



## IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO PERSONNEL ACTIVITIES IN SLOVAK ENTERPRISES

### VPLYV PANDÉMIE COVID-19 NA PERSONÁLNE AKTIVITY V SLOVENSKÝCH PODNIKOKCH

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#### Abstract

*The aim of the article is to identify and determine the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on selected personnel activities of Slovak companies. Specifically, the article focuses on personnel activities such as recruiting and laying off employees, training, evaluation of work performance and rewarding. It also analyzes the change in forms of employing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical data were collected by online questionnaire during May 2023 within randomly selected sample of Slovak enterprises. The research sample consists of 60 enterprises. The article brings the answers to two research questions.*

**Key words:** Covid-19, employees, HR management, Slovakia.

**JEL Classification:** M51

#### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on human resources, one of the most important corporate production factors. As a result of the pandemic, human resources have become vulnerable, businesses have experienced their absence from the workplace or shortages and have been subject to various restrictive anti-pandemic measures. Typically, the pandemic crisis has been more pronounced in industries that are more labor-intensive and require the presence of human resources in the workplace. It has also been shown that businesses need a flexible, innovative, and skilled workforce in times of crisis. The task of

human resources managers was to deal with the problems, restrictions, and new needs of employers as well as employees caused by the changes in the external environment and thus to minimize or mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the performance and competitiveness of enterprises. New challenges have inevitably led to changes in individual personnel activities. Some of these changes were not only temporary, but also of a long-term nature, as they have proved themselves in practice and appear to be future prospective trends in human resources management.

### **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF PERSONNEL ACTIVITIES IN ENTERPRISE**

Human resources are a very important component in all companies, while the success of the company depends on the connection of human resources with material, financial and informational (inanimate) resources. For the proper functioning and use of inanimate resources, educated, motivated and moral people are needed (Snell, Morris, 2019). Richank (2015) considers human resources to be a source of prosperity and efficient operation of the company, and at the same time they are a prerequisite for building the company's strengths and competitive advantage. Špiesz (2015) states that the performance of the company is determined by the performance of processes and the performance of workers.

The main task of human resource management in the company is to focus on the work with humans, which includes mostly personnel activities (Majtán et al., 2016). Personnel activities can be characterized as an entire range of activities that go beyond the object of investigation of our research. For the purposes of defining the object of research in our article, we selected personnel activities in which, according to the available literature and conducted surveys, we could assume that the COVID-19 pandemic affected them the most. We selected following personnel activities – recruiting and firing of employees, forms of employment, training and education, evaluation and rewarding.

The acquisition of candidates is the initial stage of occupying a vacant job position, which Vaverčáková and Hromková (2018) characterize as a process of ensuring a sufficient number of suitable candidates for the vacant job position with the most appropriate costs and sufficient time in advance. The goal is to select the most suitable applicant for a job position based on qualitative and quantitative methods (Vetráková, Bočincová, 2013).

The next surveyed personnel activity was training of employees. The authors (Ali Taha, Sirková, 2011; Tokarčíková, Orlovská, 2014) agree that education is not only an investment in people with the goal to achieve better performance and the use of employees' abilities, but it is also a tool by which the organization shows its employees that it values them and also sees a perspective in them.

Employee training methods can be divided into on the job and off the job training methods. Both groups have their advantages and disadvantages. Internal training of employees at the workplace is more suitable for lower job positions and allows very illustrative training with easy practical applications. On the other hand, the quality of lecturers is crucial here, while internal employees may not have the skills to implement quality training. Examples are coaching, instructing, consulting, job counseling, assisting, demonstrating, mentoring, and more. Training activities carried out outside the workplace could be e.g. online and offline courses, workshops, trainings, etc. Due to the additional costs associated with such training, this form is usually more suitable for a smaller group of employees (e.g., middle and top management). It allows the managers to confront with managers of other organizations. Qualified trainers are an advantage of these methods, while the disadvantage is the risk that employees will not transfer the learned knowledge to their job position (Tokarčíková, Orlovská, 2014).

Evaluation of work performance is another personnel activity that was the object of our research. Employee evaluation provides feedback for company employees about their work performance and the view of work from employees, employer, and co-workers. The goal is to evaluate the employee's performance and to motivate them in the development of skills (Serinová, 2022). Smerek and Ďurian (2021) describe the evaluation of employees as a process of observing employees, evaluating their behavior at work and attitudes towards the performance of tasks at work. To make the evaluation of employees successful, it is necessary for managers to implement a system of motivating of employees that would give better results at work and improve their own development (Smerek, Ďurian, 2021). In primary research, we focused on changes in the evaluation of employees from two points of view - the frequency of the evaluation and the modification of the employee evaluation criteria during the COVID-19 pandemic.

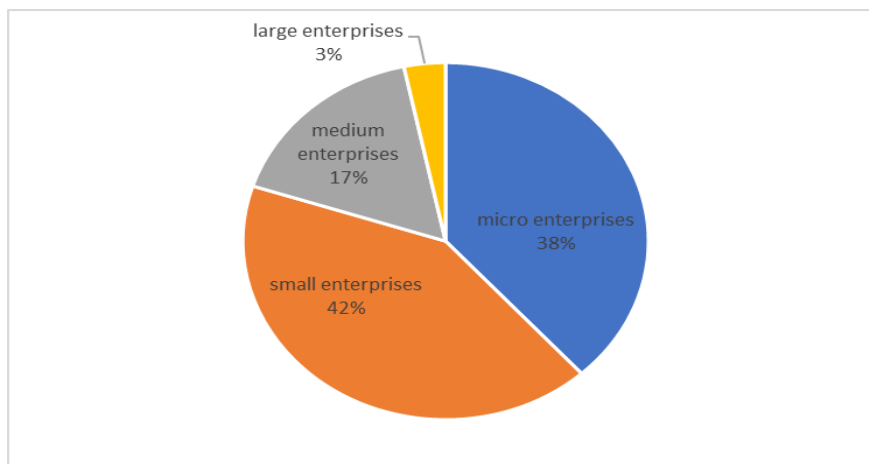
Nowadays, there are various tools to create an employee rewarding system. In order to ensure the fairness, adequacy and motivation of this system, it is necessary to base it on the specific needs of a specific organization and also the needs of employees. There are several factors with a direct impact on the rewarding of employees, which must be taken into account. We can divide these factors into external, where the overall economic situation and the situation on the labor market are the main factors, and internal, where strategy, culture and values shared in the organization belong (Vaverčáková, Hromková, 2018). Employees can receive rewards for their work, which are divided into two main categories, namely intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards, which can be called non-monetary rewards, are related to how an employee perceives his work. This includes a sense of achievement, a sense of self-esteem, a sense of developing special abilities and talents. Extrinsic rewards are provided by the organization to its employees in the form of monetary rewards, which can be direct (directly linked to money) such as salary, bonus, profit share and others, or indirect (linked to employee benefits) related to the health insurance, childcare benefits, employee discounts and others (Kumar, Hossain, Nasrin, 2015).

A relatively independent area that we investigated was the forms of employing people and the solution of respondents to the redundancy of employees. Although these areas belong between the acquisition and training of employees, the literature does not mention them as a personnel activity. When recruiting employees, companies most often choose from a group of standard or flexible forms of employment. In our survey, we included five standard forms of employing (definite and indefinite labor contract, all agreements of work), from flexible forms of employment we offered respondents the opportunity to mark following options (outsourcing, personal leasing, part time employment, flexible work time, home office). We left it up to the respondents to choose the ways in which companies dealt with the redundancy of employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. AIM AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The aim of the article is to identify and determine the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on selected personnel activities of Slovak companies through the analysis of primary data on enterprises in Slovakia. For the purposes of research and collection of primary data from respondents, i.e., business entities, the interview method was used. We used the online questionnaire. The research population was Slovak business entities of different sizes, legal forms and from different sectors. Subsequently, subjects were randomly selected from the database of verified Slovak companies (INFOMA) and from the platform grouping registration and financial data on Slovak companies (FinStat). The questionnaire survey was conducted in May 2023. A total of 518 Slovak companies were contacted by e-mail. The return rate of the questionnaire was 11.6% what represented 60 respondents.

The research sample consisted mostly of small businesses (10-49 employees) with the share of 41.7% of all respondents. The second largest group was micro-enterprises (0-9 employees), with a total representation in the survey of 38.3%. Thus, micro and small enterprises together constituted 80% of the research sample. Medium enterprises (50-249 employees) made up 16.7% of respondents, and the remaining 3.3% were represented by large enterprises (250+ employees). The research sample structure is presented in graph 1.



Graph 1 Structure of research sample

Source: Own processing.

The representation of individual sectors of the economy in the research sample was also uneven. In total, the respondents identified themselves in fourteen sectors according to the SK NACE classification. The most represented sectors were manufacturing (30%), wholesale and retail (18.3%) and construction sector (18.3%). The remaining eleven sectors were represented in the range of 5% to 1.7% of respondents.

Even though our distribution of respondents is not representative, we believe that it presents interesting primary results regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on selected personnel activities of companies in the Slovak Republic.

Based on theoretical knowledge and researches conducted in the past, the following research questions were formulated:

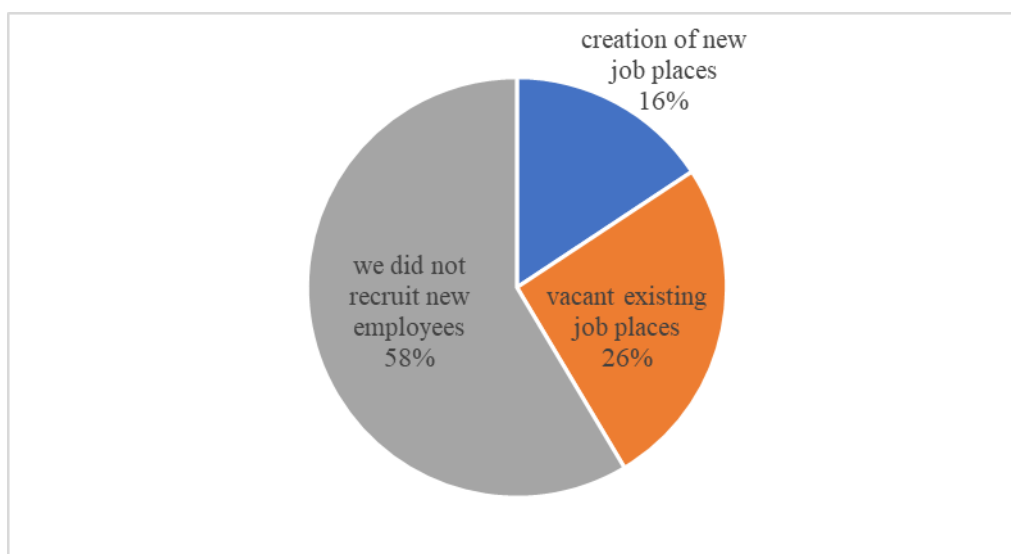
1. What was the prevailing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the investigated enterprises in Slovakia?

2. What were the specifics of Slovak companies in personal activities during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other researches?

### 3. EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research aim was to identify and determine the extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on selected areas of personnel activity of companies through the analysis of primary data on enterprises in Slovakia.

First researched personnel activity was the recruiting and laying off the employees. We investigated the reasons of recruiting new employees during the COVID-19 pandemic as presented in graph 2.



Graph 2 Reasons of recruiting new employees during the Covid - 19 pandemic

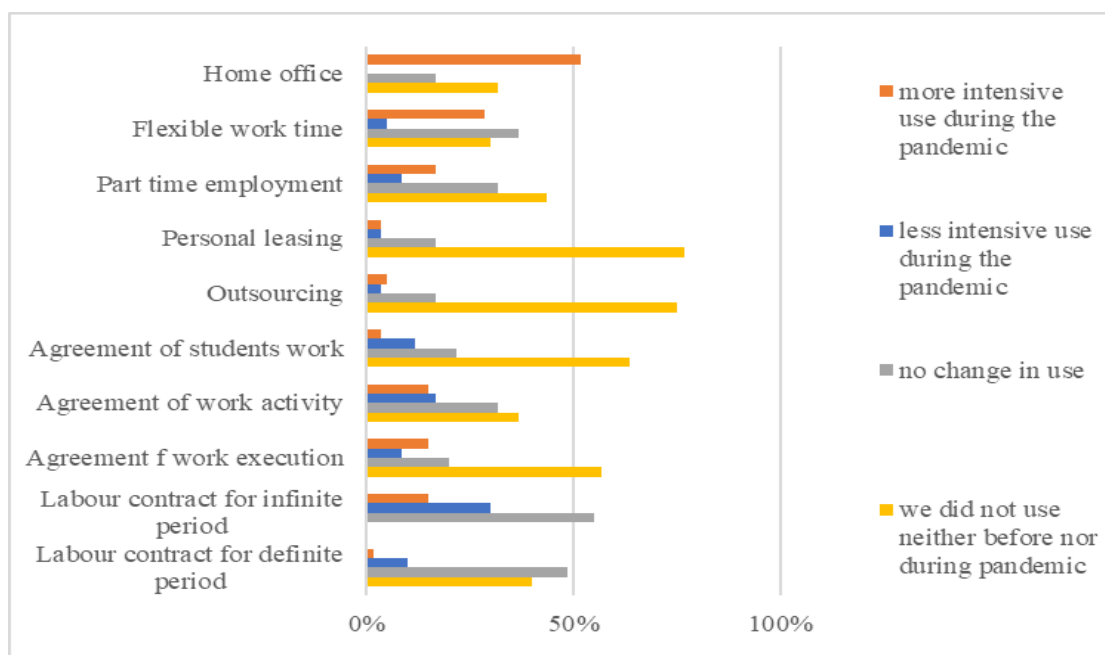
Source: Own processing.

The largest part of respondents (58%) answered that they did not recruit new employees during the COVID-19 pandemics. The remaining 42% of respondents stated as the reason for creating new jobs, the expansion of their business activities (16%) or the recruiting new employees as a replacement for those leaving (most often due to retirement, illness, healthcare of family members).

Respondents, that were recruiting new employees mentioned several risks of acquiring new employees. In connection with the specific situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents most often mentioned the lack or low qualification of suitable applicants for vacant job places (45%). 15% of respondents mentioned as the problem the high salary requirements of potential employees.

The results of the research presented by Tomčíková (2021) confirmed that most participating Slovak companies did not change the requirements for job applicants due to the pandemic or changed them to an insignificant extent. However, the changes occurred in the use of individual recruitment techniques. Enterprises declared a more frequent use of electronic labor recruitment and a wide use of social networks as forms of recruiting employees. We achieved the same results on the sample of respondents.

During the pandemic, it was assumed that there were changes in the forms of employing of people in businesses, either standard or non-standard (flexible) forms. We asked respondents what forms of employing they used before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We can see the answers in graph 3, which presents the ways and extent of their use, respectively non-use by entrepreneurs before and during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

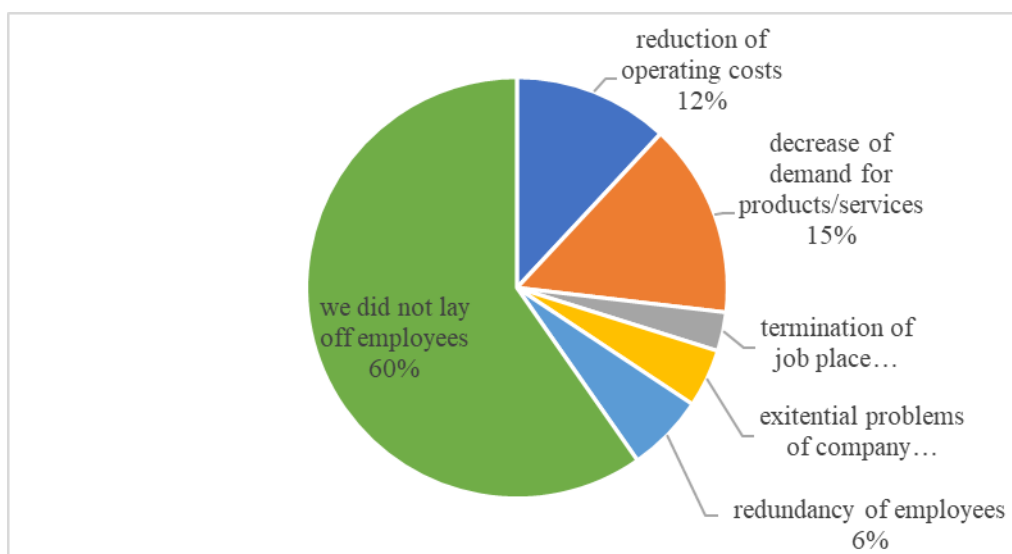


Graph 3 Forms of employing people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Own processing.

More during the pandemic than before, businesses used work performance agreements and outsourcing. The use of a labor contract for an indefinite period decreased during the pandemic period, but it was still one of the most used forms of employing. The low response values for the possibility of a greater rate of use during the pandemic than before the pandemic may also be caused by the low rate of recruiting new employees during the pandemic, as up to 68.3% of respondents stated that they did not recruit new employees during the pandemic. The highest rate of use during the pandemic was recorded by the "home office" form of employment, which was used to a greater extent during the pandemic than before it by 51.7% of respondents and to the same extent before and during the pandemic by 16.7% of respondents.

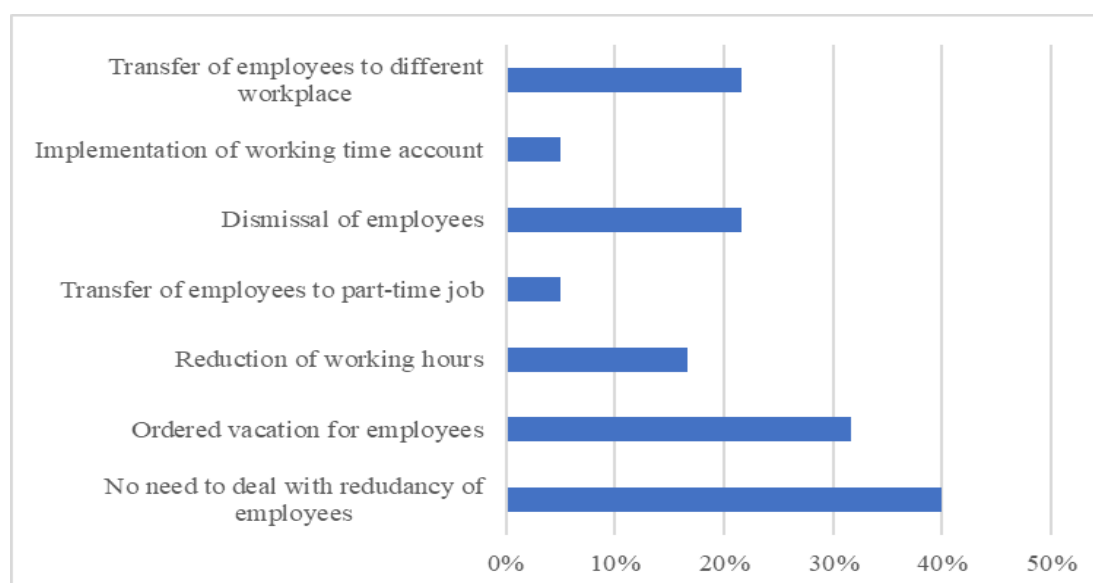
Consecutively, we researched the reasons for laying off employees during the pandemic. As many as 66.7% of respondents stated that they did not lay off employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rest of the respondents gave us one or more reasons why they fired employees (see graph 4). Most respondents (16.7%) said that the reason for the dismissal of employees was a decrease in demand for their products or services. The second most common reason was the need to reduce operating costs, which was declared by 13.3% of respondents. By laying off employees, companies could save on personnel costs and thus reduce operating costs, since personnel costs usually make up a significant part of operating costs. We can therefore conclude that the most common reasons for layoffs among respondents were the need to reduce operating costs and a decrease in demand for their products or services. Approximately the same number of companies indicated the remaining three reasons for layoffs, as presented in graph 4.



Graph 4 Reasons of employees' reduction during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Own processing.

Redundancy of employees was another problem faced by businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. We researched the measures the respondents had implemented to deal with the redundancy of employees or changed business conditions. Graph 5 summarizes the results.



Graph 5 Ways of dealing with the redundancy of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Own processing.

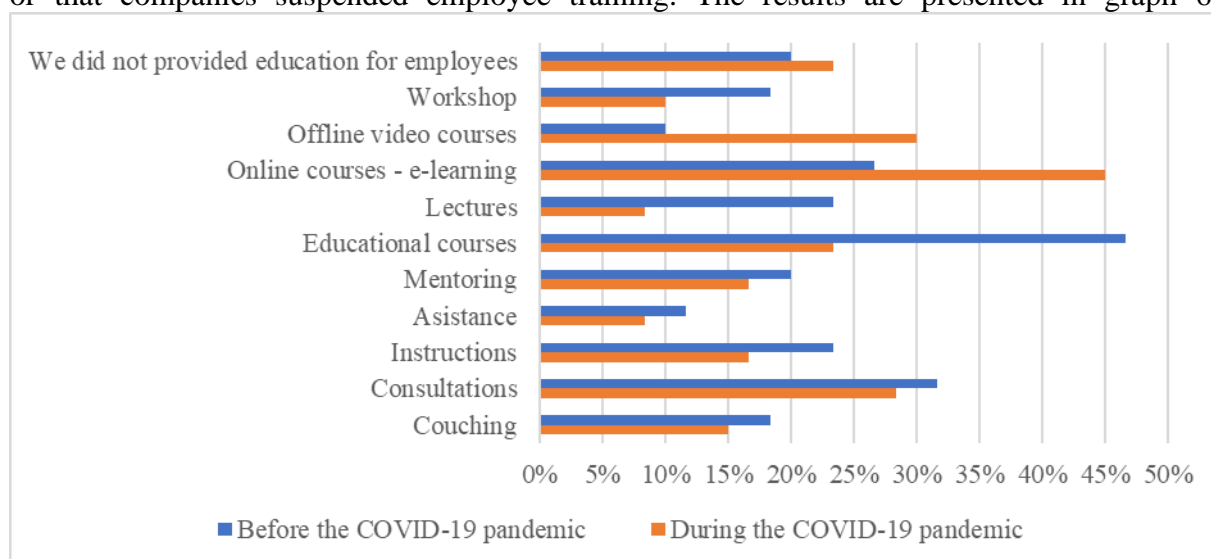
Among the most frequently used measures to deal with the redundancy of employees were ordered vacation, transfer of employees to different workplace (change of location or other type of work) and dismissal of employees. However, most respondents (40%) stated that they had no problems with staff redundancy. This answer corresponds to the answers in chart 4, where 60% of respondents said that they did not lay off employees during the pandemic.

Kopčáková (2021) emphasizes that the negative impact of the pandemic was also reflected in the staffing. However, our survey shows that, despite the negative impact, there was no change in the staffing for the majority of enterprises in Slovakia, i.e. there was no recruiting or firing of employees. Again, however, it also depended on the area of business,

since in accommodation and catering services, the negative impact of the pandemic was reflected in the staffing, specifically, there were layoffs. On the contrary, with the positive impact of the pandemic, some companies expanded their business and created new jobs, which led to the recruiting of employees. This finding corresponds with the findings of Hamouche (2021). However, when we take into account all business entities, regardless of the field of business, for the majority of respondents there was no change in the staffing of establishments, whether the impact of the pandemic was more negative or positive for the company.

In the following section, we focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee training. Since anti-pandemic measures affected the physical presence of employees at the workplace, we investigated the use of various forms of training before and during the pandemic as a change in the intensity of this activity of companies.

We assumed that the form of employee training changed during the covid-19 pandemic, or that companies suspended employee training. The results are presented in graph 6.



Graph 6 Ways of training for employees before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Own processing.

Since the pandemic limited face-to-face education, the use of video recordings of lectures increased significantly during the pandemic, while the use of traditional face-to-face lectures decreased. A decrease was recorded for every form of training surveyed, except for e-learning and video recording of lectures. Our results are in line with the survey of International Labor Organization (2021), which stated that around 65% of businesses and organizations worldwide have taken active measures to continue upskilling and retraining their employees. These measures included the use of video conferencing tools and online learning programs, as well as partnering with external organizations to facilitate training and employee development.

The change in the intensity of employee training was evaluated by the respondents as follows. 73.3% of respondents did not change the intensity of their employees' training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 5% of companies experienced a greater intensity of training due to the pandemic. 21.7% of respondents had less intensity of training than before the pandemic.

Employee performance evaluation was another area of personnel work that we examined on a sample of respondents. We analyzed the change in the frequency of employee evaluation as well as changes in the criteria for employee evaluation due to the covid-19 pandemic. The

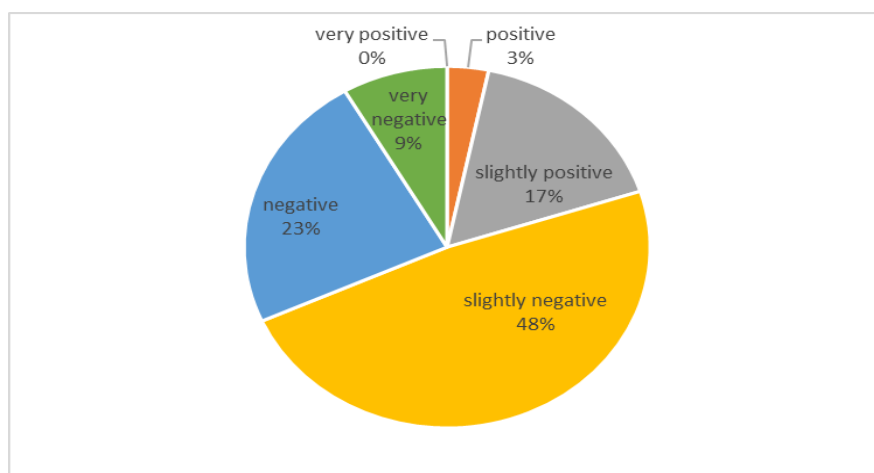
results confirmed that respondents did not change the frequency of employee evaluations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was confirmed by up to 88% of respondents. Only 1.7% of respondents increased the frequency of employee performance evaluations during the pandemic. 10% of respondents made a reduction in the frequency of employee evaluations. In terms of changes that were adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the area of employee evaluation, up to 90% of respondents said that either they did not change the criteria for employee evaluation, or the changes made were insignificant.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a largely insignificant effect on the evaluation of employee performance in Slovak companies as part of the conducted survey. Although the authors (Calderón-Hernández et al., 2021) pointed to changes in the evaluation of employee performance, whether in the regularity of evaluation or the introduction of new criteria in the evaluation system, our research showed that in most respondents there was no change in the frequency of evaluation and the changes in the criteria were to a large extent insignificant.

The last area of our investigation was employee rewarding. The majority of respondents (73.3%) stated that there were no changes in the area of employee rewarding during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the period before the pandemic. The rest of the respondents indicated that the changes made were mainly an increase in the fixed component of the salary (8.3%), an increase in the variable part of the salary (10%), respectively. expansion of employee benefits (6.7%). 8.3% of respondents reported a reduction in the variable wage component and a 5% reduction in employee benefits. In terms of the size of the respondents, micro and small enterprises declared an increase in the salary evaluation of employees, while in medium and large enterprises, the respondents hardly changed the system of remuneration of their employees.

At the end of the research, we asked the respondents to evaluate the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their personnel activities compared to the period before the pandemic.

Graph 7 presents the answers of respondents who confirmed the statement that the pandemic, or a similar global event has a predominantly negative impact on the economy of countries and individual entities. The same was true in our investigation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on personnel activities. 80% of respondents assessed the impact of the pandemic as slightly negative, negative, or very negative. In addition to the above answers, 20% of respondents in the field of personnel activities also identified an overwhelming positive impact of the pandemic in the company.



Graph 7 The overall impact of COVID-19 pandemic over entrepreneuring in Slovakia  
Source: Own processing.

Out of all sectors of the economy represented in the questionnaire survey, respondents in six sectors indicated slightly positive impacts. It concerned administrative and support activities, transport and storage, professional, scientific, and technical activities, industrial production, construction and wholesale and retail trade. The positive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was stated by 3.3% of respondents, all from the wholesale and retail sector. At the same time, other respondents from the same sector described the impact of the pandemic as negative to very negative. The variety of answers was also evident in industrial production and construction, where the degree of positive impact was significantly lower. Thus, a negative influence prevailed here within the answers of the respondents. Such a variety of answers for these three areas of business was probably caused mainly by the number of respondents, since these three areas of business had the largest representation in the questionnaire survey. Businesses from the financial and insurance sector, information and communication, agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining and quarrying, and others (other personal services) experienced a rather negative impact. The most affected areas of business and therefore with a negative to very negative impact of the pandemic were healthcare and social assistance, art, entertainment and recreation, accommodation and catering services, as well as the already mentioned construction, industrial production and wholesale and retail. Within some industries, there were both positive and negative impacts of the pandemic, which could be caused by the different demand for products and services, the range offered, the methods of distribution, the availability of purchased inputs, as well as the amount of available finance to ensure the running of the business even during the pandemic. Our results correspond with Hamouche (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has mostly had asymmetric impacts on industries. Some, such as tourism, entertainment, accommodation, and food services, have experienced a sharp decline in business, leading to their temporary closure. Businesses in other industries, such as transportation and warehousing, and information technology services, on the other hand, saw an increase during the pandemic. Therefore, the consequences of the pandemic on the staffing of individual companies are different.

### CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected businesses all over the world. Although there were Slovak companies that were positively affected by the pandemic, the negative impact of the pandemic on business prevailed, which was also reflected in changes in the personnel activities of the companies. How the pandemic affected the businesses depended mainly on the economy sector in which the given entity did business. Approximately half of the respondents experienced more significant changes in human resources management, and half of the companies experienced less significant changes. In some of them, despite the unfavorable situation caused by the pandemic, there were no changes in personnel activities or in the employment of people.

While before the pandemic, most respondents used standard forms of employing, during the pandemic the use of flexible forms of work organization, especially in the form of "home office", increased. Overall, we can say that companies had positive experiences with the introduction of the "home office" and the consequence of the pandemic was that the "home office" continued in many companies. The assumption is that the more jobs "home office" could be applied to, the more widespread its use would be during the pandemic, and the more businesses would keep the "home office" in the post-pandemic period. In the survey, "Home office" was also the most proven change in human resources management caused by the pandemic, so it can be assumed that its use will increase in the future.

We can see the specifics of the investigated companies around personnel activities compared to the results of other surveys mainly in the area of evaluation of work performance of employees.

The COVID-19 crisis forced HR managers to deal with new employee needs, such as work life balance problems, which were related to the expansion of home office and remote work in

general. Concerns of employees about their health, family health, fear of possible infection at the workplace, mental health issues were the new challenges in personnel activities.

HR managers had to implement digital technologies in personnel activities to a much greater extent. COVID-19 pandemic emphasized even more the role and need for quality management of human resources and thus the high demands placed on human resources managers.

The authors consider it important to draw attention to the size and unrepresentativeness of the research sample, which may influence the obtained results.

In the further research, it would be interesting to examine whether the changes made in personnel activities during the COVID-19 pandemic are still relevant and equally widespread in the functioning of enterprises in Slovakia.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Scientific Paper was elaborated within the framework of the project VEGA 1/0290/22 Regional investment aid as a determinant of the development of companies and regions in the Slovak Republic.

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