Never waste a good crisis; Which work-related COVID-19 changes are here to stay?

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Summary

Background: Which work-related COVID-19 changes are here to stay? This research question emerged based on earlier results from our **project**, funded by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund, and based on our discussion of these results with the research community and with management and policy decision makers in Austria (Willems, Knassmüller, Ebinger, et al. 2020). While many changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in personal and societal disadvantages (for an overview see: Willems, Knassmüller, Eggenreich, et al. (2020)), some changes might have direct and indirect, as well as short and long-term advantages too. With this report, we aim to document the overall public opinion (in Austria - June 2020) on whether some changes could or should stay. Moreover, we look at whether opinions differ for gender and age, and we are mainly interested –given our own overall and long-term research agenda– to evaluate whether opinions differ between employees in the private or public sectors. Such insight can be relevant to evaluate whether a sector-specific approach is necessary to develop the future of work.

Data & method: We were able to integrate a 9-item scale in the eleventh wave (12 June 2020 – 17 June 2020) of the large-scale data collection process of the **Austrian Corona Panel Project**, led by Prof. Bernhard Kittel, Prof. Sylvia Kritzinger, Prof. Hajo Boomgaarden, and Prof. Barbara Prainsack (“Austrian Corona Panel Project” 2020). In this Corona Panel, about 1500 respondents are surveyed on a weekly basis. We refer to the extensive and especially useful website (click here), including many interesting results, details on sampling, access to data, and content of other questions and data waves.

The items for the construct that we report here focused on whether respondents were in favor or against particular COVID-related changes in the work environment and could be answered on a 5-point Likert scale (“1 = Very much in favor”, “2 = Rather in favor”, “3 = ‘In between’”, “4 = Rather against”, “5 = Very much against”). Original items (in German) and English translations are reported at the end of this document.

Results: For the graphs in this study, items are ranked based on the sample mean, from most in favor (at the top of the graph) to least in favor (at the bottom of the graph). Mean values are indicated with a dot, along with the 95%-confidence interval around the mean. For the overall reporting of mean values for the total sample, item mean scores are reported above the confidence intervals. For other figures in this study, graphs report differences for subgroups based on gender and age and based on sector of employment for the subsample of employed respondents.

Main findings and conclusion: Respondents are in general in favor to keep particular COVID-related changes in the working context, such as more flexibility with respect to home office, working hours, and part-time work. Respondents are also in favor for less bureaucratic procedures for sickness leave, and less business trips and outside appointment. However, this should not come with more employer control, nor with increasingly fading boundaries between personal and professional life contexts. These results mainly show the overall challenges for the future of work, where more autonomy and flexibility is desired, but not at the cost of losing a clear delineation between professional and personal contexts. Moreover, women are for several aspects more in favor to keep COVID-related changes, such as keeping distance in the work environment, less business trips, and flexibility with respect to part-time work and home-office. Younger respondents (under 45) are also in favor of less business trips and external appointments, however not as much as respondents above 45. Except for the reduction of business trips and external appointments, no significant differences are reported between employees of the private and the public sectors. This suggests how challenges are similar across these sectors, and both public and private organizations can learn from each other to shape new attractive work environments.

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All Graphs, in German and English, can be downloaded here (Willems and Ebinger 2020): <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12570623>

Overall Sample - Ranking onf items based on item means

DOWNLOAD (In German and English)

Gender

DOWNLOAD (In German and English)

Age

DOWNLOAD (In German and English)

Sector

DOWNLOAD (In German and English)

Survey Items

English

Variables	Items
W11_Q63A1	Employees should, where possible, be free to choose whether to work in the workplace or the home office.
W11_Q63A2	Employees should, where possible, be free to choose their own hours of work.
W11_Q63A3	Employees should, where possible, be free to choose whether to work full- time or part-time.
W11_Q63A4	Administrative procedures for sickness leave should be simplified.
W11_Q63A5	Telecommunications and digital solutions should be more widely used for collaborative work.
W11_Q63A6	Business trips and outside appointments should be reduced.
W11_Q63A7	Work and private life should be clearly separated.
W11_Q63A8	It should be possible to work with sufficient distance from other employees.
W11_Q63A9	Employers should have the possibility to control employees by technical means or mandatory registration.

German

Variables	Items
W11_Q63A1	Mitarbeiter sollten wenn möglich frei wählen dürfen, ob sie im Betrieb oder im Homeoffice arbeiten.
W11_Q63A2	Mitarbeiter sollten, wenn möglich, ihre Arbeitszeiten frei wählen dürfen.
W11_Q63A3	Mitarbeiter sollten, wenn möglich, frei wählen dürfen, ob sie in Vollzeit oder Teilzeit arbeiten.
W11_Q63A4	Krankschreibungen sollten vereinfacht werden.
W11_Q63A5	Telekommunikation und digitale Lösungen sollten stärker zur Zusammenarbeit genutzt werden.
W11_Q63A6	Dienstreisen und Außentermine sollten reduziert werden.
W11_Q63A7	Arbeits- und Privatleben sollten klar getrennt sein.
W11_Q63A8	Es sollte beim Arbeiten räumlich möglich sein, ausreichend Abstand einzuhalten.
W11_Q63A9	Arbeitgeber sollten die Möglichkeit haben, Arbeitnehmer durch technische Mittel oder Dokumentationspflichten zu kontrollieren.

Correlation of survey Items (n = 1292)

References

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