

How to cite: Deliou, C. & Malagkoniari, M. (2023). Business Executives' Perspectives on Their Workplace Well – Being Throughout COVID-19 Pandemic. *Global Innovations and Collaborative Solutions in Contemporary Science*. (pp. 36-41). *Futurity Research Publishing*. https://futurity-publishing.com/international_conference_3/

Business Executives' Perspectives on Their Workplace Well – Being Throughout COVID-19 Pandemic

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Accepted: October 2, 2023 | **Published:** October 28, 2023 | **Language:** English

Abstract: Work well – being has been displayed continuously after a period of prolonged pandemic that left deep scars on humanity. Realizing the crisis created by the sudden change in work status as a protective measure, we decided to investigate how employees felt at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample came from business executives who were enrolled as part – time students of postgraduate programs. The key finding was that the large percentage of respondents consider that the company/ organization they work for is not really interested in employees' welfare. This conclusion is in line with many surveys carried out to date.

Keywords: well – being, remote working, COVID-19 pandemic, burnout.

Introduction

Well – being has been associated with human happiness and has always been one of the main issues of human concern. The attempt to conceptualize dates to the ancient Greek philosophers, who considered happiness as the highest good and motivation for human behavior and functioning (Diener, 1984). Specifically, the philosopher Aristotle presented the first term of well – being, happiness as the supreme human good.

Remote work has been displayed due to the businesses' digitization and the ICT' development to facilitate workers who made business trips (Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021). Since then, "remote work" is used to describe all types of work that take place outside the main office, but remain connected to it (Bailey & Kurland, 2002).

The paper is supported by a literature analysis that theoretically analyzes the main research axes of remote working and well-being. Following that, the basic research hypotheses, data collection method, research tool, and a general descriptive analysis of the sample are offered. The interpretation of the findings comes next, followed by a discussion of the findings. The report finishes with conclusions, limits, and future research ideas.

Literature Review

"Well – being" is a multifaceted term for which different definitions have been given based on the approaches developed by scholars over the years.

Nowadays, the first conceptualizations recorded before the Second World War link well – being to health and evaluate it by the absence of disease and disability. In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed to the scientific community a broader definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well – being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity" (Cooke et al., 2016).

Since then, well – being has engaged many disciplines of the scientific community, including psychology, medicine, sociology, and counseling (Cooke et al., 2016). The World Health Organization links the term of "well – being" to working life, describing it as "a state in which individuals realize their potential, manage the stress of everyday life, work productively and efficiently and contribute more broadly to their environment". Also, Sahai and Mahapatra (2020) link employees' work well – being to the fulfillment of their overall purpose in the workplace and their positive emotions in it.

Moreover, in Europe, the term "electronic work (e – work)" has been used, which generally refers to work carried out digitally. Remote work is widely recognized in the literature as an "alternative mode of work" or "flexible work arrangements" (Drucker, 1999) and its term is found in many studies in English terminology as "remote work" (Barsness et al., 2005), "teleworking" (Haddon & Lewis, 1994), "working from home" (WFH) (Breckmann & Rupietta, 2016), "mobile work" (Chatterjee et al., 2009), "remote e-working" (Grant et al., 2013) and "work from anywhere" (Choudhury et al., 2021).

Most evidence shows that the way people telework and this practice's effect on their well – being can vary depending on the organizational context, the individual characteristics and the environment in which teleworking takes place (Beckel & Fisher, 2022).

Research Methodology

The sample consisted of students of four postgraduate programs of two Greek universities during the academic year 2020 – 2021. Each program consisted of 35 students, so the size of the population was 140 people. Therefore, the data is primary, and all students received the link to the form (Google Forms) to answer the survey regarding their experience as workers especially during the difficult and unprecedented period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research is carried out with a "quantitative" approach and methodology. The questionnaire was based on the scales of Pradhan and Hati (2022) and Wieneke et al. (2019). The total number of questions – closed type – was 12 and the estimated time to complete the questionnaire is 5 minutes. These questions aimed to contribute to drawing conclusions both about the challenges faced by new workers (and graduate students) and about the needs (psychological, social, work) that arose within the new work context.

After the preparation and the evaluation of the above-mentioned questionnaire, it was distributed via e – mail to all students. Each questionnaire is accompanied by a brief letter in which the purposes and the necessity are mentioned. Fifteen calendar days after the first e – mail, a second kind of reminder e – mail followed. The data collection period was from 31/05/2021 to 30/6/2021 (one calendar month). The total number of responses is 110 out of 140 students. The response rate, also known as completion rate, is calculated at 78,5%.

Research Results

When asked if there is a helpful working environment, the majority of participants, 66.3%, agree (strongly). The same is true for the question of whether the company (organization) has fostered a cooperative spirit based on teamwork and employee cooperation. The majority, i.e., 55.45% of survey participants, clearly agree (totally). When asked whether their obligations and everyday work are vital to them, the majority of participants, 84.54%, agreed (definitely) and 62.72%, agree (absolutely) about the their organization having effectively dealt with the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the workplace.

However, when asked whether the company (organization) truly cares about the wellbeing of its employees, 39.09% of respondents disagree (strongly), while 34.54% do not give a clear answer - neither agrees nor disagrees. The same is true for the question of whether the company (the organization) offers excellent prospects for advancement. 43.63% of survey respondents disagree (strongly), with a similar number of 40% holding the exact opposite viewpoint. There were clearly opposing perspectives in several questions.

Other queries yielded more evident results. 45.45% of survey participants disagree (definitely) when asked whether their organization encourages them to live a healthy lifestyle (diet, exercise, sleep, etc.). Furthermore, 45.45% of poll respondents agree (totally) that they are exhausted from work

(experiencing so-called "burnout"). The same results show in the question of whether the firm (organization) financially supports them through various benefits/services, where the majority of participants, i.e., 53.63%, disagree (totally).

When asked which was the biggest challenge they faced throughout the COVID-19, 35 participants - the majority - indicated job burnout, while 22 participants said job isolation. We also have 14 individuals who express work-related stress, 13 who report financial concerns, 12 who report job uncertainty, and others who describe a lack of supervision from superiors. Only 2 participants noted something else: (a) daily contact with many people with the risk of transmission of the virus as a hospital worker and (b) the mandatory vaccination.

The huge percentage of respondents who believe their work environment to be helpful and oriented toward employee collaboration and teamwork was a key finding of the study. 45.45% believe that working in a company that allows employees to enhance their skills is beneficial. The majority of participants (84.54%) agree (definitely) that their obligations and everyday work are vital to them.

The percentage of responders who believe that their company (organization) has effectively dealt with the challenges brought about by the COVID - 19 outbreaks is also very significant. While this positive response is evident in how businesses (organizations) have dealt with pandemic difficulties, a significant majority, up to 50%, believe that the company they work for does not assist employees in adopting a healthy lifestyle (diet, exercise, sleep, etc.). The same is true for how fatigued employees are from their occupations (so-called "burnout"). More than half say that their company (organization) does not financially aid them through various benefits/services.

Many people disagree about whether they have enough time for their personal/family life (work - life balance). The similar opinion persists when it comes to professional advancement, with a substantial majority, close to 45%, believing that there is no advancement and a fraction of the order of 40% believing the reverse.

As previously stated, a significant finding is that a sizable proportion of respondents believe that the firm (organization) for which they work is unconcerned about their well-being. Our findings are consistent with previous study, which indicated that one in every three workers and executives suffers from exhaustion and poor mental health and believes that their employer does not care about their well-being in at least 45% of cases.

Conclusions

Observing this research results, we would say that both the health and the well – being of employees are evolving as an imperative in the business world. We should not forget that even global quality standards such as ISO 45003:2021 were created in addition to 45001:2018, which concerns both the health and the safety of workers, to provide practical guidelines for the management of psychological health in the workplace.

Organizations should recognize the paramount importance of human resources well – being in their journey to achieve long – term sustainability. Especially in unprecedented situations such as the implementation of flexible working practices, the health and emotional stability of employees must be the focus of organizational policies, with substantial investments that promote well – being (Gigauri, 2020).

Therefore, the formation of an environment of holistic well – being that will not be limited to piecemeal practices, but to the cultivation of trusting relationships and a culture that encourages and empowers employees, will inevitably ultimately lead to the assumption of "happy employee – productive employee", ensuring long – term competitiveness and sustainability of the organization (Ojala, 2019).

By monitoring teleworker experiences, organizations and HR professionals can design strategies that promote organizational human resource well-being policies (Kulik, 2022). When implementing telework, the issue of psychological separation from work should be addressed on the agenda of policies to support employee well-being. The organization's support should not be restricted to the apparent, but should also listen to individuals' needs and sentiments by giving meaningful communication and direction.

In conclusion, focusing on developing a culture of good mental health is the best way to go, especially after the imposition of new conditions brought about by the epidemic and reinforced by teleworking. Employers must create the optimal working conditions by providing workers with the tools they need to be efficient and happy, while also balancing the psychosocial elements that affect individuals whether they work on-site or remotely.

It would be beneficial to use a qualitative data collecting research instrument, such as the interview method, to offer information regarding teleworker experiences, resulting in more targeted organizational interventions. At the same time, doing study on a broader sample of people would allow the current work's findings to be confirmed.

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