Digital work in the context of covid 19

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Abstract: *The crisis caused by the COVID 19 virus has affected both the economic environment and the daily lives of all citizens. Despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, some companies have understood to continue their activity, to train their staff, to inform their suppliers and customers. The main problems faced by organizations, in addition to those inherent in the decrease in turnover, lack of liquidity, were those related to staff. Digitization has been accelerated in all environments and areas of activity. For a good development of the activity in the remote working system, the managers were put in the situation to redefine their management, orientation and control. The change was not only related to the use of new technology and remote work, but also to the transition in a time of crisis, dominated by panic and concern for citizens for their own safety and health. The purpose of this article is not limited to an analysis of the literature, but presents certain aspects from which we can learn lessons for finding and applying the right solutions in practice, especially for managers who face the challenges of coordinating remote teams. One of the important challenges that managers face in leading remote teams is communication. Communicating unclear, incomplete or ambiguous messages is very risky, and the effects can be disastrous. Crisis communication must have a single source of presentation of the truth, it must be clear, simple and humane. The essential element of distance communication refers to being very accurate.*

Keywords: Digitalization, COVID 19, work force, leadership, management and communication.

JEL: M12, M15, M53, M54, D83

1. Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic has recently caused the fastest changes and at the same time the ones that have involved the most people in the history of the economy. However, not all branches of the economy have been affected to the same extent. Almost without exception, companies had to adapt to the new conditions imposed by the pandemic (Butler, 2020).

COVID 19 not only influenced the economic environment, but also influenced the lives of all citizens. Citizens around the world have been subjected to various restrictions that have mainly involved social distancing and changing the way they carry out their professional activity in general (Rump and Eilers, 2020). These changes took place overnight without the citizens being prepared in advance.

The management of the various companies has been put in a position to make quick decisions to continue, albeit to a lesser extent, the economic activity of the company they run. Thus, a number of employees started working from home. This phenomenon known as telework is not new. Telework began and developed in the United States over 20 years ago (Caligiuri, et al., 2020).

The fear and even the panic triggered by possible disastrous effects both on the health of the population and on the European economies triggered a series of analyzes carried out at governmental level. European governments must show transparency, decision-making capacity and last but not least the total availability of collaboration (Fritsche and Harms, 2020).

The main problems faced by companies due to the COVID pandemic were of course related to the flow of supply and sales of products, but the main problem was related to the staff crisis. The human resources of companies now had to face challenges for which they had not been prepared, and the directors of the human resources departments were put in the situation of looking for strategic talents to overcome the crisis (Caligiuri, et al., 2020).

The need for people with digital skills was not limited and did not refer specifically to executives, but especially to managers who have to make strategic decisions in a period of continuous change (Toma and Marinescu, 2015; Marinescu, et al., 2018). In order to build successful business model, today's managers are facing new situations as they lead and motivate remote teams (Toma and Marinescu, 2018). This way of working is unknown to the vast majority of managers, and this has led to situations of stress and tension within teams (Yi-Lin Forrest, et al., 2020).

One of the important challenges that managers face in leading remote teams is communication. Communicating unclear, incomplete or ambiguous messages is very risky, and the effects are very different. For example, one effect of incorrect communication may be to create panic. Another effect is to convey distrust, incompetence, which leads to a stress reaction from team members. One mistake a manager can make in communicating with his team is to give too much assurance. These will cause a state of confusion, mistrust and even fear in the minds of employees (Sandman and Lanard, 2020).

The purpose of this article is not limited to an analysis of the literature, but presents certain aspects from which we can learn lessons for finding and applying the right solutions in practice, especially for managers

who face the challenges of coordinating remote teams.

2. Research methodology

The digitization of the working process was implemented through decisions of the external environment (government, laws, regulations, etc.), due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Digitalization is implemented normally through decisions of the external or of the internal environment, which are often top-down (Zawakcki-Richter and Latchem, 2018).

Today, the transition has been clearly caused by a situation external to the normal working process, and the central question of this study is to understand better the situation in order to take the correct steps and how to use digitization as a chance to increase the chances and possibilities of the companies. Fortunately, in many situations, as the results of the analysis in this study show, the correct use of technology can improve the situation during COVID 19. The objective of the research is to identify in the academic literature different models and factors which can be used to adapt better to the new situation brought by the crises caused by Covid 19 in the context of Industry 4.0. By identifying the factors that influence the most the environment in the present situation, we can find in the next step solution for best practice rules.

The present study included a secondary research of the academic literature. The method used is a descriptive and quantitative one, given the fact that the subject is very widely discussed.

The analysis of the academic literature was made in various publications and scientific articles in order to illustrate the global situation. Therefore, we used a comprehensive search into numerous sources of secondary data, such as articles, reports and books from the domains of "Industry 4.0", management, including intercultural management and sociology and COVID 19.

For the research, we used also electronic databases, such us Springer, Academia.edu, BRILL and Wiley Online Library. Other sources were the archives of different journals and conferences, such as the journal "Manager", the conferences "BASIQ", "ICBE" and "ETIMM".

3. Results and discussions

The changes caused by the COVID 19 pandemic affected mainly its staff and tasks. For example, the automotive industry has called for a change in the way it presents and promotes its products. If until now we were used to choosing our car in a showroom, now we receive a series of information's in the virtual environment. Most of the activities involved call center and contact center staff. Of course, these services do not replace a test drive.

In other areas such as insurance, a number of consultants offer us solutions in the virtual space. Banks have also adapted their services; more and more options are offered online. Lawyers have quickly adapted their way of working and communicating with both clients and courts. Even if the online solution for court hearings has not been implemented and accepted in our country, it will soon become a necessity.

Despite limited personal contact, many companies have understood to inform and train customers through online seminars. These have proven to be both sought after

and highly successful. Another advantage of the activities carried out in the online system is that the staff can carry out their work from home, which gives more time for family, avoiding the time lost for traveling from home to work. At the same time, those who were forced and at the same time had the chance to continue their professional activity at home, were forced to organize their private space in such a way as to be able to carry out their activity efficiently. This relatively sudden transition from classical activity to the use of virtual tools was possible due to the existence of advanced technology necessary for the proper conduct of these processes. This required companies to provide employees with the necessary technology.

For this, many companies have had to invest in technology, both in the area of hardware and software. The platforms that would allow remote work, even in the happy situation where companies had such platforms, had not been thought of for the capacity of use that was needed during the state of emergency. Of course, the key element of the success of this transition was the people. Well-trained and willing to change employees were the ones who managed to maintain a minimum, but relatively stable level of activities of their companies. The general demand for change imposed by the market, the economic situation, customers and last but not least the pandemic caused by COVID 19 was a challenge for employees (Butler, 2020).

For companies that have shown flexibility and for those operating in the ICT industry or in the virtual environment in general, the volume of transactions has exploded. These companies were the ones that benefited from the crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic and which stabilized their position on the market.

The effects of digitalization on the way people will carry out their professional activity in the future has been a wide-ranging topic of discussion in the literature over the past five years. This future surprised us in March and now the prospects for the next stages are being analyzed. About what the organization of the future means or the trades of the future, the specialized literature presents a very wide collection of materials. Thus, we discuss about two perspectives, the qualitative and the quantitative, of the effects of digitalization on jobs. The quantitative perspective refers to the new jobs, the new fields of activity and the new job descriptions that digitalization brings with it. The qualitative perspective refers to the possibility of maintaining the long-term capacity to remain employed and here it refers more specifically to the skills needed by the employee of the future (Rump and Eilers, 2020).

In the conditions of transforming the business into a digital business, the term smart working was introduced. It involves certain changes both within the organization and especially in the workplace of employees. New elements in the organization's culture are related to responsibility for results, trust, changing forms and methods of control and verifying their compliance.

Initially, companies planned to use smart working in standard workspaces, but also in virtual workspaces. Virtual workspaces refer mainly to work from home, otherwise called telework. The tools used to carry out the new type of activity are the same ones that the employees have used lately, namely: the computer, the mobile phone and the internet. Smart working also involves accepting a dose of flexibility in terms of working

time and location of the professional activity (Menshikova, 2020).

According to the study published by Ernst & Young last year, in 2019, only 20 percent of the top 500 companies that took part in this study said they are ready to face a large-scale adverse attack. In the current context of the pandemic, it turned out that the concern of most managers of large companies participating in the above-mentioned study was real and well-founded.

The literature even presents a comparison between the capacity and role of the CFO during the financial crisis of 2007-2009 and the HR director in the current context. In the context of the financial crisis, the very important role of the financial manager was a matter of course. Today we can believe that finance would play an important role. When the economy does not function at the expected level, the money does not run, many end up in the situation of lack of financial resources, which leads globally to new blockages. However, this comparison presented in the literature highlights the fact that in the current context of the COVID-19 crisis, we need very talented and dedicated human resource managers, perhaps even more than financial liquidity. These managers have the role of motivating, providing training and preparing staff to meet current challenges (Caligiuri, et al., 2020).

HR managers know that employees face a high level of stress in situations where they are forced to perform tasks in an uncertain or unknown, or unprepared, or previously undiscussed context. Stress affects the ability of employees to show empathy for the rest of the team, and thus creates various tensions in remote teams not properly prepared.

Other indicators of the fact that one of the employees is affected by a high level of stress are: his willingness to think freely, his ability to perform his tasks and last but not least his ability to develop and learn new things. In fact, it is not the employee's intellectual capacity that is affected, or his level of performance is low, but his emotional state of concern does not allow him to adapt to new situations and this creates various blockages.

The work carried out by remote teams is much more demanding and stressful due to the fact that we do not notice the reactions of colleagues and thus do not know how to react in certain situations so as not to disturb and still be able to perform our tasks properly. What we totally lack when working remotely is interpreting body language. The human brain has the ability to interpret messages through what our gestures and facial expressions express, including the tone of our voice is perceived long before the content of verbally expressed messages is received. In other words, we can say without mistake that it is much more important how we say something, how we transmit information than the dry, technical content of the basic information we transmit.

A possible solution to reduce the effects of the pandemic would be to apply the following five steps:

- implementation of remote work for everyone possible
- granting paid leave
- granting unpaid leave
- temporary reduction of salaries
- undetermined salary reductions (Haak Saheem, 2020).

Leaders need to set clear tasks and goals and divert employees' attention from meaningless comments and discussions. Leaders need to determine, together with employees,

where they think their organization can go during and after the crisis.

Employees must have two or three objectives, so as to focus their attention on the tasks they have to perform and not on unanswered worries and anxieties. The leader must focus all his attention on achieving those two or three goal objectives around which the confidence and stability of his entire team is focused. Throughout the pandemic, leaders must communicate to the team that all tasks they perform are safe, and the company has taken all measures to maintain the health of its employees (Mendy, et al., 2020).

Management problems are mainly due to their lack of experience working and leading remotely. For companies to have the capacity to innovate, both management and employees must be trained and have the necessary knowledge to use the advanced technology. In an innovative company, the challenges posed by the market are assumed to occur at a very high speed, which means that the company must have flexibility in both hiring and laying off staff depending on the economic situation at a given time (Yi-Lin Forrest, et al., 2020). These companies are better prepared to face new challenges, being much less anchored in old rules and more open to trying new solutions. In general, the least flexible structures are in the area of public institutions, in the field of health and last but not least in the field of education.

The factors that influence the commitment and motivation of employees have evolved in the last 30 years, but in the last approx. five years very much. This evolution can be presented in four phases. The first phase refers to the period 1900 - 2000 when employees were motivated by the possibility to have a say, to be able to be involved and to

have an active participation in the company. In the second phase, between 2001 and 2010, the employees were looking for a sense of activity and a balance between personal and professional life. In the third phase, between 2011 and 2018, employees expected from the workplace to provide them with the resources they need to meet their requirements related to the objectives of the chosen position. Starting with 2019, employees are looking for meaning and a better life for the talent they show and the performances they bring in their professional activity (Turner, 2020).

After presenting the expectations of employees recently in terms of the professional activity they want to carry out, we continue to talk about the skills needed for these employees of the future. Future competencies refer to the ability to decide and lead a team, to cooperate and support colleagues, to interact and to present a topic. Employees of the future must also have the ability to be creative and to conceptualize, organize and execute, adapt and imitate. However, these skills are not enough if the employee does not have the ability to perform and show entrepreneurship. In an older sense, these skills were required only by top management. Today we must note that everyone has a certain talent and is, depending on the situation and knowledge, sometimes follower, sometimes team manager (Okros, 2020).

Organizations expect employees to respond in times of crisis with high speed, accuracy and safely. This way of acting was required of the employees for a very short periods of time. These employees were organized in shock teams, which had to intervene when a crisis arose. These shock teams have other tasks in normal times. The most well-known such teams are those, existing in most

companies, that intervene with firefighters to remove a danger, such as fire. Until the outbreak of the pandemic caused by COVID 19 companies were not prepared to have enough staff trained to intervene in the long term and in sufficient numbers to eliminate the negative effects of a crisis (van Fenema, PC, Romme, AGL, 2020). If fiscal and economic insecurity can be managed through the right measures taken by the various European governments, today the problem of social insecurity arises. The citizens of Europe are worried about the future of each family and of each individual. For these, Germany, for example, offers solutions such as professional retraining and new specializations for the professions of the future offered by universities (Fritsche, J. Ph., Harms, P. Ch., 2020).

Mistakes in communicating messages were observed in the speeches of many politicians who were not trained as Managers and did not respect the rules of communication in crisis situations. These rules are not intuitive, and involve correct learning, understanding and application without personal interpretations. A correct managerial communication supposes the narration of the known elements in clear terms, punctually and with the correct expression of one's own emotions. By sincerely expressing our own dilemmas and the difficulty of the problems the manager is facing, we have a great chance to gain the attention and interest of the team members. The manager who seems to know them all in a crisis situation cannot be believed by his team members. To reduce insecurity, we need to involve the team in clear and useful tasks in the context of the crisis. Proper communication requires the recognition of the manager's personal mistakes in a simple and understandable way. Possible task-solving options need to be discussed, especially in crisis situations, with team members, provided that they have the necessary training to be able to make the necessary decisions together (Sandman and Lanard, 2020).

Crisis communication can be briefly presented in three steps. Step one refers to the uniqueness of the source of truth presentation. The second step involves clear, simple and as humane a communication as possible. The third step refers to the essential element of communication in front of the remote team, namely to be accurate. The themes and statements made by the manager must be well verified beforehand and in line with reality (Koh, 2020).

In the last five months of activity, companies that were not used to working in the virtual space had to adapt and to choose from the multitude of solutions offered by the market. The main solutions that the companies approached in order to communicate as directly as possible with the employees at home and carrying out telework were the online platforms. Such platforms have been offered both for free and by subscription by major companies around the world. The use of online platforms, however, implies for a large part of the employees the need for training. In addition to general online platforms, companies have also received personalized offers. In all cases, companies resorted to the application of the initial emergency solution, and in the second phase of training and improvement of communication tools provided to employees (PWC, 2020).

In a situation of crisis, business ethics is all the more important as all companies, both suppliers and their customers, face a new situation, full of unknowns and risks of all kinds. Some companies consider that ethical

principles are sufficient if they are displayed and respected in external relations. Other companies choose to please only their customers. They consider the relationship with suppliers or other stakeholders to be less important. In reality, the classification of a company in the category of ethical conduct cannot be achieved exclusively according to the strict norms presented in the academic theory. The reality in practice is often complex, unpredictable and interpretable. Thus, a company will respect the ethical principles in order to be able to overcome well the difficult periods that a crisis implies (Gurău, 2020).

5. Conclusions

The main issues addressed in this article relate to the challenges posed by the crisis due to the COVID 19 pandemic on citizens in general and implicitly on their professional life. The purpose of this article is not one related to a simple analysis of the literature, but more precisely to the presentation of real situations, from which we can learn lessons for finding and applying correct solutions in practice, especially for managers facing coordination challenges. remote teams.

Various models and solutions are valid for management in general, others are addressed especially to human resources managers. For example, a possible solution for human resource managers who face the issues presented and discussed in this article is to seek advice and specialized training. Training and specialized advice are important to be based on the results of recent academic studies. There are a number of solutions in the literature, easily applicable to human resources managers in the context of the crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. The present study is limited to the analysis of recent literature and to a few unstructured interviews conducted especially at companies with German capital.

For the next stage we will expand the area of the interviewees, we will properly structure the interviews to obtain broader results based on a qualitative analysis. The main results of the qualitative analysis will be verified econometrically.

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