

**SPOŁECZEŃSTWO
I GOSPODARKA
W CZASIE PANDEMII
COVID-19
DOŚWIADCZENIA UKRAINY**

SPOŁECZEŃSTWO I GOSPODARKA W CZASIE PANDEMII COVID-19 DOŚWIADCZENIA UKRAINY

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Jurij Kariagin

Zdzisław Sirojć

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Recenzenci:

Ella M. Libanova – sekretarz Akademii Nauk Ukrainy,
akademik, dyrektor Instytutu Demografii i Badań Społecznych
im. W. Ptuchy w Kijowie, profesor nauk ekonomicznych

Anatolij Drabowskij – rektor Instytutu Spółdzielczości w Winnicy,
deputowany do Rady Najwyższej Ukrainy, przewodniczący grupy
parlamentarnej Ukraina-Polska, profesor nauk ekonomicznych

Wojciech Słomski – kierownik Katedry Filozofii Akademii
Ekonomiczno-Humanistycznej w Warszawie, profesor nauk humanistycznych,
prezes Społecznego Towarzystwa Polska-Ukraina

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e-mail: oficyna@aspra.pl

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SOCIETY AND ECONOMY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EXPERIENCES OF UKRAINE

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**Yuriy Karyagin
Zdzisław Sirojć**

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Reviewers:

prof. Ella M. Libanova
prof. Anatoly Drabovsky
prof. Wojciech Słomski

Wydawca:
Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR
e-mail: oficyna@aspra.pl
www.aspra.pl
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BA
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University

Impact of COVID-19 on Business Processes and HR Management in Ukraine

The authors discussed the impact of COVID-19 on business processes and HRM in Ukraine. The authors are sure that digitalization of the economy will ensure competitive benefits of enterprises at the cost of rapid automation of business processes, decline in operational costs, growth in efficiency of staff management and its productivity, providing a lot of advantages for entrepreneurship in general, and consumers of goods and services, in particular.

Losses and consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced all spheres of human life. They are difficult to estimate as well as forecast. According to the World Health Organization data, Europe is in the midst of the pandemic at present; every 17 seconds one person dies of COVID-19 [1]. The International Labor Organization estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic seriously impacted both human health and functioning of businesses.

Enterprises faced a rapid fall in income which resulted in a decline of productivity as well as in bankruptcy [2]. Due to unprecedented rise in unemployment and reduction of working time the problems on the labor market have deepened, especially concerning the retention of earnings [3]. The pandemic deepened the problem of poverty among the working population. It is unclear when humanity will return to normal, though it is pretty obvious that apart from threats to the life and health of the population, economical and social losses caused by COVID-19 greatly impact the well-being of millions of people.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ukraine the decrease in sales and monetary flows (61%), failure in serving customers and/or clients (52%), and the impossibility to run business properly (46%) were the greatest challenges for employers [4]. That is why businesses started quickly transforming their own business processes considering the needs for preserving the life and health of both staff and customers. In Ukraine, employers prioritized the measures on support for employees in 2020 such as the following: restriction of business trips (89%), provision of remote work (87%), and office safety, in particular, with anti-bacterial agents, disposable utensils and thermometers (82%), as well as the provision of up-to-date information and advice to the employees (81%) [4].

In April 2020 the Federation of Employers of Ukraine with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and the International Labor Organization conducted a survey among the managers of 121 businesses in different Ukrainian regions. By the types of economic activity these scalable businesses represented different branches of the economy—from machine building and metal working, transport services and construction to trade and agriculture. The purpose of the survey was to reveal the impact of quarantine restrictions on business activity in Ukraine.

The results of the conducted survey pointed out that COVID-19 had no impact on business activity of 6% of enterprises. The rest of respondents experienced a different level of such impact more or less. For instance, in case of prolonging strict quarantine restrictions in Ukraine only a third of employers assume that their businesses will be in existence from 2 to 3 months [5]. Nearly a fifth of employers believe that their businesses will remain sustainable only from 1 to 8 months, whereas another fifth of employers expect their businesses to survive only 3-6 months (Figure 1).

According to the opinion of Deloitte the crisis opened up the unique opportunity for Ukrainian business to alter their traditional attitude to humans and technologies as separate components but to combine their possibilities for synergy [6]. Such approach will assist the organizations in charting a new way of innovation development for the following weeks, months, and years. This crisis enables the managers to foresee what may happen in case they do not propose efficient model of interaction between the human and technologies and refuse to transform their businesses into real social enterprises.

Among the main reasons which impacted the operational activity of Ukrainian enterprises the following should be mentioned: their associates faced a negative impact of restrictions and did not carry out their economic activity (74% of those surveyed), suppliers failed to ensure timeline deliveries (49%), businesses lacked working capital for their staff and operations renumeration (34%) [5].

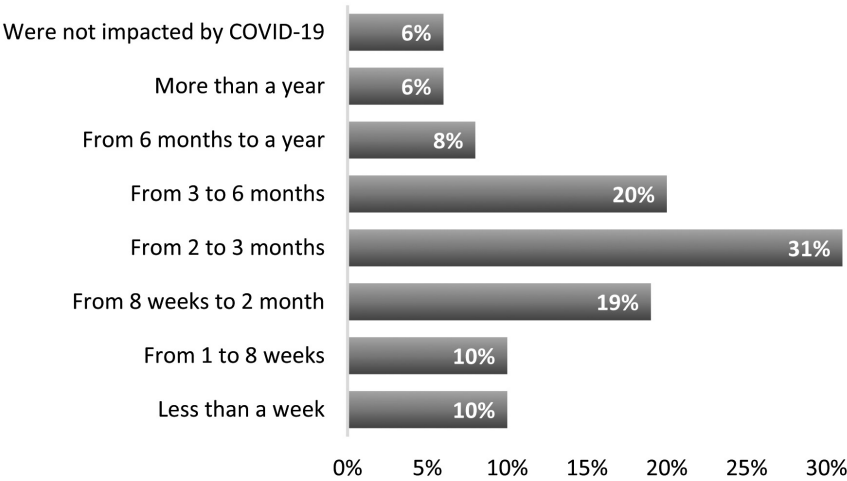


Figure 1. Employers’ Subjective Evaluation of Their Business Resilience in Case of Prolonging Strict Quarantine Restrictions

Source: According to the Federation of Employers of Ukraine data “Business and COVID-19: To Survive Is Not to Die”

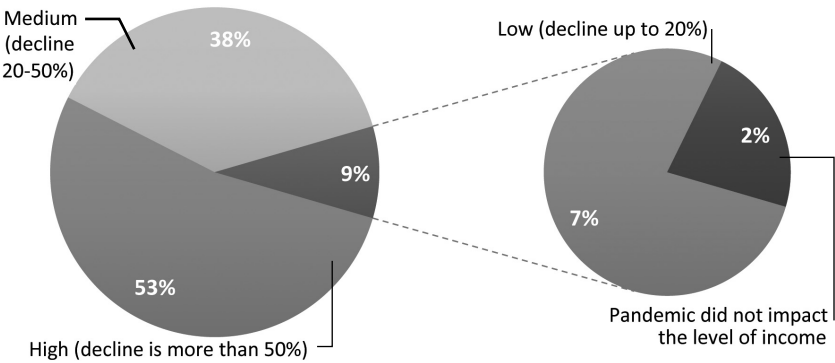


Figure 2. The Level of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Revenues in Business (Rise/I Income)

Source: According to the Federation of Employers of Ukraine data “Business and COVID-19: To Survive Is Not to Die”

A tiny minority of employers (2 %) noted that the pandemic did not impact the level of income/sales of their businesses. By contrast, almost 90% of entrepreneurs noted a level of decline in revenue/sales due to the negative impact of the pandemic as “high (a decline by more than 50%)”—53%, or “medium (a decline by 20-50%)”—38%. At the same time, none of employ-

ers surveyed acknowledged positive impact of pandemics on their businesses (Figure 2).

To reduce production costs Ukrainian businesses had to reconsider the working schedule, ensure the optimal number of staff, redefine the form of the labor system, transfer the staff to a remote form of work and suspend the recruiting of new employees. In general, according to the Federation of Employers of Ukraine, 81% of those employers surveyed confirmed that they had to shift the approach to running business activity in order to protect the enterprise from the pandemic.

Within this context the results of the 2020 KPMG Outlook Survey of business top-managers should be given. During the period of quarantine restrictions, the employers prioritize the business trends as follows: improvement of the environmental social and managerial sustainability, flexible working hours, and digital transformations [7].

Unlike the 2008 financial crisis when massive layoffs of employees were the only strategy of enterprises, these days human capital and employee retention is of the highest priority.

Table 1. The most significant threats to business development within the period of adaptive quarantine 2019-2020 (% of respondents)

	2019	Jan.- Feb. 2020	July-Aug. 2020
Human capital	2	1	21
The chain of supplies	2	2	18
Coming back to locality	16	19	14
Environmental problems/ climate change	21	22	12
Information security	14	15	10
Disruptive technologies	19	11	7
Operational activity	14	11	5
Regulatory policy	7	8	5
Taxes	0	2	4
Interest rates	3	3	2
Reputation/brand	3	6	2
Internal non-ethical culture	0	1	1

Source: KPMG 2020 CEO Outlook

71% of Ukrainian company managers, while adapting to the new forms of business running, introduced the transition to reduced working hours and weeks, shift work etc., trying to maintain the natural staff turnover [8]. For those employees whose job nature makes it impossible to work remotely 38% of employers offered to work as it was supposed to, 31% of employers offered to take an annual paid leave, 29% of employers offered

to arrange the shift schedule excluding direct contacts in the office, 25% of employers had to give the employees a non-paid leave, 15% of employers had to suspend their activity for force-majeure reasons, 10% of employers transferred their employees to reduced working hours, 6% of employers proposed extra leave with full pay [9].

Such decisions led to changes in staff rewarding. During the quarantine period nearly every second an employer had to lessen the sum of their employees' earnings by 20-30 %. To reduce the costs every third Ukrainian enterprise had to freeze the pay rise to their employees for an indefinite period, 14 % of businesses shortened the benefits, 11% of businesses cut down on staff bonuses [10]. Those steps were forced and inevitable, but they caused rising tensions on the labor market and aggravated concerns about income inequality. The youth and migrants appeared to be the most vulnerable groups of the people employed in the informal economical sector

It is fairly obvious that because of the pandemic, the transformational processes in business activity will result in radical changes in dealing with human capital, as well as in shifts of necessary employee skills. Investments in remote working places providing the employees with all conditions for efficient work at home should be the new HR-priorities for Ukrainian businesses.

The 2020 KRMG Outlook survey showed that 42% of Ukrainian enterprises managers are going to reduce the office areas and introduce remote work for a part of their employees after the pandemic's finisg in the nearest future. It should be mentioned that the part of employers in the world who are inclined to do so comprises 69% [7]. In the authors' viewpoint, such a decision will promote the optimization of business costs. Yet, these diverted funds saved up due to renting should be directed at providing the staff with the up-to-date technological devices necessary for work, such as smartphones, tablets, laptops as well as investing in education and training of employees to obtain new experience for remote work.

The complicated situation in the world has triggered the development of the costly nature technologies by medium-sized and small businesses which were considered inaccessible for these segments. The enterprises had to adapt to the new conditions facing the risks of business continuity, including interruptions of supply, shifting of spots to interact with customers and/or clients, unavailability of drastically significant resources, flexibility of transactions volumes, concerns about efficiency of staff labor due to remote work arrangements, cyber-security issues etc.

As a result, each business owner faces the issue of prolonging their own activity and rapid change implementation.

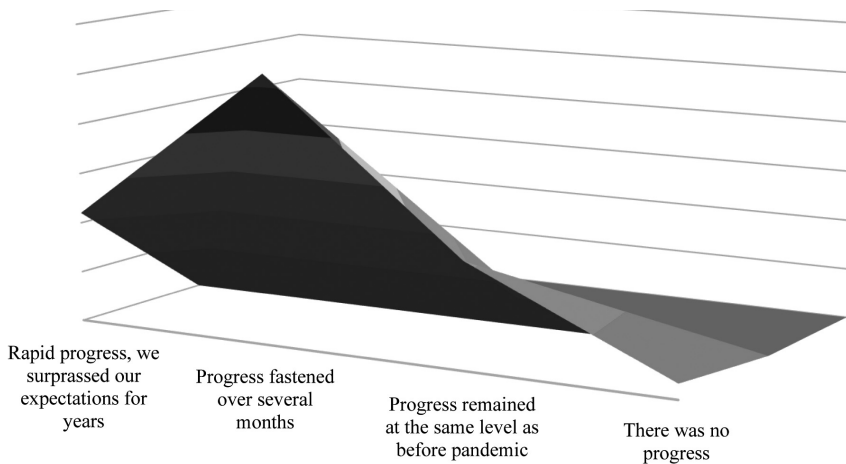


Figure 3. The Impact of the Pandemic on Digitalization (Viewpoint of Business Owners)

Source: KPMG 2020 CEO Outlook

Businesses had to accelerate the digitalization providing non-stop digital services for customers. A dramatic situation in the country quickened those processes though hardly any businesses were able and eager to be digitalized. Almost every fifth of business managers (22%) noted in the survey that the digitalization advanced and related to its processes fastened the enterprises' development [7].

39% of employers admitted that the pandemic fastened digital transformation and creation of the operational model of a new generation. But even with the decline of economic indicators in Ukraine 72 % of employers expect a rise in profitability of their businesses in the next 3 years. It is directly related to how fast they will be able to provide necessary digital changes. 77% of employers are going to develop instruments of digital communication and collaboration in the future [9].

The pandemic also led to a large-scale reconsideration of the chain of supplies carried out by both the businesses themselves and their associates. 43% of enterprises regarded this fact as the essential premise of business ability to respond to the changes in customers and/or clients' needs promptly.

Taking into account the fact that digital changes have quickly gained momentum and become the competitive advantage of enterprises, businesses require people to introduce digital technologies, work in a digital format with one another, with clients and suppliers, as well as create added value.

"If you want to survive, you should be digitalized!" has become the slogan of entrepreneurs since the beginning of the introduction of a full lock-

down in Ukraine because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. While introducing changes related to digitalization, entrepreneurs faced a set of internal barriers. Some of them, such as one of the largest media groups of Ukraine—StarLightMedia, which unites several Ukrainian companies, can be presented as an example. This media group as well as many other businesses found themselves in a tough situation which promoted the introduction of a number of digital changes, in particular:

1. Use of digital platforms and instruments. It has become an issue as to which platform should be used for work. Development of own digital platforms and instruments is rather costly and requires specific period of time, but they had to act quickly. The StarLightMedia group found a solution: they purchased software by the powerful company Microsoft. That provided a simpler way to carry out transformations.
2. Safety of StarLightMedia employees. All employees were provided with masks, gloves, and individual disinfectants at the company's cost. The company executives arranged commuting the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid unnecessary contacts. Service Express Delivery was maintained which made it possible for those employees who worked at the locations to exchange messages, mails, and parcels promptly and move between the locations. Company car scheduling was established within this service which was spread via corporate emailing.
3. Lack of employees' experience and skills while using digital platforms. Over the past months platform Microsoft Teams has become the main site for meetings. Considering the fact that majority of employees did not have enough experience of its usage, a special guidance on business communication ethics was developed and later sent via corporate emailing to each staff member. This guidance provided a detailed algorithm of actions with screenshots as examples to meet specific requirements, particularly, obtaining a corporate account, password changing, avatar and sound settings etc. Therefore, the company applied and wide-scaled all possible instruments to ensure cooperative remote work and provided all necessary recommendations on streamlining business processes during the period of quarantine restrictions caused by COVID-19.
4. Approach to filming. Quarantine and self-isolation forced people to rethink the approach to filming. It was not cost-effective to stop shooting and bear losses, so Novyi Kanal launched online-sitcom «#those who chatting» («#chatnuti» in an unusual format. Each actor recorder himself / herself at home independently with the help of videoconferencing, exposed the light independently, worked as a make-up artist, costume designer, and camera operator. Thanks to that sitcom the StarLightMedia group managed to save up some money, as there was no need for a make-

up artist, costume designer and camera operator. Such steps enabled them to arrange safe working conditions for the staff, retain leadership positions and, certainly, obtain some profit [11].

Apart from the above-mentioned changes related to the transition from traditional to digital forms of working processes, the StarLightMedia group announced the large-scale “Remote” project. The purpose of the project is to ensure efficient and comfortable remote work of the employees, which has become a reality of the current life. With the assistance of the “Remote” project, the StarLightMedia group established a permanently remote form of staff’s labor which in its first stage enabled to transfer nearly 20% of employees to remote online work.

Reorganization of working processes, particularly, training to manage remotely, arrangement of workspaces under the new mode and introduction of technological innovations into the working process calls for creating specific conditions. The internal training company IT Excellence within the StarLightMedia group provides fast mastering digital tools and services for the staff. In case a staff member wants to visit the office to reboot the mind as one is unable to unwind anywhere, he or she can come to the office and communicate with the colleagues. In doing so, a number of seats for employees in the studies lessened, but the studies were rearranged into open space areas to collaborate with those who visit the location temporarily either to work or to change the scenery. Each employee was able to get somebody else’s workstation and watch on own technologies [12].

Thus, realizing the enormous losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth estimating new opportunities for the national economy. At present it is quite obvious that remote organization of work will be of active use in Ukraine in the nearest years. Under the conditions of adaptive quarantine, a number of benefits of remote employment have been revealed, in particular, employees spent less time commuting to their workplaces, balanced their work and private life, improved their own productivity and liberated time for their hobbies and leisure. At the same time employers note such drawbacks of remote work as complications in employees’ arrangements of working and leisure time, declining capacity of monitoring individual and team efficiency, lack of equipped office environment and communication with colleagues, decrease in the level of project management effectiveness. Considering all benefits and drawbacks, businesses should establish an anti-crisis management plan, review the strategy and policy concerning the staff for short-term and medium-term prospective taking into account strategic goals of the company, audit the staff, adapt the program on training and retraining to the new business requirements, develop comprehensive plan of introducing the Elastic Digital Workplace. It is advisable to provide resource security

of Elastic Digital Workplaces, technical equipment, software, wide use of cloud services and information protection facilities, as well as reflect the necessity of creating the channels of interaction with customers or clients, associates, suppliers, and contractors.

To sum up, it should be mentioned that in Ukraine the COVID-19 pandemic promoted fastening the processes of national economy digitalization, regulation and improving the process of remote education, and training and employment. The authors are sure that digitalization of the economy will ensure competitive benefits of enterprises at the cost of rapid automation of business processes, decline in operational costs, growth in efficiency of staff management and its productivity, providing a lot of advantages for entrepreneurship in general, and consumers of goods and services, in particular. At the same time employers have to optimize business models and processes, secure the essential level of virtual interaction tools, improve channels of feedback, provide a high level of digital support to the staff and care for informational security.

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