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The Workforce's Judgement about a full Return to the Office Mandates: a transnational data analysis

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ABSTRACT

The workforce works in different work environments at the present time, but this is in the face of the managers' desire for a full return to the office. The main objective of this study is to examine the status quo of the modern workplace from the workforce's point of view, in particular how changes have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and what the post-pandemic influence has been on the modern workplace culture. To understand the figured dynamics of judgement associated with shifting to a full return to office mandates, we conducted a transnational online survey (from 9 to 22 November 2024) of Austrian, Czech and Slovak (N=1467) workforces that worked in various working environments. A descriptive statistical method was used to analyse and describe the basic features of the data. At the time of the survey, 18.61% of firms were totally remote in their operations, while 47.65% were in hybrid mode and 33.74% were in the office. Flexibility characterised the state of most firms. Only 33.33% of the respondents were very enthusiastic about returning to the office, 47.44% were moderately and 19.22% not at all interested. Seven hypotheses were set. Hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H7 were confirmed for all factors except gender, while H4, H5 and H6 were confirmed for all factors. The RTO state is already here, and it divides people and their organisations. RTO will not solve challenges in engagement. In fact, almost 63% of respondents choose flexibility even if their office seems to be available. The RTO trend as shown in this study is facing resistance and may not be a sustainable long-term solution.

INTRODUCTION

Many businesses are facing the great conflict brought about by the worker who refuses to return to the office. This simply means organisations have a full-return mandate that is being ignored by an e-employee. In addition, the employee who is returning to the office is not the same employee as the one who left the office during COVID-19. Workforce experiences have undoubtedly changed. The pandemic revealed new ways of working (Andrulli and Gerards, 2023) and affected the workplace culture in the business (De Lucas Ancillo et al., 2020; Spicer, 2020). Beno (2021, p. 332) highlighted that "workplace culture can be seen as the general nature of business, including values, beliefs, behaviours, goals, attitudes, work rules and practices." This relates to presenteeism, rigid attendance policies and micromanagement versus flexible work structure practices, which in turn means shifting the focus from where the workforce finishes its work

duties to what the workforce achieves in the various work environments. According to Ding and Ma (2024), the return to the office (RTO) is linked to reasserting control over the workforce. The pandemic demonstrated a change in the power dynamics where employees gained a small amount of extra power. RTO mandates seem to be another way for business to regain control.

In 2022, the usual working week for people aged 20-64 in Austria averaged 36 hours, in the Czech Republic it was 39.8 hours and in Slovakia 39.6 (Eurostat, 2024a). There is a clear decrease of working from home in the surveyed countries (Eurostat, 2024b). Recent data demonstrate that 38% of respondents envision the future workplace environment as fully on-site and 53% as hybrid (Envoy, 2024). But the trend of the RTO mandate is rising. The recent KPMG 2024 CEO Outlook revealed the following expected working environment: 79% in the office and 17% hybrid in 2027 (KPMG, 2024). White-collar workers enjoyed flexible work environment possibilities (Radstand, 2023). According to Kastle barometer data for 4 March 2020 to 13 November 2024, expected occupancy rates will continue to expand (Kastle, 2024).

The main objective of this study is to examine the status quo of the modern workplace from the workforce's point of view, in particular how changes have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and what the post-pandemic influence has been on the modern workplace culture. First, there is the need to develop some criteria that will help to understand the changes that have affected the workplace. Secondly, this study will contextualise the workplace situation by reference to the return to the office mandates or the flexibility mandate, which will be done while trying to explain some of the most important aspects of workplace participation.

Years after the pandemic brought about an increase of the remote workforce, many businesses are still trying to find a comfortable and appropriate working model. Businesses have had to go from empty offices overnight, to becoming used to managing and communicating with the home to starting to ask workers to return to their desks. Will we spend more time in the office in future, or less? Flexible work will continue to be an important tool. The solution lies in flexibility. In view of this, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1: How do employees perceive a model of workplace participation?

RQ2: Does post-COVID-19 impact on employees' preferred work situation?

RQ3: What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to return to work at the company's premises?

RQ4: What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to continue working remotely?

This paper first reviews the relevant literature. Next, the quantitative method used in this study is described. The section after that presents the findings, followed by the authors' discussion. The last part contains the conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The workplace is a physical (working from the office, working from home, working from anywhere) or digital premises environment (virtual work environment) where the workforce completes its duties. Opperman (2002) identifies three subtypes of workplace environment, namely the technical, human and organisational environment. Work environments carry many capital items, elements or factors that may influence both the physical and psychological well-being of the workforce (Briner, 2000). The notion of the workplace is fluid, as the pandemic demonstrated, because "digital technologies have colonized other's locations and other aspects of life" (Doursih, 2006, p. 2). Chandrasekar (2011) identified important environmental factors among 12 workforce engagement and disengagement factors.

According to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022, p. 1), "the choice between office and home will not only depend on workspace preferences, but also on the type of tasks planned for the day (concentration, communication, or a mixture of both)." Flynn and Ghent (2024) demonstrate that industry-specific remote work feasibility, office rents and firm size determine the level of in-person work that firms require.

Under RTO, the authors understand the shift by businesses to encourage their workforce to return to the in-person work mandate after the boom of work flexibility due to the pandemic. Jaqua (2022) stressed that it is not about whether or not to include an e-workforce but how to structure it appropriately. Many employees strongly resist a return to the office (Gibson et al., 2023). Authors further added that rigid RTO rules feel outdated, manipulative and controlling for many employees. Ding and Ma (2024) highlight that RTO mandates after COVID-19 do not result in a notable improvement in business performance. Van Dijke et al.'s (2024) data suggest that RTO policies can cause an exodus of the senior workforce, resulting in a possible threat to productivity, innovation and competitiveness. Flexibility seems to be a high priority for knowledge workers with negative RTO perception. Note that Barhatov et al. (2020, p. 20) observe that "flexible forms of employment offer global opportunities to the companies." During the pandemic and in the post-pandemic time, different experiences led to different perspectives of the workplace. According to Ding and Ma (2024), RTO mandates did not improve stock returns or profitability. Workforce participation needs to be associated with perceptions of actual changes in daily work practices (Nielsen and Randall, 2012).

There is, however, no previous analysis involving the authors' study intention from the workforce's point of view as shown in a transnational survey of Austrian, Czech and Slovakian workforce. This raises questions around whether a transition to RTO would negatively affect intrafirm business and personal work output and life. Despite these ongoing discussions, we have very little evidence on how changes have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and what the post-pandemic influence has been on the modern workplace culture. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there are no studies that document the extent to which working from the office rather than from home and vice versa affect patterns of intrafirm business and personal work output and life. In order to address these unexplored issues, four research questions served as part of the method of inquiry in this study (see Introduction and Methodology).

2. METHODOLOGY

Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as the surveyed countries, provide valuable insights and data. Firstly, their economy is dominated by the service sector with e-workability options. Secondly, the countries have a long common history. Thirdly, as a group, there is a higher ratio of men working than women (OECD, 2024).

The web-based app Google Forms was used to gather data for the present study. Quantitative research explains how different items interact, and this can be done by gathering numerical data that can be further analysed using statistical methods (Creswell, 2012). Google Form is a free application which emulates an online survey system (Kim and Park, 2012, p. 2).

The authors followed Beno et al.'s (2022) methodology using an ad hoc Google Forms questionnaire to collect data in the period 9 to 22 November 2024. The form of the questionnaire was two open-ended questions and 16 close-ended questions (Likert scale: agreement, attitude, desire, importance, periodicity and quality). In addition to demographic questions, the following questions were asked: On a scale of 1-3, how excited are you about returning to work? (extremely, moderately, not at all); Which work model do you prefer: fully remote, hybrid, or in-office?; How important is flexibility to you in your work schedule? (very important, moderately important, not at all important); Do you have any concerns or reservations about returning to the office?; In the recent past have you worked in an office at all?; How flexible would you like your schedule to be?; What are your major concerns about returning to the office? (Check all that apply). Other (please specify); Which of the following will motivate you to return to the office? Please specify; On a scale of 1-3, how conducive is your current home environment to working from home in the long term? Good-Fair-Poor; If you're prepared to return to the office, will you be available to work the same hours as you did before leaving the office? I prefer to visit the office: daily, weekly, monthly, never.

The authors contacted the organisations by telephone for the initial step of gathering potential respondents. After this approval had been obtained, the next step was to send an email with an invitation to

participate in the questionnaire, with a Google Forms link. The respondents represent a broad cross-section of service sectors with a total sample of 1467, 683 female (56.6%), and 784 male (53.4%). Most respondents were married, 678 (46.2%), and 44.1% had one child; 33.3% had no children. The age of the participants ranged from approximately 22 years to 69 years. More specifically 376 were Gen Z (25.6%), 369 were Millennials (25.2%), 394 Gen X (26.9%) and 328 Boomers II (22.4%). The sample consisted of 600 (40.9%) Austrians, 410 Czechs (27.9%) and 457 Slovaks (31.2%).

After an examination and synopsis of what had been written by others, the authors developed their own research questions and hypotheses. As a consequence of linking literature reviews to research issues, the following research questions were formulated for this survey:

RQ1: How do employees perceive a model of workplace participation?

RQ2: Does post-COVID-19 impact on employees' preferred work situation?

RQ3: What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to return to work at the company's premises?

RQ4: What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to continue working remotely?

Testable statements provided seven hypotheses stemming from these research questions to proceed with for empirical investigation and analysis:

RQ1 led to hypotheses H1 and H2;

RQ2 led to hypotheses H3 and H4;

RQ3 led to hypothesis H5, and

RQ4 led to hypotheses H6 and H7.

A descriptive statistical method was used to analyse and describe the basic features of the data. All respondents were informed about the aims of the survey. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

There has been a mixed reaction to the RTO movement. At the time of this survey, the operating model in 18.61% of firms was totally remote, while 47.65% operated in a hybrid mode and 33.74% were in-office. Flexibility featured in the models of most firms. Only 33.33% of the respondents were very enthusiastic about returning to the office, 47.44% were moderately interested and 19.22% not at all.

3.1 The role of personal circumstances

Workforce participation is a key component of workforce involvement in decision-making, problem-solving and more autonomy in work processes. This is a procedure that allows employees to have some control over their work and the conditions under which they work. As demonstrated in this study, many employees are still working remotely. There has been an upside-down work environment in on-site, hybrid and the fully remote models since the pandemic. In fact, almost 63% of respondents chose flexibility even if their office seems to be available.

H1: How excited employees are about returning to work is influenced by gender, age, marital status, number of children and the country where employees work.

The data show that about one-third of men and one-third of women are very excited about returning to work. Fewer than half of both men and women are slightly excited. Therefore, we do not observe any major differences between men and women. Further analysis demonstrates that 40% of employees aged 22-27 and 60-69 are very excited about returning to work, while only 21.1% of employees aged 28-43 are very excited. About half of the employees aged 28-43 and 44-59 are slightly excited. A total of 40% of employees who are single or widowed are very excited about returning to work, while only 22% of employees who live separately are very excited. Employees who live separately are somewhat excited in 58% of cases. Over 40% of childless employees are very excited about returning to work. Employees with three children are

very excited only 26.5% of the time. Employees with three children are not excited at all in more than one-third of cases. Employees who are the most enthusiastic about returning to work are in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia and Austria, about half of the respondents are mostly slightly enthusiastic.

The hypothesis was verified using Pearson's chi-square test of independence at a significance level of 0.05. According to the test results, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on how much employees are looking forward to returning to work was confirmed. The P-values of the tests for these factors are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05. The effect of gender was not proven.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, which measures the extent of the effect of a given factor, age has the greatest influence on how much employees look forward to returning to work ($V=0.149$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is country ($V=0.078$).

Employees aged 22–27 and 60–69 are therefore more excited about returning to work than employees in the 28–59 age category. Employees who are single or widowed are more excited about returning to work than employees in another family relationship. Childless employees are more excited about returning to work than employees with children. Czechs are more excited about returning to work than employees in Slovakia or Austria.

H2: There is no significant difference between men and women who are hesitant or have concerns about returning to work and who are influenced by gender, age, marital status, number of children and the country where employees work.

The hypothesis was verified using Pearson's chi-square test of independence at a significance level of 0.05. According to the test results, a statistically significant influence of age, marital status, number of children and country on whether employees are hesitant or have concerns about returning to work was confirmed. The P-values of the tests are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05 for these factors. The influence of gender was not proven.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, which measures the extent of the effect of the given factor, the greatest influence on whether employees are hesitant or have concerns about returning to work is age ($V=0.165$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is country ($V=0.106$).

According to the contingency data of frequency distribution, we can therefore state that employees aged 22–27 and 60–69 are less hesitant and have fewer concerns about returning to work than employees in the age category 28–59. Employees who are single or widowed are less likely to be hesitant or have concerns about returning to work than employees in other family relationships. Childless employees are less hesitant and have fewer concerns about returning to work than employees with children. Czechs are significantly less likely to be hesitant or have concerns about returning to work than employees in Slovakia or Austria.

3.2 The role of the work situation

Generally, workplace behaviour is modelled, taught and absorbed by being in the environment. Working remotely, or in a hybrid environment, is sometimes a matter of adjusting the way you worked before, but for a whole new generation of workers it will be their first real job, so for them there is no experience to draw on.

H3: Past office work is influenced by gender, age, family status, number of children of employees and the country where they work.

The hypothesis was again verified using Pearson's chi-square test of independence at a significance level of 0.05. According to the test results, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on whether employees had worked in an office in the past was confirmed. The P-

values of the tests for these factors are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05. The effect of gender was not proven.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, the number of children has the greatest influence on whether employees have worked in an office in the past ($V=0.151$), and the country has the lowest influence, although it is statistically significant ($V=0.101$).

A significantly smaller proportion of employees aged 22–27 than older employees worked in an office every day. Older employees have recently worked in an office to a greater extent than employees aged 22–27. A significantly smaller proportion of employees who are single than employees with another marital status worked in an office every day. A significantly smaller proportion of employees without children than employees with children worked in an office every day. Employees in Austria used to work twice a week significantly more often than employees in the Czech Republic.

H4: Employees' demand for flexible working hours is influenced by gender, age, family status, number of children of employees and the country where they work.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, age has the greatest influence on employees' demands for flexible working hours ($V=0.126$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country where employees work ($V=0.089$).

Employees aged 28–43 years are significantly more likely to request complete flexibility than employees aged 22–27 years. Employees who are single are significantly more likely to request fixed working hours than employees who are divorced, married or living separately. Employees with one child are significantly less likely to request fixed working hours than employees with more children or no children. Employees with one child are significantly more likely to request partially flexible working hours than employees with three children. Employees in Slovakia request fixed working hours significantly less often than employees in the Czech Republic. Employees in Slovakia request partially flexible working hours significantly more often than employees in the Czech Republic.

3.3 The role of favouring the office

The data obtained show that from the employees' point of view several reasons for a full return to the office can be identified.

One significant pro-office element is the introduction of a four-day work week (21%). Interestingly, 190 workers (12.9%) see the act of commuting as a pivotal mental transition point between their private and business lives. Further, 186 (12.7%) respondents recognise the benefit of the office noise factor. It seems that the e-workforce has found that office noise can help them to focus. This effect of office noise depends on a number of individual employee factors. In a so-called "always-on culture", 10.4% (153) of employees desired more rest breaks to find a balance between being effective and having optimal well-being. A total of 90 younger workers (6.1%) in mentorship were deemed to have successfully navigated the path forward. It seems as if workplace relationships are not vital in the surveyed organisations because only 4.3% of respondents see the socialising aspect as beneficial.

H5: Motivation to return to the office is influenced by gender, age, family status, number of children of employees and the country where they work.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, the number of children has the greatest influence on the motivation of employees to return to the office ($V=0.222$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country ($V=0.078$) where employees work.

Men see motivation significantly more often in commuter benefits than women do. Women see it significantly more often in hybrid world incentives. Employees aged 60–69 see motivation to return to the office significantly more often in having secured child/elderly care than employees aged 22–27 do.

Employees aged 22-27 see motivation to return to the office significantly more often in team collaboration than older employees do. Employees who are single see motivation to return to the office significantly less often in having secured child/elderly care than other employees do. Employees who are single or live separately see motivation significantly more often in commuter benefits than other employees do. Childless employees see motivation significantly less often in having secured child/elderly care and significantly more often in commuter benefits than employees with children do. Employees aged 60-69 see motivation to return to the office significantly less often in hybrid world incentives than younger employees do. Czechs see motivation to return to the office significantly less often in commuter benefits than employees in Slovakia and Austria do.

3.4 The role of favouring remote work

The workforce in this study favours the continuation of e-work with a re-evaluation of work and its role. A total of 426 respondents (29%) mentioned the absence of co-workers as a pro-remote element. Further analysis demonstrates that rigidity with strict requirements around which days to be present (378 respondents, 25.8%) increases demand to work remotely. Moreover, microaggression is extremely common in the workplaces of 287 employees (19.6%) in this study. According to this data, 231 workers (15.7%) mentioned that toxic work culture can wreak havoc.

H6: The friendliness of the home environment for work is influenced by gender, age, family status, number of children of employees and the country where they work.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, the greatest influence on the feeling of the home environment being favourable for work is age ($V=0.215$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country where employees work ($V=0.092$).

Men perceive the home environment as being favourable significantly more often than women do. Employees aged 60–69 perceive the home environment as being unfavourable significantly more often than younger employees do. Widowed employees perceive the home environment as being favourable significantly less often. Employees with three children perceive the home environment as being favourable for work significantly less often than employees with one child do. Czechs perceive the home environment as being favourable for work significantly less often than employees in Slovakia or Austria do.

H7: The same working hours after returning to the office as before are influenced by gender, age, family status, number of children of employees and the countries where they work.

According to the results of Pearson's chi-square tests, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on the same working hours as before leaving the office was confirmed. The P-values of the tests are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05 for all factors. The effect of gender was not confirmed.

According to Cramer's V coefficient, age has the greatest influence on the same working hours as when leaving the office ($V=0.192$), and the lowest influence is again the country where the employees work ($V=0.115$).

Employees aged 22-27 and 60-69 want to have the same working hours as before leaving the office significantly more often than employees aged 28-59 do. Employees who are single or widowed want to have the same working hours as before leaving the office significantly more often than employees who are married or living separately do. Employees with three children want to have the same working hours significantly less often than employees with fewer children or without children do. Employees in the Czech Republic want to have the same working hours as before leaving the office significantly more often than employees in Slovakia and Austria do.

4. DISCUSSION

RTO is already here and it divides people and their organisations. RTO will not solve challenges in engagement. In fact, almost 63% of respondents chose flexibility even if their office seems to be available. This confirms similar findings of a recent study which indicates increased localisation flexibility in addition to time flexibility (Krajčák et al., 2023). As stated by Chomatowska and Janiak-Rejno (2022, p. 651), “while young employees are open to flexible solutions in work organization, research has shown that it is difficult to define their unequivocal preferences in this regard.” However, based on our data, employees aged 22-27 and 60-69 are more excited and have less hesitation or concern about returning to work than employees in the 28-59 age category do.

Older employees have recently worked in an office to a greater extent than employees aged 22-27 have. This means that as a parent worker demands flexible boundaries to attend to family responsibilities, non-parent workers desire shields to maintain boundaries around their private life (Kangas et al., 2023). Further analysis demonstrates that employees aged 28-43 years are significantly more likely to request complete flexibility than employees aged 22-27 years are. Employees who are single are significantly more likely to request fixed working hours than employees who are divorced, married or living separately are. This is similar to the situation in the IPSOS survey data (2021), where the workforce tends to have positive perceptions about e-work and desires more flexibility.

One significant pro-office element is the introduction of a four-day work week (21%). This is similar to Beno et al.'s (2022) study which demonstrates the greater preference for a shorter work week. The better the office environment, the higher the perceived work efficiency and the lower the amount of loss due to presenteeism (Arata et al., 2023). In this study, interestingly, 190 workers (12.9%) see the act of commuting as a pivotal mental transition point between their private and business lives. The so-called “pseudo commute” (an imaginary commute) can help to re-establish the work-home boundaries (Beño, 2023). Furthermore, 186 (12.7%) respondents recognise the benefit of the office noise factor. In the past, 99% of respondents revealed that their concentration was impaired by various components of office noise (Banburry and Berry, 2024). In a so-called “always-on culture”, 10.4% (153) of employees desired more rest breaks to find a balance between being effective and having optimal well-being. This is because being always-on seems to be a double-edged sword (The Myers-Briggs Company, 2019). A total of 90 younger workers (6.1%) in mentorship were deemed to have successfully navigated the path forward. As confirmed by Pietron-Pyszczyk and Borowska (2022, p. 54), “representatives of Generation Z should be targeted for mentoring support in the context of pursuing their careers.” The individual's adjustment to the new environment may have unwanted consequences in the form of stress reactions (Glass et al., 1969). But the data obtained demonstrated that men see motivation significantly more often in commuter benefits than women do. Results show that opportunities for commuter parking and transit benefits not only increase the probability of workers using the subsidised travel mode to commute but also affects workers' non-commuting trips as well as their household members' travel behaviour (Shin, 2020). Women see this significantly more often in hybrid world incentives than men do. Employees aged 60-69 see motivation to return to the office significantly more often in having secured child/elderly care than employees aged 22-27 do. Employees aged 22-27 see motivation to return to the office significantly more often in team collaboration than older employees do. DiFonzo and Bordia (1998) highlight that during organisational change related facts provide a reason for change initiative which is interlinked with the possible reduction of negative outcomes of this change by the workforce.

A total of 426 respondents (29%) mentioned the absence of co-workers as a pro-remote element. Other findings even demonstrate higher percentages of workers missing being with their co-workers (IPSOS, 2021). Employees in their twenties who often need mentorship and those over forty who often provide mentorship are more likely to return to the office (Emanuel et al., 2023), which is comparable with the data gained showing that employees aged 22-27 and 60-69 want to have the same working hours as before. Further analysis demonstrates that rigidity with strict requirements about which days to be present (378 respondents, 25.8%) increases the demand to work remotely. This is equivalent to the present findings that workspace flexibility and operational flexibility have significant positive relationships with employee engagement (Lee et al., 2024). Moreover, microaggression is extremely common in the workplaces of 287

employees (19.6%) in this study. According to the data, 231 workers (15.7%) mentioned that toxic work culture can wreak havoc. Hassan et al. (2012) revealed the positive effect of trust-building interpersonal relationships. Men perceive the home environment as being favourable significantly more often than women do. Employees aged 60-69 perceive the home environment as being unfavourable significantly more often than younger employees do. This is contrary to a recent study that RTO policies can lead to an outflow of senior employees (Van Dijke et al., 2024).

Generally, Czechs are significantly less likely to be hesitant or have concerns about returning to work than employees in Slovakia or Austria are. Employees in Slovakia request partially flexible working hours significantly more often than employees in the Czech Republic do. Czechs perceive the home environment as being favourable for work significantly less often than employees in Slovakia or Austria do. Interestingly, a recent study shows that workers who are ready to accept a four-day work week are most frequent in Austria, followed by the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Beno et al., 2022).

The data in this study indicate that “a return to the office should not be a tug-of-war between leaders and employees” (Brodersen, 2024, p. 100).

CONCLUSION

The tendency to move back to the office raises discussion globally. The opportunity to RTO is not an all-or-nothing situation. RTO and the e-working strategy require a clear understanding of how a business structure both the flexibility and office mandates and what works best for employees. This is because the workforce is reluctant to move back to the office without flexibility, but at the same time businesses need employees to commit to office work.

The following research questions were explored:

RQ1: How do employees perceive a model of workplace participation?

The concept of workplace participation can be construed differently by employees. According to the test results, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on how much employees are looking forward to returning to work was confirmed as having the greatest influence on how much employees look forward to returning to work ($V=0.149$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is country ($V=0.078$).

According to the test results, a statistically significant influence of age, marital status, number of children and country on whether employees are hesitant or have concerns about returning to work was confirmed. The greatest influence on whether employees are hesitant or have concerns about returning to work is age ($V=0.165$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is country ($V=0.106$).

RQ2: Does post-COVID-19 impact on employees' preferred work situation?

According to the test results, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on whether employees had worked in an office in the past was confirmed. The P-values of the tests for these factors are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05. The effect of gender was not proven. The number of children has the greatest influence on whether employees have worked in an office in the past ($V=0.151$), and the country has the lowest influence, although it is statistically significant ($V=0.101$).

Age has the greatest influence on employees' demands for flexible working hours ($V=0.126$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country where employees work ($V=0.089$).

RQ3: What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to return to work at the company's premises?

One significant pro-office element is the introduction of a four-day work week (21%). Interestingly, 190 workers (12.9%) see the act of commuting as a pivotal mental transition point between their private and business lives. Further, 186 (12.7%) respondents recognise the benefit of the office noise factor. It seems that the e-workforce has found that office noise can help them to focus. This effect of office noise depends

on a number of individual employee factors. In a so-called “always-on culture”, 10.4% (153) employees desired more rest breaks to find a balance between being effective and having optimal well-being. A total of 90 younger workers (6.1%) in mentorship were deemed to have successfully navigated the path forward. It seems as if workplace relationships are not vital in the surveyed organisations because only 4.3% of respondents see the socialising aspect as beneficial.

The number of children has the greatest influence on the motivation of employees to return to the office ($V=0.222$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country ($V=0.078$) where employees work.

RQ4. What factors significantly determine the decisions of employees to continue working remotely?

A total of 426 respondents (29%) mentioned the absence of co-workers as a pro-remote element. Further analysis demonstrates that rigidity with strict requirements around which days to be present (378 respondents, 25.8%) increases demand to work remotely. Moreover, microaggression is extremely common in the workplaces of 287 employees (19.6%) in this study. According to this data, 231 workers (15.7%) mentioned that toxic work culture can wreak havoc.

The greatest influence on the feeling of the home environment being favourable for work is age ($V=0.215$), and the lowest influence, although statistically significant, is again the country where employees work ($V=0.092$).

According to the results of Pearson's chi-square tests, a statistically significant effect of age, marital status, number of children and country on the same working hours as before leaving the office was confirmed. The P-values of the tests are lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05 for all factors. The effect of gender was not confirmed. Age has the greatest influence on the same working hours as when leaving the office ($V=0.192$), and the lowest influence is again the country where the employees work ($V=0.115$).

H1, H2, H3 and H7 were confirmed for all factors except gender. H4, H5 and H6 were confirmed for all factors.

This survey captures attitudes at a certain point in time. The findings in this study should be considered more as a recapitulation than a definitive description.

Some limitations are associated with this study. The first is the sampling size for saturation, which is the result of the authors' limitation on account of the novelty and trend of the RTO topic. Furthermore, since Google Forms is a web-based app in English it could represent a limitation to a certain extent because of the respondents not fully understanding the questions. Another limitation is the geographical scope of the study. Restricting the study to only Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia inevitably places some limitations on the results. Corporate organisational culture is different from country to country and nation to nation. Integrating quantitative and qualitative studies from more countries will provide more generalisable results.

Working remotely and the RTO move have been driven both by employers and employees. The question remains: “Home office, hybrid or office?” However, in line with the above discussion, future studies should investigate more closely the e-workforce preferences and reasons for leaving the organisation when RTO policies are instituted. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to track the outcomes over extended periods. Additionally, it is necessary to understand the impact fully and to determine if RTO and e-work policies are sustainable.

In conclusion, the findings of this study should be of practical benefit to organisations that are considering the values and needs of their own employees in order to encourage and retain them without forcing them to return to the office. The key message remains that e-work is here to stay. There is an alchemy

associated with being present in person that has not been replicated virtually yet, but there is also an alchemy in e-working, which has crystallised in the home and in other premises. To lure these workers back to the office, businesses will have to learn how to provide an in-office working space that the e-worker finds attractive.

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