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THE IMPACT OF COVID ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF HRM IN PUBLIC SERVICE: LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: COVID has had an immense impact on HRM. The aim of this Paper is to examine international responses and detect best practices. We analyse a variety of methods, techniques, trends and ideas from all over the world. Insights from Hungary, Austria, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the US and Canada are considered.

Work has been transported to virtual space. Home office has grown into being the engine of public service development. It is likely that the future will be characterised by hybrid models. Online operation is intertwined with numerous issues, such as: simplification and increased efficiency of procedures, legal regulation of the transformation and data protection. Numerous questions require our answer as regards the use of virtual space: How will teamwork function? What adjustments are required in learning and development schemes? What is the new role of leaders? How can we assure mental health? How do we promote resilience?

Another trend concerns digitalisation of recruitment and selection. Digitalisation is spilling over to the neighbouring areas, such as job branding, mobility management and onboarding.

How will the post-COVID era look like? The scale of HRM changes ranges from mere adjustment to paradigm shift. Areas of utmost importance include: consequences of accelerated digital transformation, growing importance of IT skills, new methodology for learning and development, demand for resiliency, sustainable development, efficiency, social dialogue as well as restoration of trust between employer and employee.

Public service has to adapt to the modified socio-economic environment. Its structure and functioning requires reform. This process incorporates the hope that digitalisation can bring qualitative changes in the functioning of public service. COVID has also brought about a chance to take advantage of the possibilities digital technology can offer. It has enabled us to reinvent the functioning of the state on a higher level.

Keywords: COVID, crisis, HR, digitalisation, education, work, atypical, resilience

INTRODUCTION

‘It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.’ In 2020–2021, the words of Epictetus have gained particular relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic – what has been happening to us – is a given fact. What is not a given fact is how we respond to the crisis. Where are we heading from here? What innovations will fill in the place of public sector HRM solutions rendered irrelevant by the pandemic? How will digital transformation affect us? What financial and other forms of support emerge? What innovations does work in virtual space demand and are we prepared for the challenges it poses in relation to data protection? Does the border between work and private life still stand, or has it been washed away for good? Where is the role of learning in this chaos? Will trust survive or perish? In our Paper, we search the international HRM practice for answers. After all – echo Epictetus’ words – ‘It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.’

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Looking at the international practice, we find financial support across the world. Short-time work schemes (i.e. subsidy from the government proportional to the reduction in hours. See the German *Kurzarbeit*, the Italian *Cassa Integrazione Guadagni* or the French *Chômage Partiel*) were introduced to secure continuity of employment in times of economic distress (Giupponi and Landais, 2020).

It was financial help and satiability too, that layer at the heart of ‘credit holiday’, advantageous credit for entrepreneurs, tax and duty allowances, prolonged parental leave as well as babysitter vouchers (the latter, *il voucher baby sitter* was introduced by the *Italian* government) (Del Boca et al. 2020, p.10). In *Hungary* health-care workers used long-distance public

transport services free of charge across the country. These financial measures, however, were mere ‘artificial lungs’ for the emergency situation (Balázs, 2020, p. 12). Surely, they were lifesaving, but unsustainable in the long run. The name of the measure is tale-telling in case of the new *Canada Emergency Response Benefit Plan*. The mentioned plan extended *employment insurance* (EI) to those not traditionally covered by the system (such as self-employed workers, contract workers, and those caring for a family member sick from COVID). Applicants received CAD 2,000 for 4 weeks between March 15 and September 26, 2020 (Lord, 2020; Canada’s COVID-19 Economic Response Plan; Government of Canada, 2020). Fast payment took priority even over the surveillance and prevention of misuse (Adam, 2020).

Providing the equipment necessary for work as well as bearing the overheads is of utmost importance for the employee (Bankó, 2005, p. 26). An obvious example of financial support is paying the increased utility bills and amortized costs. The *German* practice is worthy of our attention. On the one hand it compensates for the emerging extra costs, but on the other hand it takes into account that travelling costs are superfluous. The latter are thus no longer subsidised. The Home Office Lump Sum (*Homeoffice-Pauschale*) provides tax relief for those who have switched to remote work due to the virus, excluding home-based working space already subject to tax reduction. The amount (5 Euros/day spent exclusively working from home), however, is unlikely to cover all emerging extra costs (Anon, 2020).

THE EFFECT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION ON HRM

‘Future ready’ means being ready for the impact digital transformation has on working environment and on

competency requirements. Industry 4.0 impacts the working environment as well as competency requirements. The independent basic dimension of the assessment framework developed by German experts evaluates the level of preparedness to such impact (Némethy, 2018, pp. 45–46). Digital transformation preceded COVID. This global tendency inevitably transformed the place and function of human resources. It was predicted that, due to technological development, in the near future it would be possible to make at least 40% of routine tasks automated (Centre for the New Economy, 2018, p. 10). The pandemic only accelerated this process of change (Rixer, 2021, p. 68). The crisis demanded deep and fast reactions. Those parts of the public service that had already invested in digital capabilities were better positioned to manage the crisis.

Nowadays work processes are more and more complex and the importance of interpersonal and personal skills (commitment, responsibility, communication, etc.) is increasing. According to the prognoses the most demanded skills will soon be soft skills, such as analytical and critical thinking, creativity, complex problem-solving, leadership and social influence emotional intelligence, reasoning, etc, (Némethy, 2018, pp. 50–51). Some job descriptions become obsolete or undergo substantial changes, while new ones emerge. The rapid changes continuously demand new competences, which are hard to acquire from outside, from the labour market. *Inner mobility* is the answer for the demand for new competences. Intra-company movement, such as between jobs transfer, become typical part of the working careers.

Digitally trained workforce is a prerequisite in taking advantage of the technological innovations of the 4th industrial revolution. The lack of sufficient amount of experts causes disruption in operation

and also slows down the process of digitalisation itself (KPMG, 2019). Therefore the competition for talents is high, and it is a priority to increase the efficiency of recruitment and selection. Organisations introduce new technological tools to enhance the effectiveness of recruitment and selection (Volini et al. 2019, p. 7) e.g. camera analysing the candidates' choice of words, facial expression, body language during the interview (Anon, 2018). Data and fact driven decision-making is indispensable for strategic HRM including the process of strategic workforce planning. Data and fact driven strategic HRM requires modern technology and an expert HR staff. According to forecasts, the HRM field is amongst the winners of digital transformation (Centre for the New Economy, 2018, p. 9) and now has a chance to become strategically partner of leadership.

WORK IN DIGITAL SPACE

According to Kun (2018) 'Work 4.0 is characterized by diversification, fragmentation, constant and rapid changes, blurring and unfolding of all kinds of boundaries' (p. 391). Teleworking existed before the COVID pandemic, but the fight against the virus made it common. It currently appears in the form of home office, but conceptually, the phenomenon includes not only work from home, but also other work performed outside the employer's premises (Bankó, 2010). It fits into an increasingly growing trend in labour law and HRM, where the atypical is becoming typical. Let us take a look at some examples of said acceleration.

54 percent of German companies indicate that working from home will play an important role in their company after the crisis (Alipour et al. 2020).

In view of the growing use of teleworking, the US federal government has created a portal that, in addition to legal and

practical knowledge, publishes training, guides, reports, studies, and provides a platform for civil servants and employers to share experiences and issues related to teleworking.

Trade unions can be active actors in regulation. The *Spanish* government and trade unions have reached an agreement to regulate teleworking. Main elements are as follows:

- encouraging the development of new technologies and e-government,
- a precondition for examining job responsibilities in terms of whether they can be teleworked,
- it should not become commonplace (the percentage of jobs that are suitable for teleworking is determined in advance, taking into account the need to maintain a personal relationship with clients),
- the primary goal of teleworking is to achieve greater efficiency,
- it has to be ordered by the employer,
- objective assessment of the work in question is obligatory,
- further training in teleworking is also compulsory,
- no discrimination between those who work in person and those who work remotely,
- collective agreements regulate the details,
- legal guarantees protect the right to privacy and the right to terminate the digital connection (Darias, 2020).

The Agile Work Plan of the Italian public administration going back to 2019 (*Piano organizzativo del lavoro agile*) was rather ambitious. It aimed for transforming 60% of work into smart work by 2021. The reform was expected to bring about

the most significant changes of recent years (Viglietti, 2020). In contrast, in other countries, such as in *Hungary* teleworking arrangements were not welcomed in the majority of the public service. No central regulation gave clear, consistent and transparent regulatory framework. No social dialogue took place either (Linder, 2021, p. 277).

What do these international examples show us? In summary, current trends represent the acceleration of earlier ones. The conditions for teleworking are not designed for a transitional period only. Digitization is linked to the simplification of work processes and procedures. It is also coupled with rationalization and efficiency incensement. Possibly, the rate of working from home will be higher as the pandemic subsides, than it was before. The full prevalence of teleworking however is far from realistic.

It is already visible that the current model is less suitable for certain tasks (e.g. those requiring teamwork) and has serious downsides (such as social isolation). It is more likely that the future of work will be characterized by hybrid work models. We may ask: is agile philosophy the answer to current challenges? In agile organizations, responsiveness to change takes precedence over following plans, a feature that at first glance meets the requirements of the COVID era. At the same time, the engine of agile operation is cooperation, interaction between individuals and joint learning. The big question is how we work together effectively without physical proximity. The answer will be given by practice. One thing is certain, during this crisis, 'the public sector has become 'accidentally agile', with new procedures and protocols governing remote working, accelerated hiring processes, and fast-track mobility programmes developed with unprecedented speed' (OECD, 2020).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND DATA PROTECTION

The move towards home office and the accompanying control has brought changes that will leave their mark permanently. The concept of public and/or private and the relationship between the two will no longer be the same (Li, 2020). Pandemic-related restrictive provisions entail several data protection aspects. By implication, increased attention needs to be paid to ensuring the lawful handling of new sensitive data (e.g. COVID test result). Another area that has come into the spotlight is monitoring employees (camera use, virtual meetings, monitoring emails, etc.). Social media use is a hot topic of the latter. On these platforms employees can express their opinion. The communications (likes, posts, comments, etc.) are intended for a closed community; however, they are in fact made public (Kártyás, Répáczki and Takács 2016, p. 80). The line between private and public sphere is blurred. There has already been a growing interest in the literature on labour law aspects of social networking sites. This interest is now intensified. Where is the line between surveillance and invasion of privacy? Undoubtedly, the violation of privacy violates human dignity. Without the protection of privacy, meaningful social relations – the very building blocks of society –, would also disappear. The control of the employer (exercised via different tools and methods) must not violate human dignity nor invade the employee's private sphere in an illegal manner. On the other hand, the employee also has obligations. Loyalty, secrecy or protection of reputation of the employer does not expire at the end of working hours. The law requires public servants to behave true to their profession even off-duty. This also applies to behaviours on social media forums. The right to privacy must not be used as a means of abusing the right (Kajtár, 2015, p. 206).

The collision between freedom of expression and the interest of the employer stands in the limelight. Regulation is possible with *soft and hard measures*. Let us take a look at examples to both categories via the practice of Australia and Germany.

The *Australian Code of Conduct for Public Servants* was supplemented with rules for online communication. The document is more of a guide (therefore a soft measure). Amongst others, the document states that anonymous or pseudonymous posts and opinions provide no shield for the public servants. These do not provide complete and definitive anonymity, because the identity and position of the person may be revealed later on. Another noteworthy element: The classic limitation clause (i.e. the opinion is binding only on its author) in itself does not release the authors from their obligations. Last but not least, the document also highlights: The higher the position, the more difficult it is to distinguish between private and official statements (Australian Public Service Commission, 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the *German* example. Here, the competent ministry and two civil service unions opted for hard measures. The parties regulated the data security issues arising from the spreading of digital devices in a collective agreement (Öffentlicher Dienst News, 2019).

SUPPORT

One possible form of support is providing detailed, clear regulations, accessible to all. The *French* digital Labour Code with mail templates, pay and notice time calculator is an excellent example of such regulation (<https://beta.gouv.fr/ap-proche/>; <https://www.demarches-simplifiees.fr/stats>). The French practice provides an example for sophisticated IT support as well. Autonomous development

teams support ministries and other public institutions in implementing their IT developments. Their aim is to simplify administrative procedures and develop online-based public services. They currently run more than 13,000 applications. This number is growing by about 13% per month. Satisfaction with improvements is around 70%. An inter-ministerial incubator centre has been set up for start-ups that do not yet have the appropriate infrastructure and operational background in their own ministry. The government incubation centre also promotes networking (<https://beta.gouv.fr/approche/>, <https://www.demarches-simplifiees.fr/stats>).

In *Ireland*, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform responsible for public management and governance structures published various internal memos outlining the public management response. It also issued three key documents governing how public employees are to be managed during the crisis (OECD GOV/PGC (2020)14, p. 85). A detailed code of conduct for videoconferencing was put in place. The document is a collection of practical and technical specifications. Technical advice includes, for example, ensuring a calm, quiet environment, neutral background, preventing the appearance of unauthorized persons, WIFI, Internet connection, microphone, pre-testing of cameras. The Code also covers body language. It draws attention to the fact that in a home environment one easily loses focus. It gives advice that seems to be technical but is much more important, such as: look straight at the camera and not your own screen, sit in a straight posture, position the camera so that your head and shoulders are visible, smile. The code also includes a provision for a dress code (dress identical to a personal meeting) (www.publicjobs.ie).

RECRUITMENT, SELECTION AND ONBOARDING

As the use of digital tools has become generally accepted in government work, its regulation is developing dynamically. The HRM system traditionally focuses on the application of various digital technologies in the field of recruitment and selection. The ‘werkvoornederland’ platform for the *Dutch* civil service is a fine example. This serves to create and develop job branding. It does not simply list vacancies, but also actively encourages application. How? Every job is associated with a career story that shows the applicants what they can expect in terms of projects and tasks once they are hired. They get a rounded picture of the position, as they can learn about the level of flexibility, ways of appreciation as well as opportunities connected to the position in question. According to surveys, the last three items are the most relevant factors for the candidates (Philippart, 2017).

In the *UK*, the ‘Golden Thread’ should be highlighted. This is an analytical and evaluative tool, designed to increase the effectiveness of recruitment campaigns. It carries out the 2/3rd of recruitment in the public service. The application and selection processes operated by the Government Recruitment Service are fully automated. Both employer and applicant can get real-time information on the job process (Soper and Richardson, 2019). The *Government Recruitment Information Database* (GRID) contains data on job applications from multiple sources. These are analysed and evaluated with the Golden Thread to make job postings even more effective and to reach potential applicants (Cunningham et al. 2020). British private sector organizations are also increasingly using digital tools to select, evaluate and retain employees. The most widely used digital tool for recruitment is database screening (Blatch-Jones et al. 2020).

In *Ireland*, automated and video-related methods are used for public service interviews. The candidates' answers are evaluated by a separate committee (www.publicjobs.ie). Let us emphasise again, these developments are never unprecedented. The unified public service IT infrastructure that had been already in place before COVID certainly provided a basis for the actions. The 'Our Public Service 2020' Program adopted in 2017 set out a package of reforms that, if implemented, 'could make Ireland one of the countries with the most advanced government HR practices' (Klotz, 2020, p. 348).

In *Austria*, a job search database was set up to support the internal mobility of the federal administration for those seeking a higher or different job (*Mobilitätsmanagement*) for career advancement and development. The operation of the system also helps to create optimal headcount conditions (Republik Österreich, 2021). The pandemic gave new impetus to the development of the system which was supplemented with resume analysis function. First the applicant fills in the key data of the CV template, and then the system creates the CV based on these data. It analyses the data using AI and then searches the database for the vacancies that best meet the applicant's needs (Jobbörse der Republik Österreich).

A futuristic picture of full digitalisation is revealed to us when we look at the U.S. Staffing program at U.S. federal government agencies. Its services are used by about 70 agencies, 12,000 HR and 114,000 selection professionals, and fill on average 12,000 positions and handle 250,000 applications per week. The dashboard provides monitoring and management of processes and workload (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2021). *Onboarding* is also managed by the USA Staffing. A talent management system was designed to digitally support the integration of new entrants into the workplace during pan-

demic or other extreme situation in the final phase of the recruitment process. It provides new recruits with personalized information about their job, position, activities, organization as well as training opportunities. The development paves the way for the complete automation of the selection process (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2021).

However, not all new measures regarding recruitment, selection and onboarding introduced in the last year were about digitalisation. Let us mention a tool that was designed to make up for the limited possibility of live encounters during pandemic. Undoubtedly, starting fresh is always a challenge. It is even more so during this difficult period of time which is why the *Danish* brought forward the insertion process. The integration of newly recruited civil servants into the job is scheduled before entering the job. Thus, the recruited civil servants can get to know their job, the values and culture of their future organization as well as the employees even before starting to work (Borongic, 2020).

MENTAL HEALTH, PANDEMIC FATIGUE, RESILIENCE

Pandemic fatigue and resilience, these two words have become part of our active vocabulary during the last year. The first expression, *pandemic fatigue* means exhaustion, apathy and de-motivation to the use of recommended protective measures. It is most often manifested by irritability, lack of concentration, restlessness, and can be associated with eating disorders as well as changes in sleep patterns. According to WHO estimates, 60 percent of people experienced pandemic fatigue eight months after the broke out of the virus (WHO, 2020, p. 7).

Let us take a look at the bigger picture. Up to the 30th of April 2020, the Eurofound COVID-19 E-Survey (Eurofound,

2020) reached more than 85.000 people in EU Member States. The document examined the effects of the pandemic on subjective quality of life, health perceptions, institutional trust, and concerns about work and the workplace. Despite some improvement since the start of the pandemic youngsters are still one of the biggest losers of the quarantine era, reporting the lowest levels of well-being among the unemployed. While life satisfaction and optimism have increased since April 2020, young people continue to feel excluded from society and remain at the highest risk of depression (Eurofound, 2020 p. 59).

By now representative research on the impact of the pandemic on mental health is available (Rajkumar, 2020). A recent representative *Italian* study of 6,700 people shows that the rate of depressive symptoms is higher among women, young adults, those reporting occupational insecurity, and those in a lower socioeconomic situation. A higher proportion was also found among people living alone, forced to work from home and those with a family history of COVID (Delmastro and Zamariola, 2020).

The emotional state of the individual worker spreads quickly and multiplies irrespective of the nature of the environment (be it online or offline). The frustration, anger and sadness can easily cumulate at the organizational level. The exhaustion of the leader can also have an intense effect on the whole team (Istók, 2020). This is why the second expression, resilience is so important.

Resilience is the ‘immune system of the soul’, our capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. It has become a key factor of socio-economical change in times of the pandemic (Giovannini et al. 2021). Resilience is a protective factor that makes us healthier and more effective. It is easy to see why its development is a priority for today’s HRM. After all, the efficient

operation of the organization is mostly supported by strengthening individual stress management in addition to reducing stressors and thus equipping employees to overcome difficulties (Berta, 2019, p. 70). In light of the aforementioned, now more than ever HR should offer training in stress management, burnout prevention and resilience development.

As ILO Director-General Guy Ryder stresses, front-line workers are in a particularly difficult position, but there is also increased stress for those who can work from home. Workers are becoming increasingly isolated, finding it increasingly difficult to balance work and private life. We need to talk openly about mental health at work, all the more so as mental health risks will be present even post-pandemic (Ryder, 2020). Communication is one of the tools for conflict resolution for organisations (Bajnok, 2019, p. 18). Open communication is obviously easier where the topic in question is not labelled as taboo. In *Canada*, for example, public administration employees are surveyed every three years about their experiences in their workplace. An important and natural element of the Public Service Employee Survey is well-being at work. The document covers psychologically healthy workplace, work-related stress and emotional exhaustion, causes of work-related stress, as well as work-life balance (Kriskó, 2020, p. 227).

Let us take a look at the bright side of the issue and at some good practices. Undeniably, the pandemic created a crisis situation requiring appropriate mental health HRM measures. Governments increased mental health support services in recognition that many public servants are carrying an increased emotional burden linked to their duties and/or personal situation (OECD, 2020). In other words, the pandemic has reinforced the *duty of care* of the governments to their employees. This duty includes the protection of

health as well as the protection of physical and mental integrity of staff. This obligation goes far beyond provision of protective equipment or disinfection. In *the Netherlands*, a hotline has been established for the employees to discuss their specific challenges and an online toolbox provides information and videos about topics such as working from home, health and work-life balance. The guidelines include the possibility of seeking individual support from social workers (OECD GOV/PGC (2020)14, p. 133). *Norway* is exploring the use of targeted ‘pulse’ surveys to check in with employees (GOV/PGC(2020)14, p. 145). *Canada* has developed dedicated Webpages for employees to provide them with information and resources on working remotely and on improving mental health (OECD: GOV/PGC(2020)14, p. 32).

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The spread of the virus has challenged education and training programmes around the world as well. The first ‘freeze’ reaction is not surprising. In times of crisis, training costs are cut back first (see the Global Crisis of 2008) (Boeren et al. 2020). Fortunately, after the initial shock, the adaptation phase started.

Knowledge is the most important capital of an organization. Training staff is an investment in human capital, with the expected result of increased productivity and higher wages. Appropriate focus on knowledge transfer is of utmost importance (Szondi, 2020, p. 185). According to *World Bank* experts, switching to online learning was a global trend, notwithstanding many public and private institutions were not ready for the shift (Azzi-Huck and Shmis, 2020).

Let us here focus on those organizations that did react and adapt to the new environment created by the pandemic. They recognised if they choose to provide fur-

ther training instead of dismissal, they can achieve the ideal objective after crisis: a match between the number of employees and the number and nature of the tasks to be performed (Ludányi, 2019, p. 46). What can we learn from these organizations? The online training and development programs acted as agents of fast upskill and reskill. Rapid skills assessment helped to determine whether staff was using skills that can be transferred to other areas of the business. Internal job advertisements facilitated internal mobility (ILO, 2020, p. 7).

The first step in transforming the learning and development model is to set priorities. Crisis or not, onboarding of new workers remained essential. At the same time, new priority topics emerged such as teleworking, telemanagement or management in times of crisis (Kshirsagar et al. 2020). Findings of a *Hungarian* research (Poor et al. 2020, p. 43) clearly showed that the pandemic reorganised the hierarchy of required competencies. The importance of social and methodological competences grew as opposed to professional ones. After the first wave of the pandemic, the employers ranked the following five most crucial competences: (1) digital competencies; (2) communication, assertiveness and conflict resolution; (3) EQ and social skills; (4) cooperation, team work; and (5) flexibility and adaptability.

In *Portugal*, by a decree establishing the training system in public administration, public employers were obliged to provide workers and managers with training required by their work. Therefore, training related to use of ICT tools as well as teleworking were provided (Kshirsagar et al. 2020, p. 24).

Another best practice is the virtual training marketplace. This was set up in *France* to make effective use of the vocational training support framework available for all citizens. The application

(*moncompteformation*) was modelled by well-known service sharing sites such as Airbnb. Registered users have their own account and can search for courses according to their individual training needs. The search results are sorted based on the assessment of previous learners. The rather busy tool manages around 1 million training courses per year (Dumoulin, 2019).

Besides these new measures, *self-driven learning* in general came to the fore during the crisis. Because of the pandemic a number of free trainings (retraining and further training) programme became available to all. TV and radio channels, courses, trainings, workshops and podcasts were (are) available worldwide. Let us note: drawing attention to freely available programs (providing a list of links) is also a development tool for HR.

Another important takeaway: education and training are not just about cost-effectiveness. They are also the driving force for cohesion. We agree with the words of *Adult Education Quarterly* 'It is our hope that during this trying time, adult education can be a force for connecting people who, after months of social isolation and physical distancing, may recognize more than ever the value of supportive networks and solidarity among members of society' (Boeren et al. 2020).

THE SILVER LINING OF THE CLOUD: COVID AS CATALYST

Public service HRM has received a strong impetus. The volume of the occurring changes ranges from alignment to paradigm shift. According to the OECD Report issued on the 22nd of April 2020 (GOV/PGC(2020)14), governments may now be in a position to review and capitalise on many of the changes introduced, and place them on a more sustainable footing. The post-crisis period provides a unique opportunity. We can take ad-

vantage of the changes the implementation of which was expected to occur only gradually (OECD, 2020). COVID is a catalyst for change on several levels (Hazafi and Kajtár, 2021):

1. COVID as *catalyst for digital changes*: In the past, the digitalisation of the public sector has lagged behind the private sector. COVID has forced the spread of digital technologies and tools in key areas of HRM such as recruitment, selection, onboarding, internal mobility or training programs. The innovative practices will continue to work well in the years ahead and there will be more and more automated HR processes.
2. COVID as *catalyst for digital competencies*: In just a few months, digitally less advanced countries managed to catch up decades. Oftentimes new technology was learned 'on-the-go' (Koós et al. 2020, p. 125).
3. COVID as *catalyst for sustainable development*: The partial digitalisation of work and HR functions has resulted in a radical reduction in HR's eco-footprint. In *Denmark*, for example, the full digitalisation of recruitment (selection), remuneration and further training reduced paper-based administrative burdens by no less than 70% (Schulian, 2020).
4. COVID as *catalyst for efficiency*: Some costs (e.g. travel) were eliminated. Administrative processes (e.g. selection) were shortened.
5. COVID as *catalyst for (social) dialogue*: The pandemic made close cooperation between social partners and governments inevitable. Agreements were negotiated. Employers agreed not to fire workers, unions accepted shortening working times and lowering of wages. Governments offered benefits and/or wage subsidies (OEC-

ILO – Global Deal Partnership, 2020). In *France*, national consultation on the transformation of the civil service has been launched. The government used the pandemic experience to start afresh. To develop the measures (including structural changes) a national consultation started with civil servants to identify the most urgent areas for change. They asked two questions: (1) What measures should be taken to simplify operations and restart the country? (2) How could your day-to-day activities be improved to help restart the country? (Montchalin, 2020).

6. COVID as *catalyst for rebuilding trust*. In many cases, the transition from the ‘office’ to ‘work from home’ happened quickly (in days or weeks) even considering jobs where the employer previously thought working from home was impossible. Findings of an *Australian* study are noteworthy here. The good in the bad –according to the study– was that teleworking has

been found viable construct applicable even after pandemic. The response to the question ‘Why hasn’t it been applied before?’ was lack of trust. A thought-provoking answer. The degree of control over employees is an indicator of trust placed in them (Aitken-Fox et al. 2020). The practices presented in this Paper give rise to the hope that HRM moves towards mutual trust and empowerment not towards control and surveillance. Harari (Harari, 2020) writes: ‘Trust that has been eroded for years cannot be rebuilt overnight. But these are not normal times. In a moment of crisis, minds too can change quickly. You can have bitter arguments with your siblings for years, but when some emergency occurs, you suddenly discover a hidden reservoir of trust and amity, and you rush to help one another.’ These are the words of a contemporary historian and philosopher, someone who cares deeply for humankind. What better message for the post COVID, transforming HRM?

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