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Home Office or Distant Work? - Conclusions of the Year 2020

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Abstract: The year of 2020 has brought significant changes in the lives of people and the world of work. Many companies went bankrupt due to restrictions because of the virus situation or they were forced to decrease the working hours or the amount of workforce. Meanwhile, some companies alterations were absolutely on a different level.

The alterations mean switching to home office particularly for white collar workers. The companies were not prepared for the changes therefore, the regulating of the home working was started later. The alterations affected the employment of contract, meaning the relationship between employer and employee changed.

Can the quality and quantity of the work of the employee be controlled while working from home? How can it be controlled to be accepted by both parties and keep it legal? Does trust between the employer and employee have any role in such situations? Is there any difference between the home office and distant work?

I was searching for the answers to the questions in my survey where I used questionnaire and current regulations and laws for making statements. The questionnaire included questions (multiple choices) about the new form of work and was shared in the internet in summer 2020.

The aim of this research is to give an overview how changed the work at Hungarian companies because of the COVID-19 situation. This article would like to highlight the home office is not equal with distant work and the rules are different.

Keywords: Home Office, Distant Work, Trust, Over-time, COVID-19

1 Introduction, Aim of the research

The aim of the present research is to provide a comprehensive picture of the regulation of home office and distant work, the legal background. It touches on the importance of trust and, based on a sample of 109, is able to draw conclusions for respondents, which will provide a solid basis for the analysis of the second wave of COVID in a later article.

2 Changes in Year 2020

“Nowadays the most of the world have learnt to adapt to a social distance. Keeping a distance results in staying away from our usual jobs in the most workplace. Employers and employees had to adapt to a number of new rules, and continuous work from a distance (means home) resulted in a new situation with challenges that could be examined and analyzed” [5].

This year so many changes happened having impacted the whole world. The source of the main problem is the COVID-19 causing several changes in different areas.

In this paper the main focus is on the effects of the virus situation in Hungary. The Hungarian Government ordered the emergency situation 11 March, 2020.

The main points of the emergency:

- Quarantine
- Restricted measures

Following the rules needs a proper behavior by the people of this country. In the modern world it is a new and unusual situation and the freedom was limited.

The Covid-19 had a negative impact on the economic field. Mainly the affected companies were multinational automotive suppliers in Hungary. They were not the only ones but other companies went bankrupt or had to decrease the production volumen. The common thing in these companies is the supplier chain began to slow down or even stopped. For these companies the raw material arrives from China. The time the production in China stopped or they were not able to produce enough and send the ordered quantities to the customers.

Anyway some companies or firms were not affected in this situation at all. For example the building industry has not changed, the work was continuous.

A consequence of the situation is thousands of employees became unemployed in a short time. The unemployed were another problem for the government.

3 Home Office

The Home Office has been an existing phenomenon mainly at multinational companies for many years in Hungary though not regulated by law. It is not the same as distant working, nevertheless often referred to as distant working. On the contrary the distant work has a regulation by law [1].

Unfortunately the extended working from home arrived suddenly in 2020. Most of the companies had no existing procedures for it nor any schemes or regulations. The Employers sent their employees into home office during the quarantine. Employee contracts are modified by employer (because of home office).

During quarantine working at home is not usual even because mostly the all family member especially the children (education was also operating in home office) had to stay at home. In this case the life changed within the families for example the employee works at home but he/she must educate the child, does the housework or goes for shopping.

In some case there are unjustified expectations from the employers. During home office the employees no need to travel and save extra time but the employer asks them to work instead of the travel time. It is not legitimate. This is the point where the relationship may change between the employer and employee because it can cause disputes and tensions, these often lead to conflicts and some of these conflicts can become legal disputes [8].

The new situation required adaptation for everyone. Human relationships have changed between the family members and between the employers and employees of course. "During the quarantine period, it was primarily intellectual workers who were able and entitled to work from home, who could enjoy the advantages of this situation or even have to bear the disadvantages [5].

Since the quarantine period the human relationship exists in a digital world and the physical contacts reduced. It became customary to live and work in a cyber world. The more technologically and economically connected we are, the more challenges we have to face [7].

3.1 Occupational Health and Safety in Home Office

The Hungarian Law of protection of Labor is the basis to make a risk assessment [2]. In case of any organized work (if there is only one owner and one employee) it is mandatory to prepare. If the employees work at home office in that case the rules are the same like in the company's office. Concerning the Occupational Health and Safety rules also, that is why to need to do a risk assessment about the employees' home. The task to make the assessments belongs to health and safety expert.

Many employers ask their employees to fill a form for the risk assessment and take some photos about the work environment and conditions. This raises privacy issues (data protection of private life), among other things:

There are lots of sensitive issues:

- Who can see these pictures (only the H&S expert or any member of Management)
- Making assumptions according to the pictures.
- Religious issues
- Political issues
- Personal issues

Taking photos are not the only problems, because some employer made questionnaires for their employees and it includes questions like this:

"How often do you meet your colleagues outside of work hours?"

The mentioned question is a part of a home office questionnaire. But why? It is a violation of the privacy. Because employees are afraid of losing their jobs, they do not protest against such requests like these.

Many health and safety experts are unaware of the privacy rights and companies also. During this extended emergency period the companies try to rule the home office.

3.2 Home Office: Over-Time

In Hungary, the working times is regulated by law [1], [3]. If the employee works more than the normal work time that means extra work hours: over-time. This form of work is controlled by the employers officially, of course.

Nowadays the place of work and the home are the same. Actually the work time isn't changed except for where it had been decreased.

Most important the work or overtime during the home office is not so easy to control or limit as the normal work in order to eliminate this, an unconditional trust must be established between the employee and employer, which is called absence trust.

According the Hungarian laws the distant work is not done at the employer's site, but the activity can practically be done from anywhere (except if, it was defined in the contract), in such cases mainly digital or IT tools are used by the employee.

Distant work: Most of the work hours are spent out of the actual workplace [10]. The time spent on work is scheduled by the employee with the keeping of the deadlines.

Home office needs permission or confirmation of the employer (even without company regulation). The work hours spent in home office should be the same as defined originally on the site.

Distant work and home office are atypical working methods.

The chart below shows the differences and the similarities between the main points of distant work and home office. Necessary to highlight the 3rd row where is the regulation of these working methods. Until the home office has an inner regulation by the employers, the distant work is regulated the Law [1].

Distant Work	HOME OFFICE
Activity can practically be done from anywhere (except if, it was defined in the contract)	As shown in the name it is done from home
It is regulated by Law (Year 2012. I. LAW about the Labour Law Code § 196.)	Written, spoken or inner regulation by the employer
Using IT tools, smart phone Limited or no access to company drives	Using IT tools, smart phone Unlimited access to company drives (VPN connection)
The time spent on work is scheduled by the employee with the keeping of the deadlines.	Should be the same as defined originally on the site.
Occupational Health & Safety rules	Occupational Health & Safety rules

Table 1: Comparing the Distant work and Home office

Source: Author's own edit

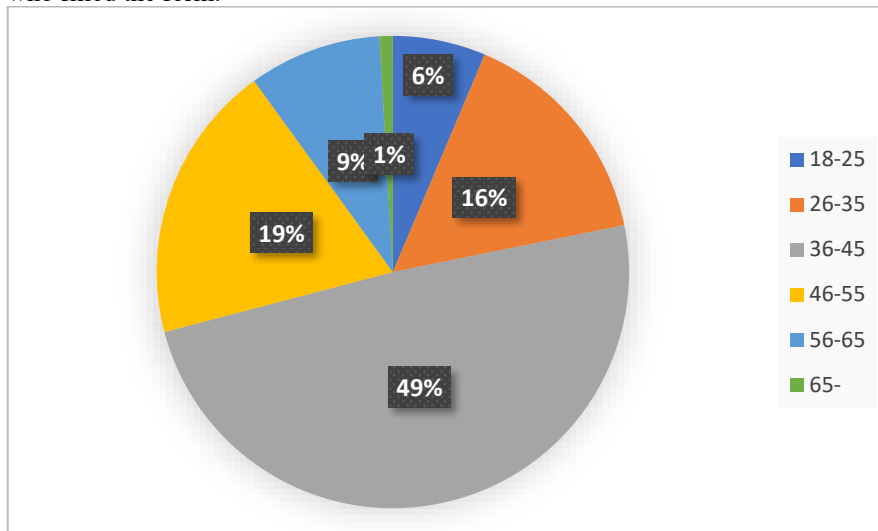
Of course, the IT tools are very important in home office and its security also. The employees must take care of the data privacy in the home. The IT systems build on corporate processes and must include the principles of information security [4]. In addition important in case of an ERP system the security and be updated in 0-24. The system needs to ensure the protection of information data [4].

4 Result of research

In the second part of this paper I assume the results of my questionnaire. My questions were shared in the social networking sites. 109 people replied to the questions and I analyzed these answers. This questionnaire was shared in summer of 2020, after the first wave of Covid. In that time that was not possible what would happen in the rest of the year. Since that we know the the second wave has started with new restrictions introduced by the Hungarian Government.

4.1 Questions

After the analisation of the answers to the questions I put the final result in pie charts. The first question was simple and interesting, it refers to the age of the people who filled the form.



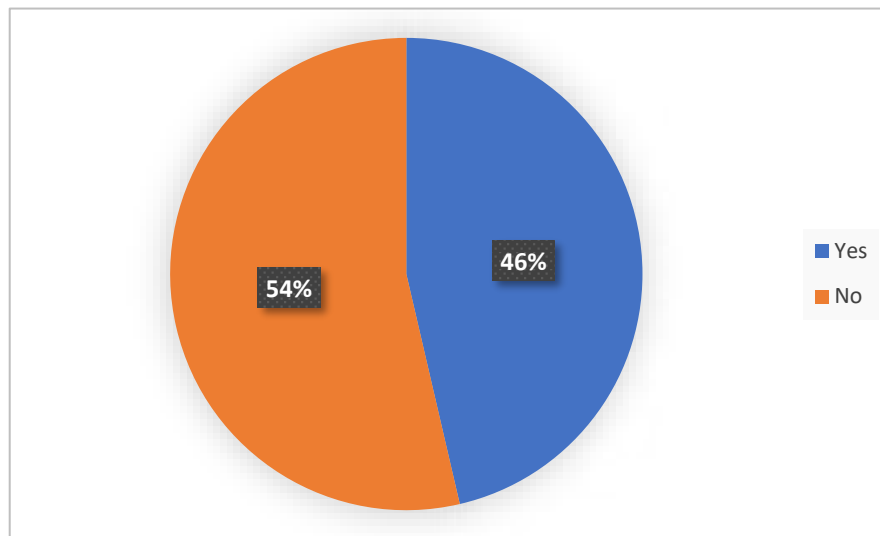
6. Figure Distribution of ages

Source: Author's own edit

Distribution according to ages: mainly 36 to 45 years old people replied (Total nr. of answers is 109). The second largest number of responses were received from 46 to 55 years old people. It is almost 70%. The rest are in different ages, surprisingly

there are over 65 years old people. Normally the people after 65 goes on pension in Hungary.

The next question was looking for the answer whether there are rules for the home office or not.

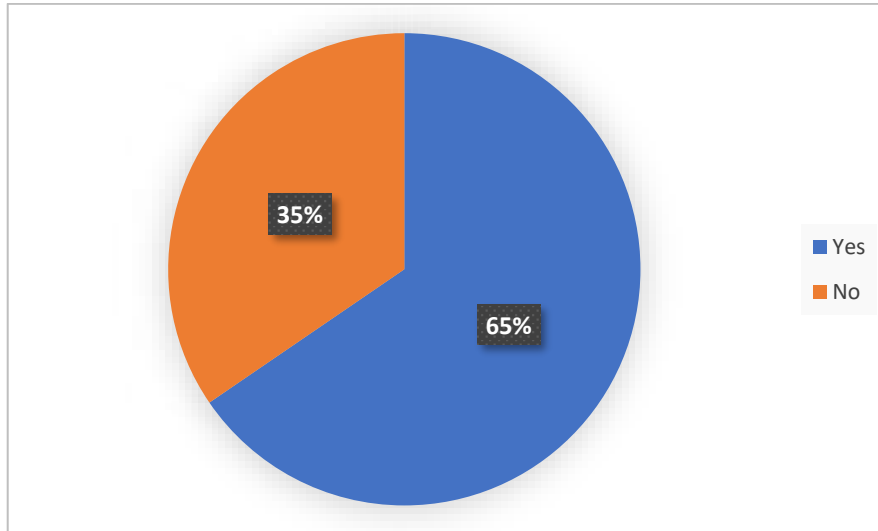


7. Figure Importance of rules of work in Home Office

Source: Author's own edit

Most of the employers (54%) did not define the rules of the work in the home office. Probably the main reason was the unexpected situation in the world of work and it was not a best practice at the companies. The work of employees were controlled in written or verbal ways by the superiors.

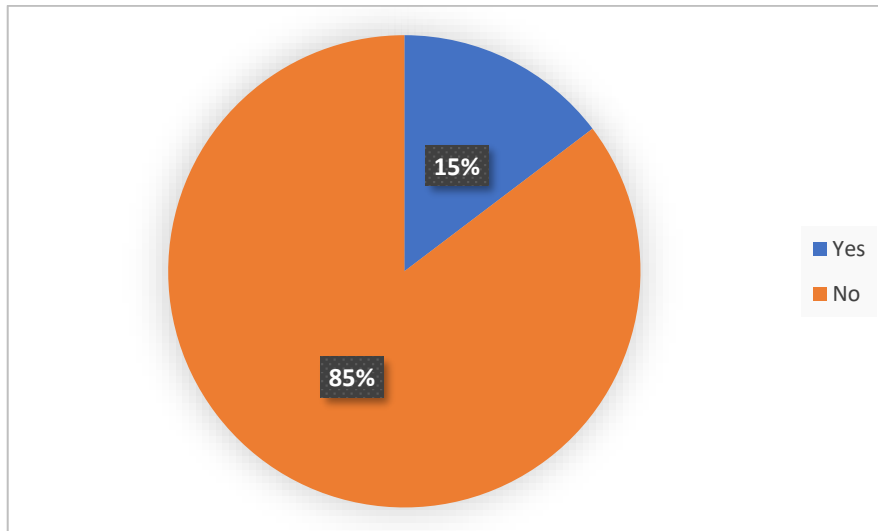
Now that the state of emergency is still existing (end of the year 2020) and nobody sees the end of it, the employers recognized the importance of the written rules of home office.



8. Figure Need to be regulated the Home Office?

Source: Author's own edit

65% of the people think that rules are needed for the home office. It is extremely important to be regulated the conditions of work in the home office. It is known that every work activity has a written regulated form (laws, company rules etc.). It cannot be otherwise if the employee does the job in the home temporarily. Interesting to note the another part of the respondents (35%) does not want rules when does the job in home. Probably they would like to build up a looser connection with the superiors or the employer. In case of the distant work it is normal, but home office is a temporary situation.

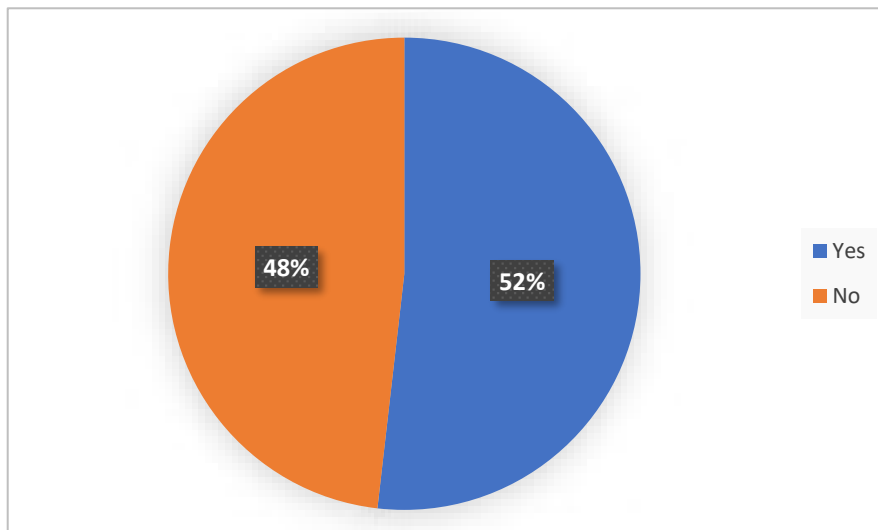


9. Figure Payment for the Over-time

Source: Author's own edit

During the home office some companies pay the over-time – 15 %. We can say the over-time is normal in this world. Over-time also has its rules by law and every employer is required to keep them.

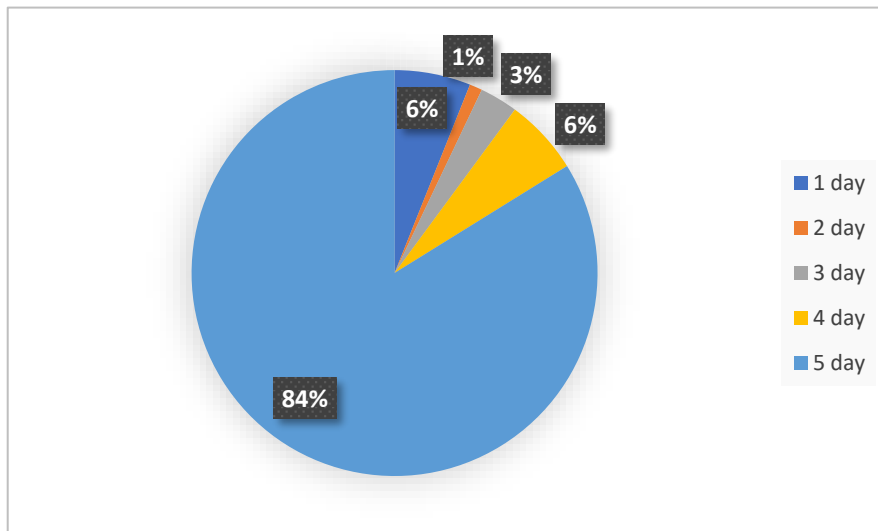
If the employees need to do more work a day than 8 hours during the period of home office in that case we can mention it is considered an over-time.



10. Figure Agrees with the over-time

Source: Author's own edit

Almost the half of people who replied agree with the over-time during home office (52%). This is a normal expectation from the employees because the over-time is a part of the work and it does not matter where they physically do the job. Unfortunately the 48% of the people do not think the over-time is possible during the home office. In the background of the answer there could be several options. If the home office is a necessary while taking care of children, the extra work only becomes a burden. Furthermore, it depends on the employees work attitude. The work in the home office can cause different kinds of conflicts. Conflicts between the family members also between the employees and employers. Conflict is a collision which needs to be handled in a proper way. „In the Hungarian legal regulation, there are several ways for persons how to resolve a conflict, how to resolve a dispute, how to continue with family members, neighbours, colleagues, business partners” [6].



11. Figure Home office after the quarantine period

Source: Author's own edit

After the quarantine, the 5-day home office remained at many companies (84%). This question was very important because it is an indication whether company sent the employees to home office because of the restriction of Government or the health of people is also essential.

The second largest numbers of answers (6%) is the one day and four days home office after the quarantine. No one knew what would happen in Hungary that is why the remained one day in home office in every week may be difficult to be understood.

If employers let the employees work from home (from 1 to 5 days) it means a sense of trust towards the employees. Of course, trust needs to be mutual. It is the base of a long time work relationship between the parties.



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“Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.” [9]

Conclusions

The year 2020 has significantly changed - mainly – the intellectual jobs. The home office is only an expression which still cannot be read in the Hungarian rules although it is not equal to distance work.

Employers are trying to keep up with the situation, but there is no uniform guideline on how to treat the home office as a “new form of work”. The way of communication between separate employees is changing: it mostly happens electronically.

The home becomes the second workplace, so monitoring the working conditions (risk assessments [2]) will be important for the employer.

It is questionable whether the method of enforcement can be legally resolved. Controlling of the work and over-time can not be done 100%. The new situation creates a new expression: „absence trust”.

The trust, of course, has a key role in both family and business life [7], but nowadays it has a much stronger role considering the circumstances of the home office. In this unusual and difficult situation let's trust each other!

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