46%		IT & Telecommunication	40%
Lives without children	54%			
Type of company/institution*			Position	
National	68%		Subordinate	78%
Multinational	32%		Team leader or manager	22%

* It must be added that not all respondents were aware of the company's type as in some cases it is complicated.

The data was processed with quantitative data analysis software (SPSS) by one of the team members.

4. Results and discussion

In the following sections, the results of the research are shared. First, a general overview is presented about the participant companies' and institutions' conditions for remote work, which is followed by a description of the changes in workload and working conditions. The third section focuses on employees' perspectives about their personal experiences, while the fourth section is a short detour about their health and lifestyles during the lockdown. The fifth section elaborates on gender roles and work-life balance, while the last one details some of the extra services which some companies offered to their employees.

4.1. Introduction: Remote work

In Hungary, according to research conducted by a headhunting portal (Profession.hu), one-third of all companies switched completely to remote work; 16 per cent mandated three or four days of remote work; and seven per cent allowed employees to work from home for one or two days. Furthermore, 81 per cent of the companies offered masks, disinfectants, and gloves to employees. The same research found that the bigger the company, the more likely it was that they allowed their workers to work remotely (vg.hu, 2020).

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9   The mobility managers were the project's contact persons. The project leader could keep in touch with the project partners mainly through them, and they were responsible for informing employees about the opportunities for sustainable mobility modes at the workplace.

10   Unfortunately, because of some companies' restrictions (i.e., data privacy policies), differentiation by company is not possible, thus comparisons with other data cannot be made accurately.
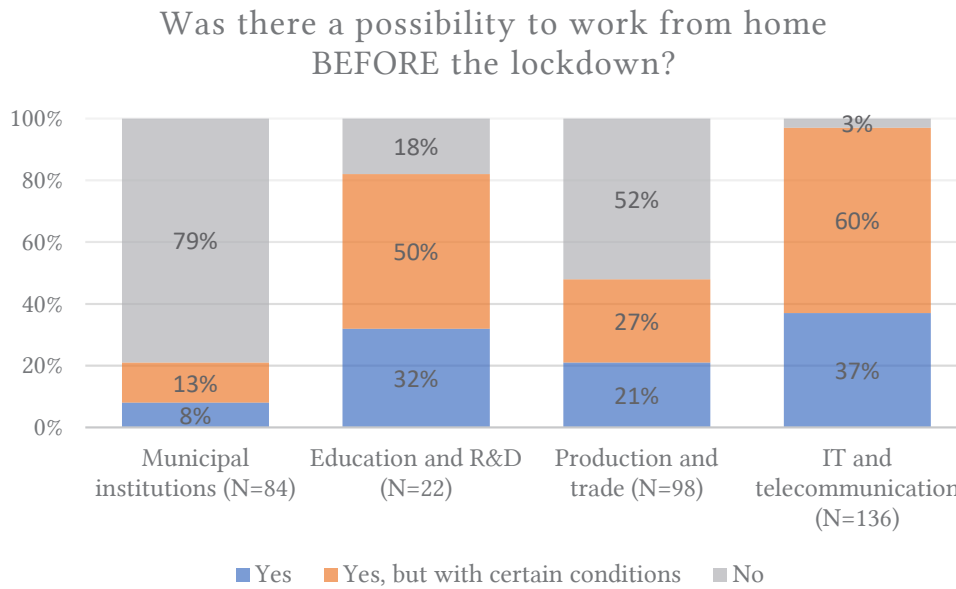
Was there a possibility to work from home BEFORE the lockdown?

Figure 1: *Possibility of working from home before the lockdown (N=340; Chi square test < 0,001)*

Was there a possibility to work from home DURING the lockdown?
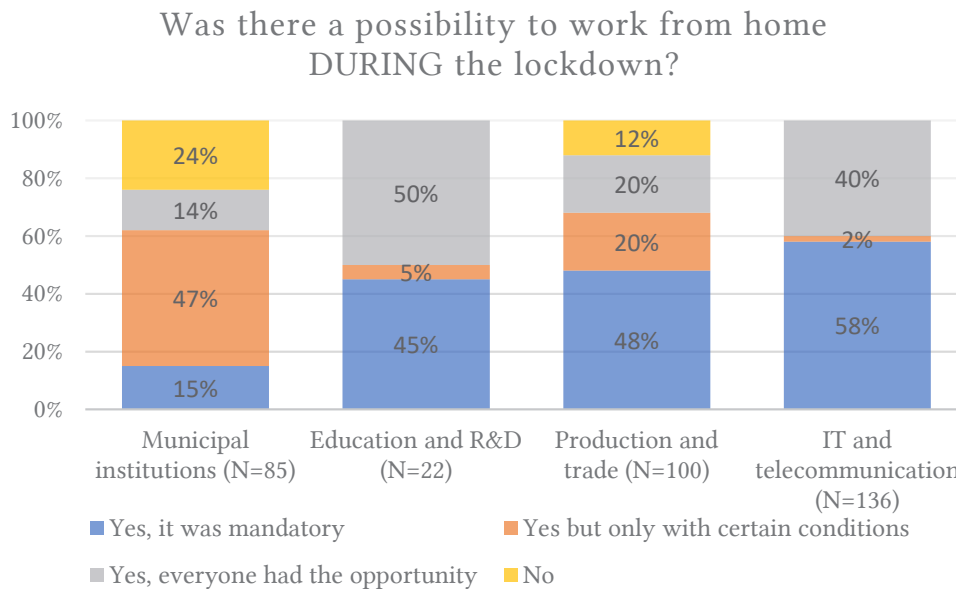

Figure 2: *Possibility of working from home during the lockdown (N=343; Chi square test < 0,001)*

Among our project partners, those employees whose work could be done from home were sent home; for others their original schedules were only slightly modified, but employers introduced the necessary hygiene-related measures to ensure their safety. The changes were introduced either in one or several steps – depending on the institution's (financial) capacity.

In terms of type of company, multinational companies are more flexible than their national counterparts: in the former remote work was more widespread even before the lockdown, and during the emergency period it was almost fully possible. While half of respondent employees at national companies/institutions reported that they could not work from home before

the lockdown, and 32 per cent could work remotely subject to certain conditions, only 7 per cent of those from multinational companies said they could not work from home, and slightly more than half (52 per cent) were able to work remotely, subject to certain conditions. In both cases, the rest had the opportunity to do so. During the lockdown, one-third of the employees of national institutions had to work remotely, while twice as many had to work from home at multinational companies. Twelve per cent of employees at national companies still did not have the possibility to work from home. The share was only 3 per cent at multinational companies. Regarding the companies' profiles, to illustrate the changes Figures 1 and 2 show whether employees had the opportunity to work from home before and during the lockdown. The rules at municipal institutions are rather strict: remote work before the lockdown was not an option: only 21 per cent of respondents said that there was the possibility to do this, but in most cases, it was subject to conditions. This changed during the lockdown, but the share of those engaged in remote work (without conditions) was still small compared to at other institutions, and the proportion of those who could work from home only subject to conditions was large. In the sphere of Education and R&D and IT & Telecommunications there was a huge difference: already permitting a high level of (conditional) remote work, these industries allowed almost everyone to work from home when necessary. Companies in the Production and Trade sector allowed more workers to work from home, but not everyone (Fig. 1, 2).

The total proportion of those companies that allowed remote work (either with conditions or without) increased from 63 per cent to 91. Due to the lockdown, conditions related to working from home were also lifted in many cases.

4.2 Working conditions and the change in workload

The switch from working at a workplace (be this an office or other place) to remote work was influenced by the given technological conditions. Only ten per cent of those who had the opportunity to work from home (N=311) lacked the technological conditions for this. In this case, most of them were lacking several items – a quarter lacked electronic and/or office equipment and some did not have proper VPN access. In the focus group discussions – mostly those representing the municipal institutions – many complained about lack of suitable conditions. Furthermore, several respondents had had to return to the office to obtain the necessary materials – forcing them to leave their homes, which caused internal conflict: while everybody had been advised to stay home, some people had to go to work. The real problem with this was that *'I was called in for something that I could have done from home'* (female, education & R+D). In a few cases, the necessary conditions were not ensured until the end of the quarantine period (for example, provision of laptops). In contrast, at multinational companies meeting employees' technological needs was not an issue. However, while at some companies only the basics were provided, other companies offered equipment needed for comfort (such as ergonomic chairs).

At a university, teachers were left unguided not only from a technological point of view, but also without guidance regarding methods of teaching online. One of them said *'we had widespread autonomy: [we were told to] do it the best way you can!'* (male, education & R+D). This situation is related to the issue of autonomy, which is one of the elements of Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000). According to the latter authors, people have three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and the need to relate to others. All three are essential for integrity and well-being. However, from the conversation with the former interviewee it became clear that the level of autonomy he had been granted was too large

and introduced too suddenly. He chose to record his lessons and upload them onto YouTube, but for some others this was too time-consuming, thus they streamed their lessons live and recorded them. The former individual added that he had also 'taught' several guest students from other universities, which implies that not all teachers were well-prepared for this period (students preferred to listen to his lectures as they were public).

Regarding effectiveness, half (53 per cent) of respondents said they were not affected, one-third said they were even more effective, and only 14 per cent said they were less effective. To include some 'mirror statistics', the above-cited research found that 57 per cent of the CEOs believed that their employees worked at the same level of effectiveness, while at larger companies this share was even larger (70). Furthermore, 18 per cent said that effectiveness had increased among workers (vg.hu, 2020). Interestingly, the answers were not correlated to whether employees were living with children. Based on the focus group discussions, taking care of one child or more was a big challenge for many. Depending on the former's age, these difficulties were related either to the switch to digital education or the constant need to be with a baby. Of course, personal and organizational circumstances counted. Apart from the age and the means of education (i.e. how independent the child was), the child's teachers and the employee's approach were also determinant.

Having a child of less than 12 years of age was also found to be a significant factor in a piece of research conducted in Hungary (Fodor et al., 2020a: 9), where perceived difficulties related to working from home were identified to be greater for those who live without children (2.6 on average on a scale from 1–5, where 5 equals 'difficult times' and 1 means that the period was 'rather beneficial'). Women found this period even harder than men (3.3 versus 2.8).

However, another important aspect was how the workplace (or rather, supervisors/management) related to their employees. One of the interviewees said that her supervisor specif-
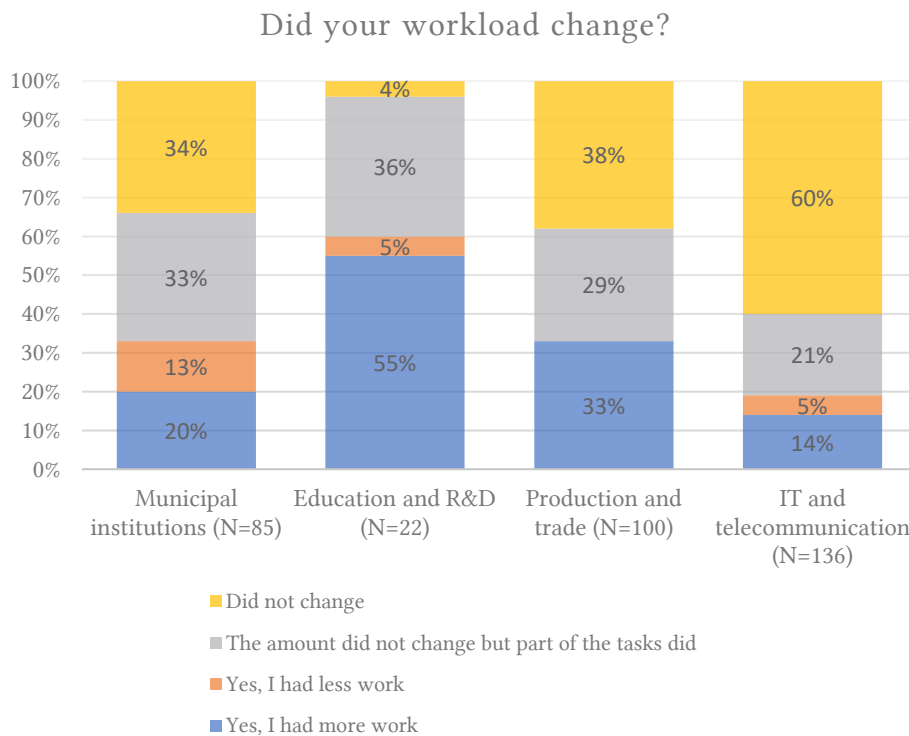

Figure 3: *Change of workload by company's profile (N=343;* Chi square test < 0,001*)*

What do you think, you worked more, less or the same amount of hours during the lockdown?
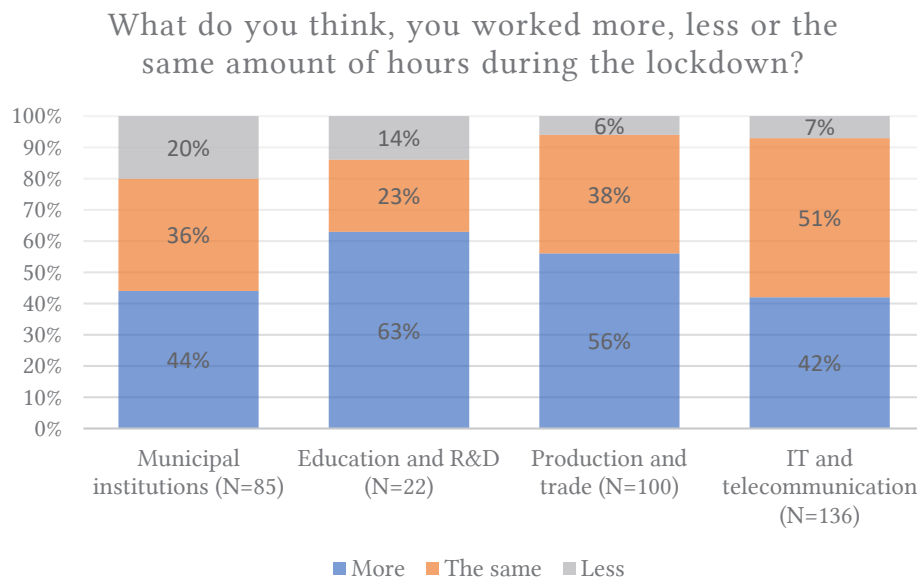

Figure 4: *The amount of work (N=343; Chi square test <0,001)*

ically emphasized that family comes first. In the survey, the respondents were asked whether there were differences between employees' opportunities and obligations: almost half of the sample (49 per cent) gave a positive answer. Of course, the differences could refer to several circumstances, but one of them may be – as it turned out from the focus groups – that parents with little children are given special attention. This phenomenon is analysed below in more detail in the discussion about maintaining work-life balance (Section 4.5).

The introduction of monitoring at work was reported by one quarter of the sample. This is also a means of limiting the perceived autonomy of employees. While the municipal institutions used this approach more often than average, in the sphere of IT & Telecommunications it was less frequent. This is related to the fact that in the former case remote work is not as widespread as in the latter, hence they are less used to this setting. Some interviewees were offended by the idea of monitoring: *'Some people think that people do not work when they work from home'* (female, education & R+D). Others considered it a good thing: they did not see monitoring as a means of checking on employees, but rather as a way of keeping in touch. There were also some who were not bothered by being monitored because this was thought to be needed to facilitate effective work. Again, permitting autonomy and having trust at work are usually very important: if an employee feels they have both, it increases their flexibility and creates a positive work ethic, which is good for both employees and the organization (Csókási et al., 2019).

According to another study, employees worked almost one hour extra on average when working from home (Gonda, 2020); this blurring of boundaries between work and family life may lead to increased stress and burn out (when working in an office, staying to work for an extra hour is more visible).

As shown in Figure 3, one quarter (24 per cent) of respondents said that they had more work, while another one quarter (27 per cent) said that their workload had not changed, but their tasks had. Breaking down the data, respondents with an IT & Telecommunication background reported no change, while employees from the Education & R+D sector had more work or had to adjust to new tasks (for example, administration for conferences had changed completely as all conferences were held online or were cancelled/postponed).

This situation is related and corresponds to the amount of work, which is shown in Figure 4. Almost half of respondents (48 per cent) worked more, and 42 per cent worked the same amount as before. The answers from respondents from the Education and R&D and Production and Trade sectors indicated more work than average, while changes were less visible in the IT & Telecommunication sector. This can be explained by the fact that at university and in companies that deal with production a lot of things changed that employees had to adjust to, while the IT sector was more prepared – although this is not to say that the latter did not have to work hard to keep up with the increasing needs of employees regarding, for example, the provision of VPNs (Fig. 4).

4.3 Lockdown: through the eyes of employees

To start by obtaining an objective overview, one of the questions was how the crisis had affected respondents (mostly financially) and their surroundings. Only 18 per cent of respondents answered that they were not affected and did not know anyone who was, while a large majority (65 per cent) were not affected but knew someone who had been. The latter corresponds to the findings of Fodor et al. (2020a, p. 7), according to which 70 per cent of respondents said that they felt secure regarding their work (i.e., would not lose their job).

To elaborate on subjective personal experiences, both the survey and the focus group discussions included questions about this topic. From the survey, the overall picture is very diverse: almost half of respondents (47 per cent) said the latter experience had been variable in nature, 32 per cent felt good, 14 per cent felt bad, and for 7 per cent the situation had not changed.

The lockdown period was full of challenges, and everyone reacted to it differently. Personal experience correlated significantly neither with gender, nor with family situation (whether living with children). However, from the focus group discussions it became clear that living with a child (or children) was a determining variable – of course, it depended on the child's age, education, etc. For example, an interviewee with older children (school-age) said, *'I worked very well from home, I enjoyed our big family house'* (man, IT & Telecommunication). Another interviewee with a younger child (nursery-age) reported about his reduced efficiency – therefore, he had had to put in more time. He listened to music during work – that was his way of switching off from family life. There was another interviewee whose child was studying from home under normal circumstances as well, and the whole family was 'introverted', which is why this period had not been unusual for them. She said *'well, to be honest, I heard about difficulties only from colleagues and family members'* (female, multinational company) – indicating that she and her family had had a good time at home.

Difficulties and challenges covered a wide spectrum and are illustrated in Figure 5 (these include both the items mentioned by the interviewees from the focus groups and the answers from the online questionnaire). Four categories were identified, while there were also some people according to whom there were no difficulties, but they were in the minority. The first large category included work-related problems, which included the lack of technological conditions for working, the mismanagement of remote work by the company, the lack of personal relations and interactions, and the challenge of undertaking new types of tasks (which occurred in some cases due to the new/unknown situation). The second category consisted of difficulties due to the family situation and personal wellbeing. The former included the need for home-schooling, doing household chores, insecurity, hearing depressing news, the lack of exercise and subsequent obesity, and the increase in the level of stress in general. A combi-
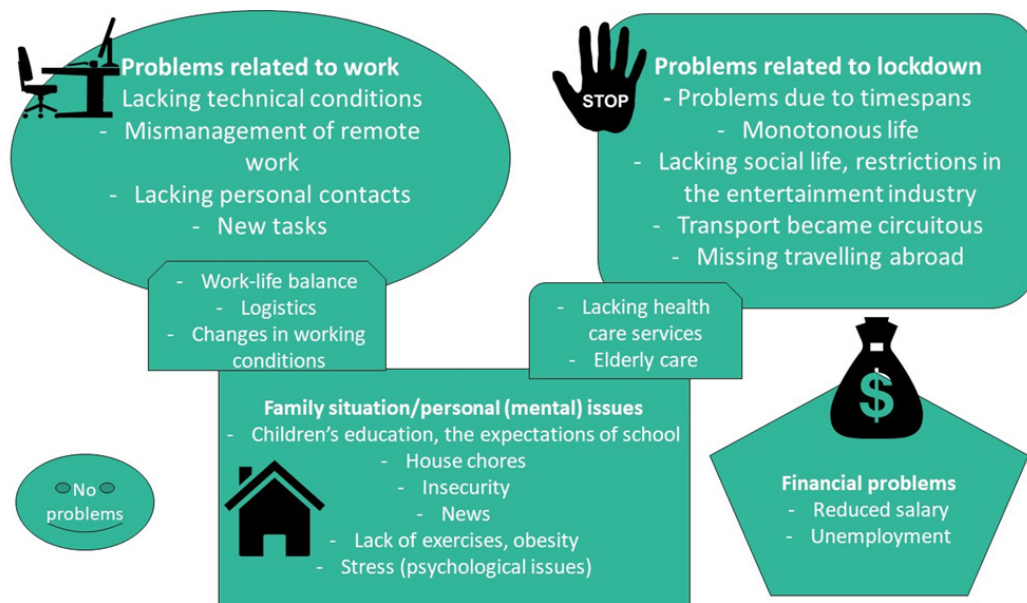
Figure 5: *Difficulties and challenges of the quarantine*

nation of the latter two categories refers to the lack of work-life balance, and the change in working conditions and logistics which respondents had to deal with. An example of the lack of work-life balance from someone who was living with her partner (with no children) was the following: *'I work the whole day, and then I do not work for the whole day: I deal with other things'* (female, education & R+D). There were other respondents for whom days had also become 'fuzzy', but they were not bothered by this overlap because their life was always like this anyway.

The third type of problem was related to the lockdown itself. Many complained about the regulations according to which only the elderly (people above 65) could do shopping between 9am and 11am. Furthermore, the lack of social life and restrictions regarding entertainment led to a monotonous life and boredom. When these problems overlapped with family-related and personal issues, complaints were about poor healthcare and caring for the elderly. The fourth category involved financial issues, such as reductions in salary or unemployment (in the family).

On the other hand, there were advantages of these critical times as well, which are summarized in Figure 6. It is visible that fewer items were mentioned here, but similarly to the disadvantages, there were four major categories: transport, family/home, financial aspects, and changes in lifestyle. The most frequently mentioned advantage was time won by not commuting. This covers several issues, such as reductions in traffic, more free time, the ability to slow down (not having to rush in the mornings), and even reduced costs (due to not having to use a car to get to work). However, due to not having to prepare in the morning, some complained that *'there was no rush, no morning traffic, but our life became fuzzy'* (female, education & R+D). Free time was not only related to respondents' own 'me-time'; some fathers were happy to spend more time with their kids due to their having to take care of them more often. One called the situation a 'family get-together'.

To cope with the difficulties and challenges, most people tried to develop some strategies which helped them get through this period. Coping strategies can be grouped into four categories: doing exercise, meditation, getting a new hobby, and creating a new daily routine or
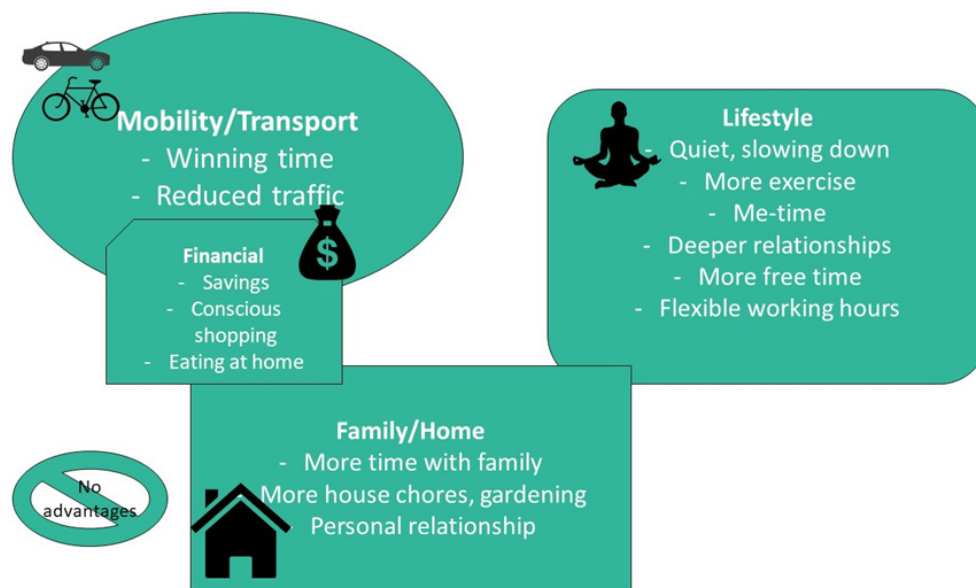
Figure 6: *Advantages of the lockdown-period*

sticking to a previous one even more. Exercises included doing yoga but biking or walking were also often mentioned (which was a mode of transport for many that replaced using public transport[11]). 'Meditation' referred to any activities which helped respondents relax (to have more 'me-time'). Among the new hobbies we identified cooking, gardening, and other activities related to the house. The category of 'daily routine' refers to imitating the office atmosphere, preparing a weekly schedule, being more with a family dog as a form of relaxation, etc. One of the interviewees said, *'I didn't have this kind of being locked in, bored-type feeling. But it depends on one's personality'* (female, municipal institution).

Both the perception of being quarantined and the coping strategies were diverse, but it is clear that (increasing the amount of) remote work – under normal circumstances – can be beneficial not only in environmental terms but good for individuals as well, and companies may benefit from this, as discussed above.

4.4 Health and sports

Staying mentally sane depends on one's physical health as well. Having a healthy lifestyle has a lot of components: one of them is doing exercise, while another one is maintaining a healthy diet (among many other factors). One of the difficulties (see Figure 5) for many was the fear of putting on weight. This was also identified in a small, qualitative piece of research based on memes and other social media sources (Kluzsnik & Surányi, 2020). Staying home a lot can lead to eating more and not keeping fit. One study in the UK found that both negative and positive lifestyle changes occurred during the lockdown: some people followed a more sedentary lifestyle leading to poorer physical health and lower productivity, while others became more active physically, with better health and greater productivity (Hernandez et al., 2021).

In answer to our survey, only 10 per cent of the respondents did not do any kind of exercise; 40 per cent did some daily; 34 per cent did exercise several times per week; and 16 per

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11 It is well known by now that bike traffic – because it is considered a (COVID-)safe mode of transport –increased across Europe during this period (ECF, 2020) and the trend was similar in the city of Szeged as well (see Gertheis, 2020).

cent did it more rarely. Regarding their health, 75 per cent reported no change, while 6 per cent said it had improved and for 10 per cent it had worsened because of the quarantine (the rest of the changes were not related to the lockdown).

Another factor which can affect health is the eight hours of sitting in front of a computer, which may have even worse effects at home because individuals are not necessarily forced to stand up, or may use a non-ergonomic chair, etc. One interviewee from one of the focus groups had experienced a serious incident that led to a life-threatening situation because he has been sitting in the wrong type of chair and did not stand up frequently enough during working hours. He stated that every company should pay attention to their workers by apply-ing a rule of having a regular 10-minute break per hour and reminding employees about this. This incident was a source of motivation for him to participate in the research (so that he could spread the word).

It is not by chance that one of the four strategies for coping with the lockdown situation – as mentioned above – was doing exercise. In the focus group discussions, biking – both as a mode of transport and for leisure – was mentioned frequently.

4.5 Gender roles and work-life balance

According to research conducted in Hungary during the first wave, men increased their con-tribution to childcare duties but at the same rate as women. This means that – because women more often dealt with childcare in absolute terms – the gap between men's and women's work-ing hours grew even further. This was typical especially among highly educated city-dwellers (Fodor et al., 2020b). Another piece of research about the preference for remote work showed that more women prefer working from home than men (Kis, 2020). This is connected to the fact that traditional gender roles are typical in Hungary – namely, the perception that men are the breadwinners while women stay home and take care of children and the household (Takács & Neményi, 2018).

Those who prefer to separate work from family and private life suffered because there was not enough space for them, but household chores and children also played a big role in their frustration. A father reported that *'household tasks distracted me from my work'*, meaning that he helped (or had to help) his wife. However, this was not always the case. The gender roles differed a lot. According to another father with older children, the moment his wife started working from home, he started going to the office because *'the goal was not to be at home at the same time. Many memes were about [showed family members at home saying] "how good! we are together, we can talk more", but I rather decreased this amount of time'* (male, IT & Telecom-munication). Yet another man was grateful for this opportunity – he said he would not have had the chance to become so close to his child if it had not been for the quarantine, when he had had to take care of the baby much more often. Another father used the expression 'family get-together' in a positive light. This shows the duality of being quarantined: some looked at it as an opportunity, while for some others it was a burden. Conflicting roles (work versus household chores and/or babysitting) were emphasized throughout the focus groups.

In responses to the survey, more than half of the respondents (55 per cent) felt that they had received enough support from their workplace and another one-fifth (19 per cent) got more than they had expected. The answers 'I received some support' (chosen by 11 per cent) includes those who might have been satisfied with their company, but not their direct supervi-sor. This is an overall positive outcome. However, if we look at the types and company profiles there were differences. At the multinational companies one-third of respondents (33 per cent)
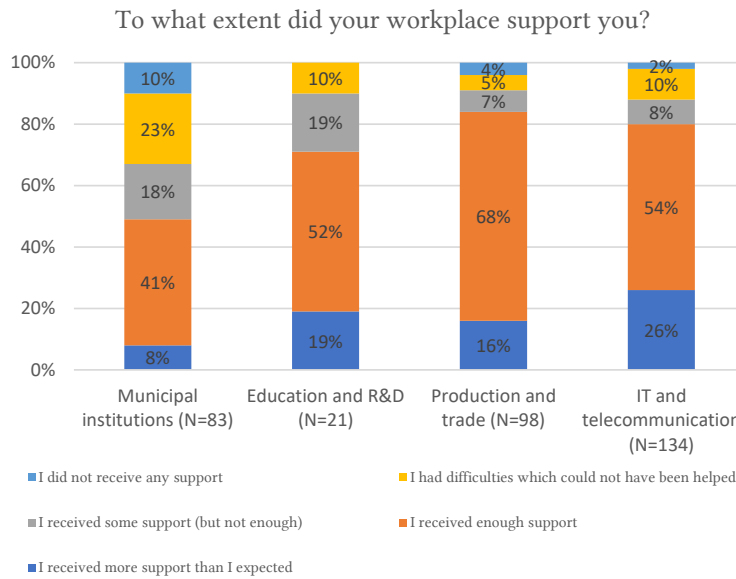
To what extent did your workplace support you?

Figure 7: *Support from the workplace by company type and profile (N=336, Chi square test 0,003)*

received more support than they had expected, as opposed to the 11 per cent at national institutions. Looking at Figure 7, we can see that at municipal institutions satisfaction was lower than average (a total of 49 per cent received enough or more support), while in the sector of Production and Trade it was higher (84 per cent).

The participants of the focus groups from multinational companies gave very positive feedback about their workplace/management: *'The company supported its employees with everything. I am very proud of my workplace – we reacted very well [to the pandemic]'* (female, IT & Telecommunication). Flexibility on the company's side sometimes meant that even if a child was crying during a call (in the background), this was accepted. Another person said, *'I am very happy that I work in such a place, because their intention was really to help'* (female, multinational company), Employers are more likely to offer flexible conditions to higher educated mothers than fathers (Oborni, 2018), which further enhances gender/role inequalities. It is important to highlight that there was a team leader in the focus group who paid special attention to her team's wellbeing. She said that there was always one hour when everybody could be with their families, stating that there always should be one hour which is not about work. Regarding work-life balance, she added, *'it is not nice for me to say this, but one has to be able to say "no" to work'* (female, IT & Telecommunication). Apart from the requirement of paying attention to each other, she put special emphasis on trusting her team members. This kind of attitude should be dominant if we want to increase employees' wellbeing. The next section will describe the extra services which companies offered to their employees during these difficult times.

4.6 Extra services

To understand how the project partners tried to improve their employees' wellbeing, this was the last topic which was discussed freely in the focus group discussions. Three big categories were outlined: organized help, such as mental wellness programs; informal meetings
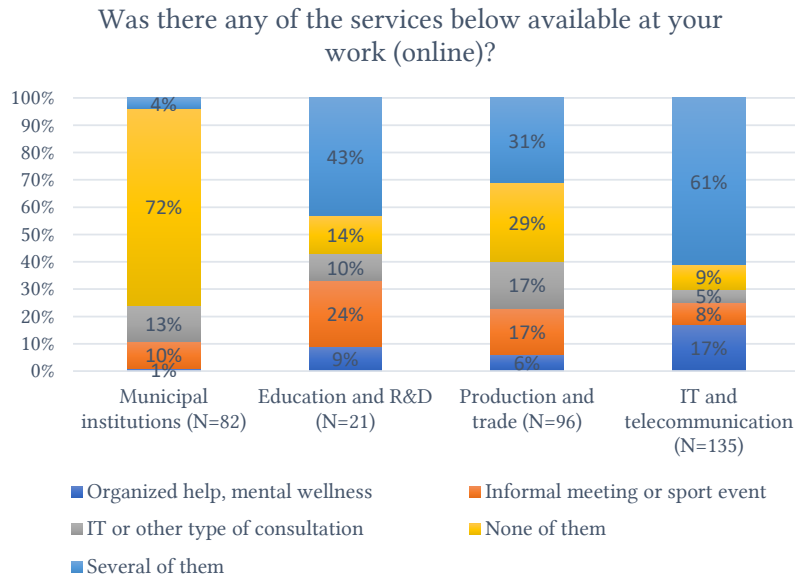
Was there any of the services below available at your
work (online)?

Figure 8: *Extra services' availability by company type and profile (N=334; Chi square test <0,001)*

and sport events, and IT or other types of (e.g., psychological) consultations. Benefitting from
the methodological setting (i.e., having the focus groups first and then carrying out an online
survey), the survey included only one question, but this time it was more targeted (we asked
whether employees had had access to any or more of these services). One third (30 per cent)
of the sample had had no access to any of them; for the others at least one of them had been
available. If we break down the answers by company type and profile, we find significant dif-
ferences. Multinational companies – as opposed to their national counterparts (16 per cent)
– are more likely to offer several services (64 per cent) than average (37 per cent). As shown
in Figure 8, municipal institutions are not (yet) advanced in terms of offering extra programs
for improving their employees' wellbeing: 72 per cent of such respondents said they had no
access to any of the listed services.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Taken together, it can be concluded that the companies and institutions that took part in this
research tried to adjust to the special circumstances and to help their employees as much as
possible to protect their health. Even those companies at which remote work was not com-
mon tried to comply with the new situation, at least for those positions where it was possible.
For those who still had to go to work, the necessary hygiene-related measures were intro-
duced. However, national companies lag somewhat behind multinational companies in this
regard: the employees of the former typically lacked a broader set of conditions that would
support their full comfort and mental wellbeing. Looking at the company profiles, the IT &
Telecommunication sector understandably seemed to be the most prepared in every sense,
while municipal institutions were less flexible and prepared. Their technological conditions
derive from their poorer financial situation (municipal institutions are highly dependent on
the state), but legal regulations may have bound them further, while organizational culture is
also an obstacle.

Companies/institutions had to develop or overcome their typical competences/boundaries. Remote work functions well when it is not only basic needs that are secured (i.e., adequate technological conditions, etc.), but other issues such as wellbeing and personal needs are also taken into account. However, mental wellness is not yet a commonly accepted and acknowledged need in some cases.

Switching to remote work was needed, and it turned out that it was possible even when it was considered taboo before. Table 3 summarizes all those recommendations which arose in the focus group discussions and in the survey (as the answers to an open-ended question). The recommendations – due to the special circumstances – refer not only to the pandemic situation but also to times when normalcy returns. Furthermore, as the needs of employees differ, some recommendations are contradictory (some individuals prefer personal interactions while others prefer to avoid them).

There are recommendations which concern measures related to remote work, e.g. management and the extra services which improve one's wellbeing and help to maintain a work-life balance. In the first column are included measures which are default options for some employees but are only wishes for others: instead of good practices, they are rather measures that companies should take into consideration. As not everyone has the opportunity to work from home, many simply wish to have such options (or have them without conditions). Such options should be supported by ensuring that the necessary technological conditions exist, and by overwriting (updating) data protection policies that are sometimes an obstacle to remote work. Other types of practices were finance-related: they involved supporting employees in different ways. Further, some people wish to be monitored (and for others to be monitored). In the second column, we find extra services which support individual health and mental hygiene, such as a relaxation room, doing exercise, having sports events, etc. Several of these good practices are found to be important for wellbeing. The third column contains those organizational or managerial measures that aim at improving the company's operations, such as improving communications, giving feedback to employees, organizing teambuilding activities, etc.

Table 3: *Good practices and measures*

Measures regarding remote work	Services aiming at improving wellbeing, work-life balance	Organization, management
Possibility of remote work (2-3 days weekly)	Possibility to do sports during working hours	Teambuilding
Remote work without conditions	Sport events, health day	Feedback
Utility bills to be paid (partially) by the company	**Relaxing room**	Proper communication
Extra allowance for those who go to work	**Massage**	Online meetings (instead of face-to-face)
Monitoring	To support those who do not smoke/bike to work (with extra day off)	Company events
Using governmental support	Childcare services	Flexible working hours
Technological conditions	**Organized, wellbeing services (mental wellness)**	Electronic administration
To overwrite data protection policies		

Those with **bold** were more frequently mentioned.

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