

Virtual Versus Face-to-Face meetings: A study Regarding the Perceptions of the Romanian Managers during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. *The new coronavirus disease was first observed in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. A couple of months later it was recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as SARS CoV-2 and nominally named COVID-19 (European Council, 2021). In just a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced individuals all over the world to adapt their behavior, both personally and professionally, social distance becoming a necessity by reducing the spread of the virus (Tang, et al., 2020). These restrictions have resulted in a dramatic increase in the use of technology for remote meetings, including video conferencing tools. And although this process was happening in a mostly unfamiliar environment, due to its necessity and one's incapacity of replacing face-to-face interactions with anything else it has become a day-to-day activity in a matter of weeks. Although there are some particularities as a result of cultural diversity, in Romania the adoption of such tools was in line with what was happening all over the world, although because of the decreased level of digitalization in public administration it was more difficult for some part of the society to adapt. The present study has the objective to reveal what Romanian managers think about virtual conferences versus face-to-face conferences, taking into consideration the period before the COVID-19 pandemic (until March 2020), but also the pandemic period (from March 2020 until January 2022). Data has been collected using in depth interviews with Romanian managers who worked before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that there was a change in one's behavior when having to use only virtual conferences tools, becoming more aware of their time and in general making the most out of it by having a clear agenda for almost all types of virtual meetings. A hybrid solution is seen by most of the managers as being optimal by reducing time lost between face-to-face meetings, but the results also indicate that a full replacement of face-to-face meetings with virtual meetings is not a solution as direct interaction between individuals cannot be replaced with the use of virtual tools.*

Keywords: virtual meetings, face-to-face meetings, pandemic, remote, human factors

Introduction

In a short period of time the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the way we live, both personally and professionally. The necessary alteration to the way we interact, by imposing social distancing regulations all over the world in order to minimize the spread of the virus, has resulted in the incapacity of having face-to-face meetings. But as day-to-day activities had to continue in order to keep business as normal as possible, solutions had to be found. This resulted in a phenomenon of accelerated digital transformation as being the first solution and the one that has been widely chosen by individuals all over the world, with the adoption of virtual meetings as the only form of direct interaction being on top of the priorities list in organizations all over the world. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the use of virtual meetings tools including such

platforms as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, Webex by Cisco to name just a few. For instance, Zoom had over 10 million daily meeting participants in December 2019, but by April 2020 that number had risen to over 300 million (Evans, 2020). Other platforms, such as Google Meet and Microsoft Teams have also experienced significant increases in daily participants (Peters, 2020; Thorp-Lancaster, 2020). It is also expected that the use of virtual meetings tools will continue long after the COVID-19 pandemic, as Gartner predicts that only 25% of business meetings will take place in-person by 2024 (Standaert et al., 2016)

Digital tools, including platforms for video conferences, were already used before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was not until March 2020 when it became clear for everyone that all efforts must be made in order to prioritize the adoption of such digital tools in order for the businesses to stay as normal as possible. Although historically there are some examples of crises that needed a quick response from the authorities (even recent ones, such as the financial crisis in 2008), the one generated by COVID-19 had a strong medical character, meaning that public authorities had to impose a series of social distancing restrictions in order to minimize the spread of the virus, making it impossible for managers and employees to have face-to-face meetings as work from home became the new reality. Even if in most of the countries the restrictions imposed by local authorities are being lifted, employees choose to work from home and use the digital infrastructure developed at the beginning and during the COVID-19 pandemic, including virtual conferencing tools (OWL Labs, 2020).

The main research objectives were as following: O1: to investigate the way managers perceive the importance of face-to-face meetings; O2: to investigate the way managers perceive the importance of virtual meetings; O3: to investigate what are the factors that influence the managers' choice between virtual and face-to-face meetings; O4: to investigate what is the relationship between those factors; O5: to investigate the way managers perceive the eventuality of going towards a world in which virtual meetings are the only option.

Literature review

Computer-mediated communication systems (CMCS) were originally defined as “sociotechnical systems that enhance and support the communication-related activities of team members engaged in computer-supported cooperative work” (Alavi & Keen, 1989). The purpose of such computer-based communication technologies is to overcome time and space constraints that burden face-to-face meetings, to increase the range and depth of information access, and to improve group task performance effectiveness (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, such computer-mediated communication systems, virtual conferencing tools included, started to be used at a wider level. Individuals all around the world acknowledged the importance of such tools and initiated an accelerated process of digital transformation in order to keep businesses as close to normal as possible. However, this process led to the rise of a new concept, called “COVID fatigue”. After a couple of months since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2020 a study developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 40% of the American adults reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues stemming from the pandemic (Czeisler, et al., 2020). A significant number of studies were published in the field of medicine, researching the rise of telehealth.

Advantages provided by the use of virtual meetings may not always overweight their disadvantages, meaning that the capability of easily creating a communication channel for people separated by time and/or space cannot replace the need of developing a strong sense of satisfaction

and cohesion with the rest of the team or the partner that is involved in that meeting (Warkentin et al., 2007).

With the use of virtual conferencing tools, group structure is most of the time broader, but more agile than the structure in a face-to-face meeting. The increased level of individual knowledge in a virtual conference may come from the elimination of time and location constraints (Slevin et al., 1998). A quick response time and the ability to access other resources in real time means increased agility. Even if up to 93% of meaning is contained in facial and vocal cues rather than in text, miscommunication can happen more often when using virtual conferencing tools. Another occurrence in virtual meetings is the inability to compensate for the inherent ambiguity of language with intonations, checks (“Do you understand what I’m talking about?”), facial expressions and gesticulations (e.g., four fingers to mimic quotation marks).

Although it may seem less important, office location, posture, eye contact, clothing and seating position provide the speaker with power and status, things that cannot be replaced with the use of virtual conferencing tools (Dubrovsky et al., 1991). Virtual meetings also provide one with the ability to stay somehow anonymous, which can significantly influence group process and outcomes. First of all, participants are feeling less visible, meaning that the level of effort may be lower, generating less productivity and commitment to the team. This ability to remain anonymous diffuses individual responsibility, meaning that group decisions can be riskier than individuals’ decisions. Last but not least, it reduces the amount of influence an expert might otherwise have (Vroman and Kovacich, 2002). Group characteristics are also altered in virtual meetings, a complex task being even more complex by the incapacity to use visual aids or to do something more ad hoc, for example moving to a larger whiteboard.

Although the technical infrastructure, internet speed and image quality improved significantly lately, in virtual conferences eye contact is basically impossible to have, first of all due to image resolution and the distance between the screen and the webcam. As the number of participants in a virtual room increases, it’s harder to interpret body language and gestures (assuming that all participants have their webcams turned on, which is not always the case). The richness of the information communicated is affected, due to limitations in nonverbal, paraverbal, and status cues. Participants in virtual meetings also have difficulties in identifying the remote speaker, gaining floor control, detecting movements and attaining mutual gaze (Daft & Lengel, 1986). However, according to some studies (Isaacs and Tang, 1994) discussion tends to be more task-oriented and less social in virtual conferences than those in face-to-face meetings. Krauss & Bricker (1967) observed that 20% of communication in face-to-face meetings was social, non-task-oriented. In virtual conferences this percent dropped to 5%. This finding is shared by other studies, showing that virtual conferences tend to be more formal, orderly, and polite than face-to-face meetings, having less conflict and showing a reduction of back-channeling and interruptions (Finn et al., 1999).

In terms of time-efficiency, virtual conferences are less efficient than face-to-face meetings, mostly because of the participants’ difficulty in understanding each other and regulating conversations (Straus et al., 2001). More in advance preparation is also needed so that objectives in virtual conferences are accomplished (Straus et al., 2001).

Participation in virtual conferences is less than in face-to-face meetings, and although this may not be critical in informational meetings, a higher level of participation would increase the responsibility and interdependency of a virtual collaboration (Yoo and Alavi, 2001). Audio quality in virtual conferences seems to be more important than video quality, as even small delays in audio can frustrate participants and seriously disrupt their ability to reach mutual understanding (Finn et

al., 1999). According to Tang and Isaacs' (1993) study, the audio delay makes it difficult for participants to coordinate eye contact and to manage turn-taking (Tang & Isaacs, 1992). Evidence shows that technology improved and nowadays the quality of virtual conferences is better, but nonetheless audio quality and responsiveness are more important for participant satisfaction than is video quality (Stephen, 1990).

Many specialists attribute a large number of communication and affective impairments to the increasing use of virtual interactions and social media (Cacioppo et al., 2020). However, in times of crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic, virtual conferencing tools proved to be a problem-solver, helping organizations to keep business as normal as possible, but also helping individuals to stay in touch with relatives or friends, reducing social isolation and bringing a sense of empathy and comfort. Remote work brought in many cases a feeling that work was always present, because there was not clear delimitation between home and office, work hours and lunch break, weekdays and weekends. It is also very important to mention that many individuals were homeschooling kids while trying to keep pace with the increased workload and dealing with a very high level of uncertainty and fear. Research showed that mothers working full-time remote spend 50% more time each day caring for their children than fathers working full-time remote (Bateman & Ross, 2020).

In order to efficiently manage meetings in a team, leaders have to follow some basic principles. Assuming that, at any time, one has to focus both on the task and on the relationship with other team members, the culture and morale of the team can be improved by running efficient meetings (Murphy, 2016). Most important, when considering whether to schedule a virtual meeting, a leader has to be clear on its purpose (Porter & Baker, 2016). Solving a task doesn't always mean starting with a meeting, meaning that leaders have to encourage employees to find ways of solving that task without scheduling a meeting.

When preparing a meeting, leaders always have to share the meeting agenda and materials before the actual start. This means that virtual meetings take more preparatory work than face-to-face meetings, even if due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 pandemic and an increased number of virtual meetings each day this isn't always possible (Murphy, 2016). Nevertheless, a leader has to always ask himself "If this meeting is successful, what will happen?" (Baker and Murphy, 2021). The leader has to be clear on the purpose of the meeting, decide on its format, and test his assumptions before the actual meeting, with a trusted partner. This process of preparatory work is arguably the most important and deliberate phase, representing the initial foundation that is laid out for the virtual meeting. In this phase even technology recommendations should be taken into consideration, such as hardware, software and connectivity recommendations (Rubinger, et al., 2020).

Even though there are clear differences between virtual and face-to-face meetings, some things are common, including frustrations faced by the participants. Starting late, lack of an agenda, too long meetings, multi-tasking, are all issues present both in virtual and face-to-face meetings (Karl et al., 2021). There are however issues related only to video conferences, such as technology issues and participant behavior. Many employees involved in virtual meetings say that they are disturbed by how others use their camera (wrong angle, not turning it on) and microphone issues, "You're on mute!" becoming the new buzzword in virtual meetings (Karl et al., 2021). In order to have the best experience in a video conference, one should first choose a quiet location where he will not be disturbed, use a light-colored background for best video quality and avoid backgrounds with windows or bright lights (Jones and Abdelfattah, 2020).

The opportunities provided by virtual meetings can be used in order to provide an extra layer of psychological safety in a society already defined by uncertainty and fear. Use of anonymous polls is a great example of how a leader can make sure that everyone can express their opinion without fear of being singled out, also providing leaders with the opportunity to develop a map of their answers and use it as a powerful insight later on (Edmondson and Daley, 2020).

Methodology

Taking all these data into consideration, we aimed to find what are the perceptions of Romanian managers towards virtual and face-to-face meetings before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which of these two is preferred by managers and in what context and last but not least, what is their opinion towards a world in which virtual meetings are the only alternative. The main research question was: What do Romanian managers think of virtual meetings in comparison to face-to-face meetings?

In February 2022 we conducted in depth interviews with 8 Romanian managers that had experience with remote working before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our respondents (5 women and 2 men) have been working mostly in senior management positions (5) and middle-management (2) within companies in banking industry, software development, cybersecurity, media, telecommunications and sales. The questionnaire has 16 open questions, developed in concordance with the literature review as follows: Q1 and Q2 are introductory in order to find out more about the managers' organization, position, experience and the level of experience with virtual teams. Q3 and Q4 have the goal of finding out the size of the respondents' team and for how long they worked remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions 5-8 are directly related to O1, investigating the way managers perceive the importance of face-to-face meetings by finding out their frequency, average duration, purpose and if there are specific guidelines or a clear agenda. Questions 9-13 are related to O2, investigating the way managers perceive the importance of virtual meetings in comparison with face-to-face meetings, by finding out their frequency, average duration, purpose, if there are specific guidelines, a clear agenda and the most used virtual conferencing platforms. Q14 is directly related to O3, investigating what are the factors that influence the managers' choice between virtual and face-to-face meetings and Q15 is directly related to O4, investigating what is the relationship between those factors. Q16 implies the possibility of replacing all face-to-face meetings with virtual meetings and is directly related to O5, investigating the way managers perceive the eventuality of going towards a world in which virtual meetings are the only option.

Results and discussions

Regarding the period in which the respondents have worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, only three of them have had the chance to go to the office since March 2020, the rest are still working remotely from different locations away from their team. 5 of the respondents had previous experience in virtual teams and the average number of employees in each one's team is 8, only one manager having to work with a larger number of employees from a position that needs their coaching and training.

Our respondents' opinions seem to align with those of the authors and papers cited above, agreeing that the future is hybrid and they shall use the advantages of both types of meetings: virtual and face-to-face. One manager underlined that "one should use virtual meetings in addition to face-to-face meetings by admitting their advantages and using them in his own favor" (M., f., upper management, 3 years of experience in virtual teams before the COVID-19 pandemic).

When comparing face-to-face meetings before the COVID-19 pandemic with virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, all respondents agree that the number has increased, „mostly because now every discussion has to be a meeting, instead of 5 minutes of small talk during lunch break or some shared thoughts while sipping from a cup of coffee” (R., f., middle management). Others agree that “at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the employees were more eager to meet in virtual conferences in order to keep the level of interaction as high as possible and the business running smoothly, but as time passed, some sort of digital fatigue appeared and people started to avoid virtual meetings as much as possible” (A., m., upper management). However, based on the existing level of digitalization in each organization, “when it all started, we decided to wait and do nothing for a couple of weeks, so that things will go back to normal. We have not used virtual conferences tools in the first two weeks, but when realizing that this was a situation that will last longer than we expected, we decided to search and adapt new digital tools in order to restart the activity, including virtual conferences tools” (V., m., upper management). Depending on the managers’ position and the organization’s domain of activity, the number of virtual meetings has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, “basically there is one meeting after another, my calendar is full of meetings each day” (H., f., upper management; L., f., upper management). The increased number of recent virtual meetings compared to face-to-face meetings before the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a decrease in the average duration of the latter, “due to the need of efficiency when it comes to virtual meetings, the average duration has decreased, from one hour to 30 minutes” (V., m., upper management; L., f., upper management; A., m., upper management). Where possible, face-to-face meetings during the period of COVID-19 pandemic are also taking longer “because we have to make sure everyone is safe and the room is airy, the organization imposing a short break once every 45 minutes” (M., f., upper management).

The goal of virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic is somehow the same, meaning that “everything moved from offline to online, from daily updates to strategy and business decisions” (H., f., upper management; M., f., middle management; L., f., upper management; V., m., upper management). However, there were also some new types of meetings, many of them a direct result of the accelerated digital transformation phenomenon, meaning that „we had to go through trainings and webinars for the new developed products or in order to learn how to use the new digital tools” (S., f., upper management; M., f., upper management). Last but not least, there was another type of meetings that had the objective of partially replacing day-to-day basic activities from the office to the virtual rooms. „Now we have coffee time, meaning that each morning we gather in a virtual call, drink our coffee or tea while discussing things that are not related to work” (R., f., middle management).

The meeting agenda has an important role in virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic as much as in face-to-face meetings before the pandemic, almost all our respondents admitting that „there is an agenda for each virtual meeting, but this was happening with face-to-face meetings too” (R., f., middle management). One specific aspect is underlined by one of the respondents, saying that „I’ve noticed that if the agenda is sent a couple of days in advance the interest of the participants towards it it’s higher than if the agenda is presented for the first time at the beginning of the meeting” (A., m., upper management). There was also a respondent that mentioned that “the meeting agenda is now more important, as it’s the main tool that we use in order to be efficient during virtual meetings” (V., m., upper management).

When having to choose between face-to-face meetings and virtual meetings, the most influential factor is the goal of the meetings. This aspect is mentioned in various forms by all respondents: “it’s hard to read body language in a virtual meeting, that’s why a face-to-face meeting

is preferred for an important discussion where I have to see how others behave and what are their reactions” (H., f., upper management); “in order to build a trustworthy relationship with my partners I have to meet them in person. It’s really hard to establish a partnership using virtual conferencing tools” (M., f., middle management); “the goal of the meeting is really important, as it's easier to stay focused in face-to-face meetings and the whole creative process is more efficient. You get your energy much easier from the other participants” (R., f., middle management); “Even if virtual meetings eliminate the need to travel and sometimes this can be an important advantage, however a face-to-face meeting is preferred for a more personal and efficient experience” (L., f., upper management). Information safety matters were also mentioned, “some business meetings are just too important and the information that is being shared is too sensitive to be discussed in virtual meetings, so a face-to-face meeting is preferred” (L., f. upper management).

In terms of video conferencing platforms used for virtual meetings, Microsoft Teams is the one used by many of the respondents, in most cases being recommended by the organization and not chosen by the respondents (H, f., upper management; R., f., middle management; S., f., upper management; M., f., upper management; L, f., upper management; V., m., upper management). Webex is also mentioned multiple times (M., f., upper management; L., f., upper management), with security being the main criteria in choosing a video conferencing platform: “it has to be secure in order to be able to share sensitive information over it. Additionally, we can’t use personal devices for remote working or communication, we have to use only the devices provided by the organization” (H., f., upper management). An important mention is however that the video conferencing platform depends most of the time of the one chosen by the partner: “when a client or a business partner is the one initiating the meeting, we agree to use the one chosen by him, not necessarily the one that we prefer” (M., f., upper management).

When asked „how would you react if your organization would restrict face-to-face meetings and request you to have only virtual meetings with all of your colleagues, clients and partners?”, the respondents had different answers. Respondents that worked remote for a longer period of time (even before the COVID-19 pandemic) said that „this would be an ideal world, I would totally agree and I’m sure that everything would work as smooth as before” (H., f., upper management). Others agreed that “there wouldn’t be an issue in adapting to this situation” and „it would be all right for a short period of time, but I think that a lot of challenges will appear” (S., f., upper management, L., f., upper management). However, most of the respondents agree that “an organization working only with virtual conferencing platforms for meetings will have a lot of limitations and wouldn’t be possible” (M., f., middle-management) and that “it would be a huge disadvantage for business relations and for sure it would affect the team and the organization” (R., f., middle-management). Where the specific of the business implies meetings with potential clients or business partners, the respondents were categorically against virtual meetings, agreeing that „for commercial purposes we need face-to-face meetings in order to maintain business relations as healthy as possible and develop new partnerships” (“A., m., upper management, V., m., upper management). One respondent agreed that “a hybrid approach would be ideal, by using all the benefits offered by both face-to-face and virtual meetings” (M., f., upper management).

Conclusion

As seen above, Romanian managers have in big terms the same vision for the future of work, admitting that virtual meetings have their benefits, but an organization can’t rely only on these kinds of meetings, especially when the specific of the business requests close relations with the partners, relations that can be established and developed only with the help of face-to-face

meetings. However, they do admit that virtual meetings can be useful when the goal of the meeting is to inform the participants about something, to communicate not so important matters or when the employees use virtual conferencing platforms for small talk or for spending some quality time together, remotely.

From what we observed, in some situations the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic brought uncertainty in terms of communications, some managers admitting that in the first couple of weeks meetings were put on hold with the hope of things returning to normal soon. But after realizing that the new restrictions imposed by the authorities meant that face-to-face meetings cannot be possible, an organizational level process of digital transformation began, including adoption or development of video conferencing digital tools. For organizations that already had these types of platforms implemented and used it was easier to transition towards a world where virtual meetings were the only option. However, for organizations where virtual meetings were not used at all or only from time to time the process was very challenging, in an environment that was already filled with uncertainty and chaos during the first month since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other respondents mentioned that at the beginning everyone was eager to meet with the help of virtual meetings in order to replace physical interaction, meaning that there was a meeting for everything, including the coffee break. But after a couple of months of restrictions imposed by authorities, some employees started to reject virtual meetings that had no relevant objective and began to minimize their number. There are however respondents who said that each day is an endless series of meetings, jumping from one to another or having multiple meetings at the same time. This generated what is now called COVID fatigue, other factors as the high level of uncertainty, social isolation and medical considerations having a significant impact on the employees' quality of mental health.

The general opinion is that overall, the number of meetings has increased after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and adoption of virtual meetings, mainly because what was before the COVID-19 pandemic a face-to-face discussion at the water dispenser is now formalized as a virtual meeting. Another aspect that contributed to this change was the organizations' need to train their employees so that they are prepared for the new reality, in which remote work is normal and new digital skills have to be acquired. This led to daily calendars filled with meetings, jumping from one to another or even having two meetings simultaneously being normal.

The most popular video conferencing platform among our respondents was Microsoft Teams, mainly because of the increased level of security provided, user-friendly experience and most importantly, because it was already used in most of the organizations before the COVID-19 pandemic started. The length of virtual meetings seems to be shorter than face-to-face meetings, mostly because of the need of being more efficient, but also because a greater number of meetings have to be scheduled during workdays.

Our respondents mentioned that the goal of virtual meetings is the same as face-to-face meetings and basically everything moved from a physical environment to a virtual environment. However, it is harder to schedule and have important virtual meetings where sensitive information is shared, due to security-related matters. That's why almost all respondents agreed that face-to-face meetings are preferred for important business matters or for establishing a new relationship with a potential customer or business partner. When having to choose between virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings, all our respondents agreed that the subject of the meeting is the most influential factor and face-to-face meetings are preferred for a first meeting or for the security of the data shared.

In conclusion, even if the number of respondents is limited and we assume that the outcomes of this paper are not generalized in all organizations in Romania, there is clear evidence that the majority of managers would rather have a hybrid approach towards meetings, using opportunities provided by both virtual and face-to-face meetings in their favor. However, there seems to be no issues with the adoption of virtual meetings, even if at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic everything was hectic and happening at a fast pace that didn't allow one to sit down and assess all his needs and constraints when having to find the best solution for him and his team in terms of efficient communication during the first imposed restrictions.

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