
Guest editorial: The pandemic-driven metamorphosis of a modern workplace

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has inevitably brought one of the most considerable disruptions that a modern world has witnessed. The abrupt halt of social lives and a relatively swift and consistent introduction of health-related measures has changed how we live and work, the places where we live, and the environments where we work. Knowledge works have primarily reverted to the home offices, igniting the debate on the efficiency of remote and telework practices. While the onset of the pandemic brought a certain level of optimism and favourability towards home-bound work (Nash and Churchill, 2020), individuals soon faced challenges with work-family interference and work-life balance (Reizer *et al.*, 2022). Remote work has morphed and largely changed in comparison with teleworking practices that started to gain popularity in 90s and continued to gain attention throughout the 2000s, mainly as pandemic-impacted workers have been forced to transform their homes in provisional offices and have not had the choice to work from various locations due to the social distancing measures.

The first wave of the pandemic has left corporate offices largely obsolete, with the subsequent waves transforming both how the work has been conducted by those who have returned to their pre-pandemic work environments as well as the workplaces themselves. However, with the Covid-19 and new strains still changing existing work environments and resulting in new workplace models, ongoing research uncovers new aspects of work and places where we tend to work. Having said that, the following second part of the special issue on pandemic-driven workplace transformations brings four papers that debate a new form of remote work, Covid-19-related stressors that commonly emerge in contemporary office space, considers the digitalization of work-based collaborative processes, and finally discusses the changes around corporate real-estate ownership. By that, the following contributions explore interconnected subjects of tomorrow's workplace and the subsequent work-related habits.

2. A debate on post-pandemic work and the reshaped workplace

The first paper that has found its place in the second special issue investigates the extent to which the pandemic transformed knowledge workers' work habits. Chiara Tagliaro and Alessandra Migliore conceptualize "Covid-working", a newly emerged working mode that arose from a rather abrupt switch from a traditional office to the home office environment. While authors present a study with some limitations due to surveying employees of a single Italian company, the concept nevertheless gives valuable insight into newly emerged work habits. As such, "Covid-working" is characterized by three pillars. Firstly, work is being conducted from multiple locations, with corporate office spaces becoming one of the options, but not necessarily prevailing work spots. Individual workers, therefore, show a proportion of their work from home, a neighbourhood café, a local coworking hub or any other place that can be momentarily transformed into a temporary workplace.

Secondly, changing work patterns require companies to adapt their value sets and organizational cultures. With work being conducted from multiple locations and becoming decentralized mainly in terms of scattered teams, the management needs to consider a



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general revamping and restructuring of leadership. Remote working individuals interact within a fully digitalized environment where collaborative processes are not necessarily moderated or moderated to a certain extent, meaning that co-conducted work outputs may be compromised. Having said that, leadership needs to reconsider their guiding and managing mechanisms to respond to what seems to be a working mode that is here to stay in the post-pandemic times.

Thirdly, “Covid-working” restructures social roles between men and women. Authors confirm that working from a home office tends to improve gender equality but can impact work performance due to work-family conflicts and inadequate work-life balance, especially with parenting individuals. Nevertheless, the research suggests that women tend to balance their work-life tasks efficiently when “Covid-working”, with their perceived productivity and work-related concentration being generally higher than men. With that in mind, authors suggest that companies should look into applying internal policies that would further support the remote working processes in the post-pandemic period as having a deliberate choice of pursuing a preferred work mode might reflect not only in better company’s outcomes but also in a more stable employees’ mental health.

For the latter, the following special issue holds a paper by Barbara Germann and Sandra Gauer, who conducted a study on Covid-19-related stressors in the workplace and integral employees’ health. The article uses an integrative literature review approach to overview the pandemic-driven stressors influenceable by the selected organization and to develop a theoretical framework around the subject. By that, the authors develop a solid scholarly framework that offers a holistic and strategic overview on pandemic-related stressors and the subsequent mechanisms for prevention to preserve and protect employees’ health.

The framework diversifies these stressors and categorizes them to connect them with favourable or unfavourable outcomes and possible coping mechanisms. Similar to the previous paper, the article explores measures that organizations should explore to protect the mental health of their employees. These measures can be part of spatial, structural or even technological changes and should be aligned both with organization’s strategic goals, internal organizational culture and leadership actions and can generally result in a more pleasant work environment, happier and more efficient employees and retain human talent. While work practices will evolve further in the post-pandemic period, with some employees finding remote work less stressful than onsite work, others will likely return to their offices and retain a favourable stance towards working in a dedicated workspace to balance their work-life ratio and avoid possible work-family conflicts.

To understand how physical workplaces might still play a crucial role when supporting encounters, collaboration and general wellbeing of individuals, Dora Horvath, Tamás Csordás, Julianna Faludi, Katalin Ásványi, Attila Simay and Zita Komár use collaborative autoethnography and explore the change of an office that the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted. With that, the third paper presents a study where Budapest-based authors compare the physical and digital workplace’s efficiency and explore the limitations of a rather abrupt shift to online-supported remote work solutions. Using a higher education setting as an example, the group of scholars argues that the efficiency of a digital workplace is impaired mainly due to the use of two-dimensional visual mediums that cannot (yet) replicate the physical workplace. However, a digital workplace can complement a physical office environment and support individuals’ mobility.

While digital workplaces will continue to develop and perhaps become immersive enough to eventually replicate their physical counterparts, the office will continue to serve as a focal point for many organizations. With that in mind, it remains unclear whether and to what extent office spaces can be expected to grow as a proportion of investment portfolios

in capital markets. Accordingly, the last paper, which is an additional paper to the three special issue papers, seeks to determine whether corporate real estate ownership can be priced into the capital market of non-property companies.

Julian Seger, Kristine Soner and Andreas Pfnür take a look into the disrupted UK real estate markets and investigate how the share of real estate assets has fallen over the past ten years. With the ownership priced in as a factor on the capital market, the recent disruptions such as the Brexit and the Covid-19 crisis suggest a counter cyclical pattern. Because of the latter, the researchers present evidence of the negative influence of ownership, especially regarding the background of economic fluctuations. Reducing corporate real estate ownership such as owning an office space can ease the associated cost of capital and subsequently increase company success, mainly as finances can be rerouted to support human-related and other processes.

3. The need for future research

The following papers create a foundation for further research. Dislocated and partially or fully hybridized work will continue to evolve, with “Covid-working” possibly being one of the transformative milestones of pandemic-impacted work as we knew it throughout the pandemic. By understanding workers’ needs and expectations, post-pandemic work environments can adapt to these preferences and humanize the places where we work and socialize and cohabitate for a large proportion of our work-active lives.

Moreover, featured research on Covid-19-related stressors in the workplace and integral employees’ health can serve as a footing for corporate managers to establish a more functional and desirable place of work. Post-pandemic knowledge workers will likely seek adaptable and stress-free work environments that will enable them a high level of flexibility, adequate wellbeing and avoid conflict situations. While specific collaborative and team-based processes will be fully digitalized, workers will likely seek their ways to the reinvented workspaces for a proportion of their time and stress-free offices might support their productivity, innovative tendencies and knowledge-sharing undertakings.

Finally, the selected papers should not be read solely by scholars and industry experts but also by policymakers who have the tools and the ability to support the future development of healthy work environments.

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