

THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

The covid-19 pandemic has created a new environment around the world. In a negative way, public administration has also been affected.. This paper work reflects the last few months, and the impact of the pandemic on public administration and its integrity.

Being an unprecedented situation, governments and institutions did not have a so-called life vest and a timely and rapid response to the pandemic is needed despite the lack of experience.

the most important thing is to stop the spread of the virus, and this is only possible with the introduction of drastic measures on citizens. These measures are very important for the health system, which is no longer able to cope with the large influx of patients.

On the other hand, the imposed measures affect the economy, the dramatic effects of which can still be seen today.

We are trying to discover how the initial stage of the COVID- analysing and investigating how this unprecedented crisis has been managed,.

Important structures of a civil society can be severely affected. Health, safety and economic services are of particular importance, and these are joined by public administration.

In this study, the main objective is to find out what the effects of the pandemic upon public administration:, how the situation was handled, which were the biggest challenges for human resources and finally, propose solutions that contribute to a better operation.; to achieve this goal we used national and international documentation; identifying and analyzing the problems found on the basis of the information obtained by online questionnaires ; interpretation of results and draw up the conclusion.

KEYWORDS: *public administration; economic measures, micro and macro effects; pandemic*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first six months of 2020, COVID-19 affected almost every country and nearly eight million people worldwide. All levels of government have been brought to work in a context of radical uncertainty and difficult trade-offs in health, economic and social challenges. More than half of the world's population has been confined with strong measures to stop the spread of the virus. Beyond the human and health tragedy of the coronavirus, it is now widely accepted that the pandemic has caused the most serious economic crisis of the last hundred years.

The citizen has the highest ever confidence in public institutions, which is why civil servants work tirelessly for better results, for a better quality of service.

The outbreak of the pandemic has caused a slowdown, an interruption in activity, in the quality of services provided. Civil servants are not only struggling with the fear of this virus but also with maintaining services at a time of socio-economic crisis.

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Because there has been no precedent, public services have to find quick solutions, adapt on the fly and continue to provide services.

The lack of experience of institutions and especially of governments has left its mark on the system - both public and private. All that is to come after this pandemic can be controlled with swift and right actions that can mitigate the devastating effects. The national and global challenge is for country managers and leaders to respond correctly to this situation and manage resources effectively.

In a country where technology is not present in all sectors and where a good part of the population does not know or does not have access to internet and devices, will society cope with telework?

We are interested in how the transition from normal operation to the home office has worked and what remains after this in the public administrations of mobile-flexible forms of work.

The aim of this cross sectional study was to analyse how workers of the public sector were prepared for teleworking. This section will describe how the implementation of restrictions to stop the spread of the virus may impact the public administration and public servants.

2. PANDEMIC IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Being a new virus, we're all at risk of contracting covid COVID-19 infection because no one has immunity. (ECDC, 2020.) This virus has its origins in Wuhan, China being confirmed in November 2019. When the Chinese authorities reported the cases to the World Health Organization (WHO) it had already spread all over the world by the end of the year. A Public Health Emergency of International Concern was declared on 30 January 2020 by WHO and the virus was named COVID-19. In Europe, the pandemic (on the concept of pandemic, see Yamamoto, 2013; Doshi, 2011) was declared on 11 March and since then, it had become clear and predictable that the spread of the virus will continue and change the face of entire world.

From Wuhan, the virus started to spread to different countries all over the world with different rate (Brahma, 2020). When such a crisis happens, one thing is common throughout the world - people are waiting for the government to act, and they often have very high expectations.

In order to fight the virus, far-reaching health policy measures have been taken in many countries, which strengthen social contacts. The aim is to reduce the rate of spread and to prevent an overload of health systems. It is currently difficult to predict how long these health policy measures will have to remain in force and when social life will return to normal. This is accompanied by strong economic impacts.

Enough of the medical staff must remain at work for this pandemic to be well managed. This may no longer be the case given the accelerated spread in some countries. (Parodi & Liu, 2020.)

In the situation we find ourselves in, we need firm and radical decisions. The lifestyle and the things we do on a daily basis need to be stopped. Mandatory and voluntary quarantine, closure of educational institutions, isolation of areas and cities and even countries, banning of gatherings- these being a few of the radical measures to be adopted (Anderson et al., 2020).

The current situation regarding COVID-19 is putting us to the test in our daily lives. Contact with other people is limited to a minimum, the world of work has changed rapidly.

The greatest challenge is that while being strategy, it comes at a huge economic and social cost, which makes it hard to sustain, even impossible over a very long period of time (Coghlan et al., 2020). In addition to those known and listed above, there are less frequently used names- that highlight some particular aspects of the government approach, such as agileadaptive strategy (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020), cluster strategy (Furuse et al., 2020), hybrid strategy (Finnish Government, 2020). Regardless of the chosen strategy, there is empirical evidence to claim that non-pharmaceutical actions were associated with reduced spread of COVID-19 and contributed to the achievement of good medical outcomes (Cowling et al., 2020).

The pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has fundamentally changed the world of work. Many public and private companies were forced to change their way of working and send their employees

to the home office. In many areas, it becomes apparent that home office functions and that the tasks are also performed efficiently outside the office. At the same time, many of us can see and experience the advantages and disadvantages of working at home.

In all European Union countries, public administration has adopted telework in order to reduce and decrease the risk of employee sickness.

There is still limited physical presence on the work premises, when needed and there is no other solution, and when the tasks to be performed cannot be modified. There are cases where the work process cannot be suspended or digitised and physical presence is mandatory (e.g. courts).

It is important that appropriate and effective measures are taken by politicians on the one hand and managers on the other. These measures must be taken to maintain economic and social balance. It is imperative that the measures adopted and those to be adopted to reduce the number of illnesses and keep the pandemic under control, so that essential services are provided without delay. The major challenge is that all these things have to be done so that people don't lose faith in the government, so leadership is essential in this period and it's not allowed to be defective.

Government must be nimble enough to disregard old norms and act quickly and concretely, doing everything they can to protect the citizens, save lives and the economy. Is a fierce battle with time, different from any normal and known kind of policymaking.

Regional organizations also have important duties and roles in fighting the pandemic by supporting the government. In this unprecedented period and crisis we need clear, secure and strategic actions and also permanent reform. More than ever, now is the time for leaders to mobilize the population, to make them understand the importance of respecting the measures imposed. More than ever now there is a need for agile and capable leaders.

This crisis put public administration in a difficult and challenging situation where it had to be clear, legitimate, effective and radical, when there are so many unknowns and the extremely rapid spread of the virus. The time was extremely limited for dialogue and gatherings and this has made it difficult to make decisions.

Problems of trust in governments and their decisions, ignoring expert advice and adversarial discussions between the political decision-making and experts was a major impediment to combating the pandemic and the crisis it brought.

Public administration had to synthesize information, follow the decisions taken by other states, and then adapt them to government decisions and responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

In times of pandemic, public administration must have prepared risk plans and scenarios ensuring the continuity of work processes without any reduction in quality. These plans also take into account employee absence due to illness. These measures and plans need to be implemented quickly, including training staff to work from home.

In the public financial management area a very flexible approach had to be adopted to enable governments to allocate resources to areas of urgent need, citizens and their businesses must be supported.

The differences between countries are largely due to the multi-level governance framework and in particular the importance of the role of sub-national authorities in economic and social terms. In countries with a high level of decentralisation, the impact on spending by sub-national authorities will be greater, particularly in the spending sectors most affected by the crisis (health, social protection, education, essential services, economic development, etc.).

States and international organisation have adopted measures to reduce risks at work, the priority being the safety and health of employees.

The World Health Organization as well as the International Labor Organization have developed and disseminated a number of relevant materials and resources, with guidelines the measures already taken at national level (e.g: the state has ensured that ministries and public institutions under its management receives funds for protective equipment; has been awarded technical unemployment; stabilisation of credit and financial policies; state aid facilitation).

Most important is to protect the vulnerable groups, mitigation and containment measures are the most effective interventions that could minimize the consequences of the virus (OECD, 2020)

3. THE PROBLEMS FACED BY ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Even at this critical time, the government must collect taxes, draw up documents and provide financial assistance. The most serious problems to deal with it was in the health and education sector. E-learning raises many problems, some related to poor infrastructure, others related to the way in which e-learning is conducted. The problems relate to a rethinking of the matter, teaching methods, teacher education, but also to the assessment of students, and most importantly and sadly, many children do not have the necessary devices such as laptops, tablets, phones and internet.

The medical sector has been confronted more and more with certain challenges, but they have become even more pressing at this time. Doctors and other medical staff are now at the forefront and play a leading role in the fight against the virus. The acquisition of new medical equipment, the management of the lack of doctors and nurses, the motivation of the health professionals through bonuses were some of the main situations faced by the government.

The short term priority of the Government remains to provide the necessary working capital for undertakings affected by COVID-19 as a result temporary closure of activities, to reduce the demand for consumption and interruptions in the chain supply, through access programs to financing for working capital and investments with state guarantees, grants and aid schemes state for new investment.

Public administration reform has stopped. There is no effective framework for strategic and budgetary planning which has a negative effect on the strategic vision for the long-term development of the country, prioritization of actions and policy coordination at central and local level. The sectoral strategic framework is fragmented and sometimes overlapping while sectoral actions are not prioritized. Strategic management at the level of the Government General Secretariat is not consolidated yet.

This crisis has revealed another dimension to the services provided, due to the social distance and in some cases the obligation to work from home.

Countless measures have been taken by Public Administration in order to continue the functioning of the state and at the same time, to ensure essential services and protect their employees.

There is no doubt that public services were already in the process of being digitized long before the outbreak of the pandemic, as a new system for operating public services and, of course, in accordance with the principle of mutability of these services. As a result, the current digitization of the operation of public services can only be analyzed as a means due to the need to ensure compliance with the principle of continuity of public services, following the increasing extension of COVID 19.

The pandemic developed into a catalyst, especially in the area of digitization. The municipalities reacted on short notice with flexible structural changes and new solutions, which led to a considerable increase in the trust of the citizens in the ability of their local administrations to act. Municipalities formed crisis teams, adapted work processes and reorganized responsibilities for certain work areas. Even if that doesn't sound like particularly new developments at first, the innovation potential for public administration should not be underestimated.

Lack of financial resources as well as insufficient digitization and IT infrastructure are currently the greatest challenges for public administration.

The digitization of administrative services and work has become more important, especially for administrative employees, under the impact of Covid-19.

With the exceptional health circumstances generated by the spread of the coronavirus worldwide, it is possible to observe a generalization of digital tools in the operation of the public service. This statement seems to apply to all legal systems facing this pandemic. For example, online courses have multiplied to become the default mode of operation of the public education service. Under the current

circumstances, the digital sector is tending to become the indispensable tool for ensuring the operation of public services.

While the resource situation is a permanent problem that urgently needs to be heard, the response to knowledge and communication should be quicker: a clear communication strategy for internal and external areas that is jointly developed and used for areas such as the exchange of knowledge and crisis management, could help here and ultimately also facilitate the home office. Because a decisive factor for credible crisis action by the administrations is precisely that: transparent and competent communication between management levels, both internally and externally. Not only to ensure objectivity, transparency and consistency in the matter, but also to create trust and encourage employee engagement.

Thus, with the principle of continuity seen as the primary obligation forefully imposed on all public services considered essential, but when it comes to the principle of equality in the public services, things are not the same, they remain limited due to several constraints which sometimes put it in difficulty.

The move to teleworking was not a problem for institutions where this was part of their culture and where they had the right infrastructure to maintain services. To support those who teleworking meant an obstacle, guidelines and manuals on teleworking were widely deployed.

Economic departments were closed because they had Covid cases and that is why they could not report the financial situation monthly and quarterly- they did not have the necessary calculation technique or in quarantine at home (this leads to erroneous data to beneficiaries: National Bank, European Commission). The central public administration is facing with the same problem- closed departments.

3. METHODS

A cross sectional study was created and the received responses were collected using structured self-administered online questionnaires.

This study was carried out among workers in the public sector in Romania and included questions about the functioning of the public administration during the pandemic from October 15 2020 to November 15 2020. Using a self-designed well-structured questionnaire data were collected and administered through an open access Google survey. The questionnaire consists of three parts. Part 1 included sociodemographic information of the participants, the second part covered the teleworking knowledge and part 3 investigated problems faced by the workers and their attitude toward teleworking. The respondents had the option of answering- 'Yes' or 'No' as answer, and were requested to use frequency (count) and relative frequency (percentage) for categorical data.

4. RESULTS

A total of 260 respondents completed the full questionnaire. Those with partially or incomplete answered responses were excluded.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

	Count	%
1. What is you gender?		
Famale	183	70,3
Male	77	29,6
2. What is you degree		
Highschool	28	10.7
Bachelor's degree	147	56.5

Master	74	28,4
Doctoral Degree /PhD	11	4,2
3. How old are you?		
20–30	43	16,5
30–40	86	33,0
40–50	92	35,3
50–60	31	11,9
60 and above	8	3
4. How many years of experience do you have?		
Less than 5 years	37	14,2
5–10 years	52	20
10-15 years	76	29,2
More than 15 years	95	36.5

183 (70.3%) were females and 77(29.6%) were males and more than half of them were holding a Bachelor's degree (56.5 %) The majority of respondents completing the survey 92 (35.3%) were between 40 and 50 years age, while those above 60 years old represented a minority 8 (3%). The majority of employees responding to this survey were having more than 15 years of experience (36.5%) (Table 1).

Table 2. Level of teleworking

Knowledge level survey questions	YES		NO	
	Count	%	Count	%
Are you familiar with the term "teleworking"	172	66,1	88	33,8
Have you seen a teleworking system before	63	24,2	197	75,7
Are you familiar with tools like teleconference	57	21,9	203	78,1

Respondents have a poor knowledge about teleworking. Of those who completes the questionnaire, 172 (66.1%) were familiar with the term 'telemedicine' but only 63 (24.2%) have seen a teleworking system. The majority of respondents (75.7 %) have not seen a teleworking system before and 203 of them were not familiar with tools s like teleconferencing (Table 2).

Tabel 3. Attitude toward teleworking

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Public administration has improved with the "forced" digitalization following the pandemic	62	102	96
The measures taken for the functioning, relationship and resolution during the pandemic at the level of public administration are good	69	93	98
Were you able to adjust your work schedule between certain limits, time intervals	72	75	113
It is useful to increase the degree of digital skills of public administration employees by implementing projects for the development of electronic public services	2	31	227
COVID is a good time to try teleworking	18	18	224
Still go to the office to solve your tasks	44	0	216

During this period you received a useful and prompt answer, solved the given situation (from a public institution)	45	151	64
Teleworking affected your already well-established work rules	71	87	102
Teleworking is compatible with work	100	78	82
Teleworking learning is hard process	56	98	106
Teleworking increases workload	76	57	127
Teleworking adds extra responsibility	57	74	129
Teleworking requires more effort	29	58	173

The results showed a discrepancy can be observed between theory and practice.

The current study indicated that respondents had an overall good attitude toward teleworking but they were not prepared to use it. The answers to the last five questions revealed that employees have difficulty with telework. 100 of the 260 say that teleworking is not compatible with work, 106 considers teleworking a hard process and almost half of the respondents said that teleworking increases workload.

More than half of them believe teleworking requires more effort than a classic work and 129 considers that teleworking adds extra responsibility.

These results show that employees have a high level of difficulty in using telework and that it makes their tasks more difficult. On the other hand, in the first part we notice that the employees look at this change in a positive way. 227 of them (87.3) agree that it is useful to increase the degree of digital skills of public administration employees by implementing projects for the development of electronic public services and only 2 respondents disagree with this fact. Even if most of them agreed with the previous statement 96 (36.9) of the respondents consider that the public administration has improved with the "forced" digitalization following the pandemic and 98 (37.6) agree that the measures taken for the functioning, relationship and resolution during the pandemic at the level of public administration are good. 102 said that teleworking affected their already well-established work rules and less than half - 113 (43.4) answered that they were able to adjust the work schedule between certain limits, time intervals. The most relevant statement for our work "Still go to the office to do your tasks" received 216 positive answers which means 83% of them of the employees cannot do their tasks.

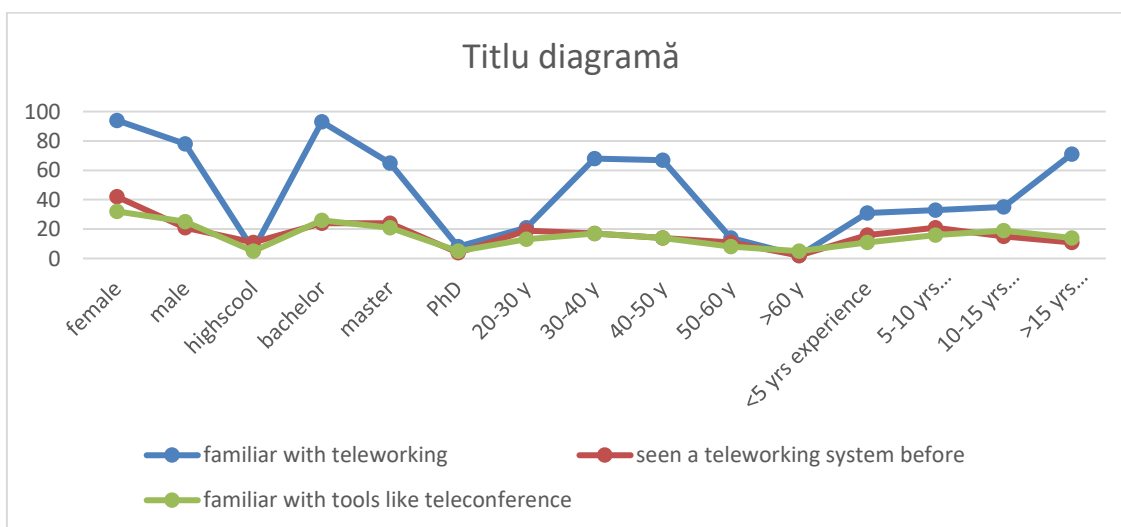


Figure 1. Descriptive statistics about the level of telework knowledge- gender, degree, age, years of experience

Figure 1 provides details about the level of knowledge of telework. The most familiar with telework are women with bachelor's degree, aged between 30 and 40, most of them with an experience of over 15 years.

Also, women between the ages of 30 and 40 are those who have seen a telework system but different from the previous ones they have a master's degree, with 5-10 years of experience.

Those who are familiar with the tools are also women. They have bachelor's degree, are between 30 and 40 years old and have between 10 to 15 years of experience.

5. CONCLUSION

Public employees must also provide services during the pandemic. Infrastructure was the main problem for employees working from home

For public employees, the problem is the work from home- the programs in which they were working are closed-circuit, and are available on computers located in the office's premises, this has led to a crowding-out of the work and even the delay in their execution. They are advised to work from home by rotation, but this is impossible and therefore they choose to continue coming to the office.

Employers must take responsibility for keeping their workforce safe, since COVID-19 is primarily a health crisis,.

Physical distancing has been the most important fact in the battle against the spread of the virus around the world and must be a priority for everyone.

The main problem is the poor level of teleworking. For our country, with a low level of IT development, this crisis may have a positive effect. They have to adjust their work even if they were not prepared for this procedures and accept to use the electronic tools.

Public administration employees need training programs in order to use telework and individual equipment containing the programs necessary for their work. This is essential in this context, but learning programs should be included in the daily lives of employees. Lack of knowledge can have its origin in the education system. Even at the moment, the education system does not have a well-developed computer program and the necessary computer infrastructure. From the analyzed results not all employees under the age of 30 are familiar with tools like teleconference which shows us that those who have recently finished their studies are not prepared and do not have the necessary knowledge to use telework.

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