sciendo

RESEARCH PAPERS FACULTY OF MATERIALS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN TRNAVA
SLOVAK UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY IN BRATISLAVA
2023, Volume 31, Number 52 DOI 10.2478/rput-2023-0005

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES

Natália VRAŇAKOVÁ[1]

[1]SLOVAK UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY IN BRATISLAVA
FACULTY OF MATERIALS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN TRNAVA
INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT
ULICA JÁNA BOTTU 2781/25, 917 24 TRNAVA, SLOVAK REPUBLIC
natalia.vranakova@stuba.sk
Received 13 February 2023, Accepted 27 March 2023, Published: 23 June 2023

Abstract

The pandemic situation associated with the Covid-19 disease has changed people's lives and significantly affected the functioning of companies and organizations. Managers of industrial companies faced a new situation and had to look for new solutions to the problems that arose. Employees were forced to get used to new conditions and adapt not only to new private along with new work situations caused by the pandemic. The success of any organization depends on its employees, which is why a high-quality human resource management was important also in the pandemic situation. The aim of the article is to interpret the results of research aimed at identifying priorities in the field of human resource management in terms of the situation before and during the pandemic as well as the priorities that will dominate after the return to the standard work regime. The collection tool was a questionnaire distributed online. As many as 70 managers and specialists from industrial companies in Slovakia took part in the questionnaire survey. The obtained data were evaluated through descriptive statistics, in the form of graphs and tables. The results can be useful for practice of industrial companies in the field of setting priorities, or evaluating and comparing the situation in the field of human resource management before and during the pandemic as well as after the return to the standard work regime.

Keywords

Areas of human resource management, Covid-19, industrial companies, human resource management

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Human resource management has been considered as one of the most important business functions in the last two decades. Academics, researchers and also practitioners admit that human resource management is essential in order to obtain a competitive advantage for the organization [1]. Among the traditional areas of human resource management are mainly

recruitment and selection of employees, development of employees, retraining, evaluation of employees and remuneration [2]. However, it is necessary to move from the traditional perception to the strategic management of human resource, which looks ahead to the requirements for the future [3]. Many situations that have arisen affect the requirements for human resource management in the future. One of the most significant changes that have occurred and creates requirements is the Covid-19 pandemic situation.

The core of the Covid-19 pandemic is a human crisis, and therefore human resource have been topical for organizations around the world. Considering the above-mentioned, it is necessary to consider the consequences of the pandemic to human resources and identify key research questions for human resource management [4]. To overcome the crisis, it is necessary for companies to have the support of their employees more than before. Support can only be achieved in cooperation with human resource management, which is why the task of human resource management becomes more demanding during a crisis situation [5]. The duty of human resource management is not to wait for the arrival of a full crisis, but to act intelligently and react to problems. Employees are worried about their own safety, but they are also worried about work disruptions and how HR management would handle the situation [6]. Covid-19 has changed the work experience for the vast majority of employees. Organizations were forced to adapt the way they organize work and design jobs [4]. The areas such as "morale management and motivation", "health and well-being", "communication" were identified as the main challenges of the pandemic in the field of human resource management [7]. Managers' strategies for the field of human resource were also identified, while they are mainly focused on the following areas: flexibility and the virtual life cycle of employees, ensuring the availability of resource for home office, providing training for employees in order to acquire new skills, innovative methods for development and support employees, innovative methods to support employees and maintain their health and well-being, safety measures for employees [8]. The issue of human resource management in the context of the pandemic needs to be looked at comprehensively. It is important to identify what human resource management has dealt with in the past, what the current consequences of the pandemic are and what the consequences for the field of human resource management in the future will be [9,10].

The article is aimed at identifying priorities in the field of human resource management from the point of view of the situation before and during the pandemic as well as those that will dominate after the return to the standard work regime.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The following part of the article explains the aim of the survey and the set of research questions. The section also includes a description of the collection tool - the research questionnaire, the research sample and the methods that were used to process the results from the research questionnaire.

Aim and research questions

The aim of the article is to present results of the research aimed at identifying the priorities of human resource management during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to meet the aim, two research questions were set:

RQ1: How did human resource management priorities change during the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Which areas of human resource management were most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Data collection and research sample

The collection tool was developed as one of the VEGA project entitled: “Identification of priorities for sustainable human resource management with respect to disadvantaged employees in the context of Industry 4.0". The questionnaire was distributed online, while the total number of respondents was 70. Due to the nature of the questions, the respondents were employees of industrial companies in Slovakia, and they were mainly employees in the position of a specialist or manager. It is for this reason that the respondents were purposefully selected with regard to the fact that they would provide relevant answers to the questions. The collected data were evaluated in MS Excel. Tables and graphs of relative frequencies were mainly used. Fig. 1 shows the representation of industrial companies according to the regions in which they are located.

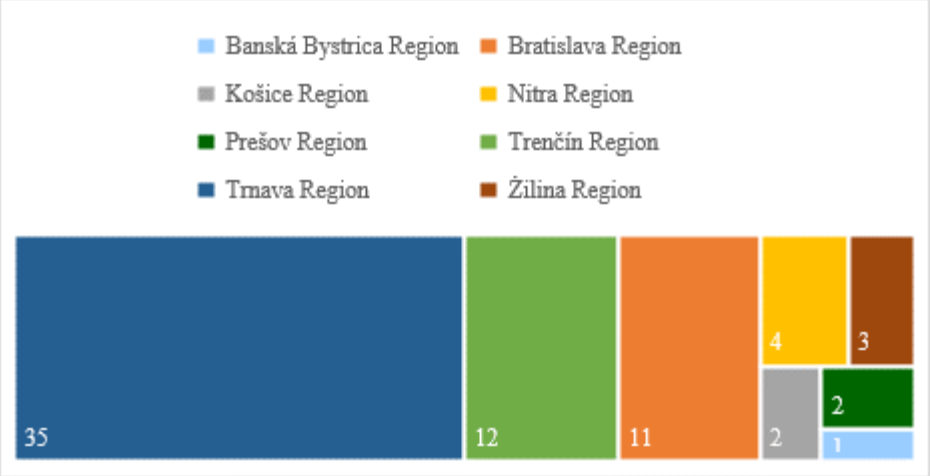


Fig. 1 *Industrial companies according to the regions in which they are located (own elaboration, 2022)*

On the basis of the data shown in Fig. 1, we can conclude that the largest representation have the companies based in western Slovakia, namely in the Trnava, Trenčín and Bratislavaregions. It is possible to positively evaluate the fact that the questionnaire survey covered industrial companies in all regions of Slovakia.

RESULTS

This section of the contribution deals with the evaluation of the questionnaire survey results within individual research questions.

Evaluation of RQ1: How did human resource management priorities change during the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic?

The aim of the first research question was to compare three questions from the questionnaire that led to the identification of priorities in the field of human resource management. The answer options included the areas of human resource management, while respondents were indicating at least three areas that led to the identification of priorities in the area of human resource management before the pandemic, subsequently during the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the priorities when returning to the standard work regime. The respondents had the opportunity to supplement their own area of human resource management, but none of them used this opportunity. The evaluation of the responses is summarized in Fig. 2 below.

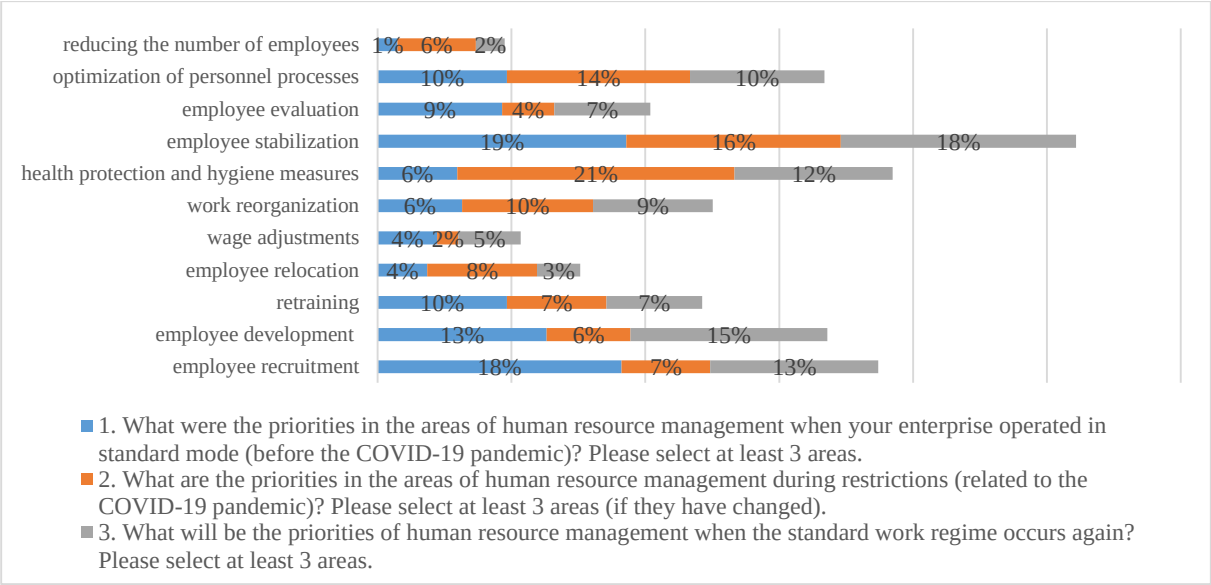


***Fig. 2** Evaluation of RQ1 (own elaboration,2022)*

From the data included in Fig. 2, we can conclude that before the Covid-19 pandemic, among the most important areas of human resource management was the employee stabilization (out of 100 % of all options indicated in the period before the pandemic, this area was indicated in the case of 19 % of responses). The second area with the highest priority was recruitment, selection and hiring of employees (18 %), followed by the area of employee development and work with talents (13 %). According to the results, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the least priority area was the reduction of the number of employees (1 %), adjustment of wages and deployment and relocation of employees with the same number of responses (4 % of the total number of markings of all options).

Another part of the research question deals with the evaluation of priorities in the field of human resource management during the Covid-19 pandemic. Out of 100 % of designations of all options during the pandemic, the area of health protection and hygiene measures reached 21 % of designations, making it the area with the highest priority. This is followed by the stabilization of employees (16 %) and the optimization of personnel processes (14 %). According to respondents, the areas of human resource management with the lowest priority during the Covid-19 pandemic were employee evaluation (4 %) and wage adjustments (2 %).

The last part of the research question was aimed at identifying priorities in the areas of human resource management after the return to the standard work regime. Out of 100 % marking of all options within the framework of returning to the standard work mode, stabilization of employees was marked as the top priority area, which reached 18 % marking. According to the respondents, the following areas with the highest priority are employee development and work with talents (15 %) and recruitment, selection and hiring of employees (13 %). Among the areas that were assigned the lowest priority in the field of human resource management after the return to the standard work regime are the reduction of the number of employees (2 %), the deployment and relocation of employees (3 %) and wage adjustments (5 %).

The following is the evaluation of the responses to the second research question **RQ2: Which areas of human resource management were most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?**

The aim of the second research question is to identify which of the areas of human resource management, according to the respondents, were most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in positive and negative perceptions. The results are shown in Fig. 3.

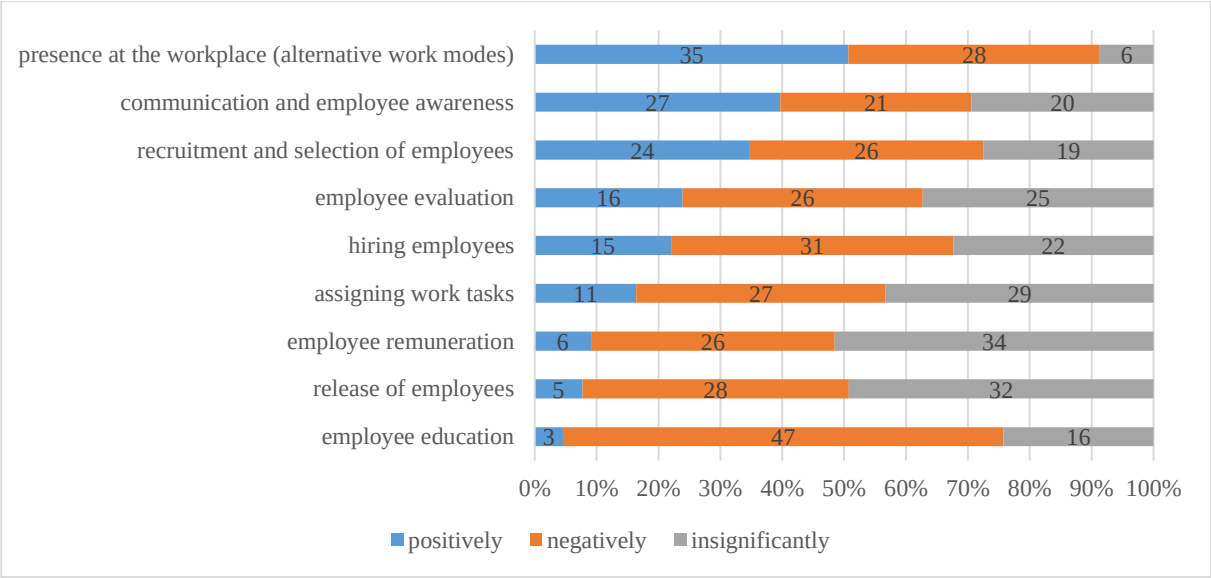


Fig. 3 *Evaluation of RQ2 (own elaboration,2022)*

Respondents had the opportunity to mark a specific area as to whether it was negatively, positively, or insignificantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. From the data in Fig. 3, we can see that during the pandemic, the presence at the workplace was a positively affected area, and thus employees were allowed to use alternative work modes and home office, the second area was communication and employee awareness. Respondents identified employee education and hiring as areas that were most negatively affected by the pandemic. The areas that were insignificantly affected by the pandemic were the release of employees and remuneration of employees. For the sake of better clarity and organization of areas, the responses were processed into the following Table 1.

Table 1 Arrangement of human resource management areas according to the perceived impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (own elaboration, 2022)

Areas of human resource management	Positively	Negatively	Insignificantly	No answer	Sum of the markings	Average
employee education	3	47	16	4	66	-0.667
release of employees	5	28	32	5	65	-0.353
employee remuneration	6	26	34	4	66	-0.303
assigning work tasks	11	27	29	3	67	-0.239
hiring employees	15	31	22	2	68	-0.235
control of the work tasks performance, employee evaluation	16	26	25	3	67	-0.149
recruitment and selection of employees	24	26	19	1	69	-0.029
communication and employee awareness	27	21	20	2	68	0.088
presence at the workplace (alternative work modes, home office)	35	28	6	1	69	0.101

Based on the number of responses within the positive/negative/insignificant perception of individual areas of human resource management due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the areas are listed in Table 1. Within the "Average" column, coefficients were assigned to individual responses (positively = 1; negatively = -1; insignificantly = 0) and average values were

calculated for individual areas. Respondents consider the most negatively affected areas to be employee education, employee release and employee remuneration. On the other hand, the pandemic has had a more positive impact on the areas of presence at the workplace (offer of alternative work modes and home office) and the area of employee communication and awareness. It is also possible to state that, apart from two areas with a positive average, the remaining areas of human resource management were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in a negative way.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the long-term consequences of the pandemic situation are currently not well known, there is a reason to believe that the impact on organizations will be long-lasting [11].

One of the most negatively affected areas for human resources is employee education. According to the authors [12], this area is also related to managers, as they should have specialized knowledge of human resource management procedures and processes, and thus should be able to adapt to crises. During the pandemic, among others, employees also faced the challenge of moving their workplace to their home environment and using information technology to a greater extent, while they may not have been sufficiently prepared for this. The forms and methodologies of training also changed, while employee engagement was reduced [13]. The pandemic also caused the interruption of professional training and staff training [14].

However, the pandemic positively affected the use of alternative work modes such as the home office, while another author [15] also characterized flexibility as a factor from which organizations benefited and employees had reduced stress and anxiety associated with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Dismissal off employees is an area of the human resource management that was identified as one of the most negatively affected during the pandemic, and also according to the evaluation of the first research question, its priority increased during the pandemic. Organizations faced a situation where they could not borrow to pay wages and were therefore forced to dismiss employees. However, this reduces future productivity, sales and profit [16]. Dismissal were caused by various factors (less work resulting from employment, shutdown of production, financial problems), but the situation significantly affected the motivation and stabilization of employees. Also according to the questionnaire survey, especially when returning to the standard work regime, the stabilization of employees will be an important area of human resource management. Companies play an important role in implementing the changes caused by the pandemic through extrinsic motivation. External motivation can take the form of extra payments for overtime work, or compensation for coming to work in the middle of a pandemic [17]. This is also confirmed by our results, as employee compensation was rated as the third most negatively affected area. However, employees also need internal motivation, where their achievements and work will be recognized and evaluated by company [17]. The results of the study [18] indicate that extrinsic motivation affects employee performance. From the above, it can be concluded that the area of remuneration, performance and motivation are key factors in human resources and managing the pandemic from an organizational point of view.

Human capital can be characterized as the sum of employee's intelligence, skills, ideas and individual health [19]. According to our results, one of the areas with the highest priority was health protection and hygiene measures. Employers are responsible for the occupational health of employees, and therefore important challenges were offered not only for employers, but also for employees, especially in the mentioned area. The pandemic situation affected both the physical and mental health of employees. It can be psychologically difficult for employees to work from home, as they feel isolated and miss a balanced personal and work lives [20]. Physical health was supported through sick leave with pay, or individual planning of breaks at

work and the use of personal, sick and vacation time [21]. However, the field of health also includes working conditions, when they have been improved especially in the area of workplace cleanliness, the provision of protective equipment (shields and face masks), the provision of testing, or the modification of the workplace in order to adjust the physical distance between employees or clients [22].

The area of communication and employee awareness was identified as one of the least affected by the pandemic situation. Managers' challenges also include the need to convey a lot of information to employees and manage multiple media used by other employees or interested parties [23]. In order to stay engaged, companies are forced to encourage employees to stay connected. Therefore, communication should be regular and frequent, and during the pandemic, it should be carried out through video conferences and conference calls [24].

Human resource management is a demanding discipline and a challenge for managers, and it becomes more important in crisis situations. The article examined the areas of human resource management, comparing their importance before the pandemic, during the pandemic and after the return to the standard work regime. One of the limitations of the article may be the geographical location, as the research sample involved managers and specialists of industrial companies in Slovakia. Similarly, there may be changes in priorities also with regard to the sector or the area of operation of company. The results can help managers and specialists of industrial companies in setting priorities in the field of human resources management, or evaluating and comparing the current situation in the mentioned area.

Acknowledgement

The paper is a part of VEGA project No. 1/0721/20 "Identification of priorities for sustainable human resources management with respect to disadvantaged employees in the context of Industry 4.0"

References

[1] ASLAM, H. D, ASLAM, M., ALI, N., HABIB B. 2014. Importance of Human Resource Management in 21st Century: A Theoretical Perspective. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies,* **3**(3), pp. 87–97. ISSN 2162-3058.

[2] BOON, C., ECKARDT, R., LEPAK, D. P., BOSELIE, P. 2018. Integrating strategic human capital and strategic human resource management. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, **29**(1), pp. 34–67. ISSN 0958-5192.

[3] DELERY, J. E., ROUMPI, D. 2017. Strategic human resource management, human capital and competitive advantage: is the field going in circles? *Human Resource Management Journal*, **27**(1), pp. 1–21. ISSN 1748-8583.

[4] COLLINGS, D. G., MCMACKIN, J., NYBERG, A. J., WRIGHT, P. M. 2021. Strategic Human Resource Management and COVID- 19: Emerging Challenges and Research Opportunities. *Journal of Management Studies*, **58**(5), pp. 1378–1382. ISSN 0022-2380.

[5] SULAIMAN, M. A. B. A., AHMED, M. N., SHABBIR, M. S. 2020. COVID-19 Challenges and Human Resource Management in Organized Retail Operations. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, **25**(12), pp. 81–92. ISSN 1315-5216.

[6] KOIRALA, J., ACHARYA, S. 2020. Dimensions of Human Resource Management Evolved with the Outbreak of COVID-19. Online. *SSRN Scholarly Paper*, 24 April 2020. Rochester, NY. 3584092. [Accessed 12 December 2022].

[7] WENHAM, C., SMITH, J., MORGAN, R. 2020. COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak. *The Lancet*, **395**(10227), pp. 846–848. ISSN 0140-6736.

[8] AZIZI, M. R., ATLASI, R., ZIAPOUR, A., ABBAS, J., NAEMI, R. 2021. Innovative human resource management strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic narrative review approach. *Heliyon*, **7**(6), e07233. ISSN 2405-8440.

[9] BENNETT, A. M. 2021. The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Future of Human Resource Management. *Journal of Human Resource Management*, **9**(3), 58. ISSN 2331-0715.
[10] ICHSAN, R. N., KHAERUMAN, SANTOSA, S., SHARA, Y., LIRIWATI, F. Y. 2020. Investigation of strategic human resource management practices in business after Covid-19 disruption. *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology*, **17**(7), 13098–13110. ISSN 1567-214X.
[11] CARNEVALE, J. B., HATAK, I. 2020. Employee adjustment and well-being in the era of COVID-19: Implications for human resource management. *Journal of Business Research*, **116**, pp.183–187. ISSN 0148-2963.
[12] GONÇALVES, S. P., SANTOS, J. V., SILVA, I. S., VELOSO, A., BRANDÃO, C., MOURA, R. 2021. COVID-19 and People Management: The View of Human Resource Managers. *Administrative Sciences*, **11**(3), 69. ISSN 2076-3387.
[13] MIKOŁAJCZYK, K. 2021. Changes in the approach to employee development in organisations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Training and Development*, **46**(5/6), pp.544–562. ISSN 2046-9012.
[14] CEESAY, E. K. 2021. Potential impact of COVID-19 outbreak on education, staff development and training in Africa. *Research in Globalization*, **3**, 100049. ISSN 2590-051X.
[15] AGARWAL, P. 2021. Shattered but smiling: Human resource management and the wellbeing of hotel employees during COVID-19. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, **93**, 102765. ISSN 0278-4319.
[16] CÉSPEDES, L. F., CHANG, R., VELASCO, A. 2021. Credit, Employment, and the COVID Crisis. *LSE Public Policy Review*, **1**(4), 3. ISSN 2633-4046.
[17] WOLOR, CH. W., SOLIKHAH, SUSITA, D., MARTONO, S. 2020. How to Maintain Employee Motivation Amid The Covid-19 Virus Pandemic. *International Journal of Economics and Business Administration*, **VIII**(4), 78–86. ISSN 2241-4754.
[18] NILASARI, B. M., NISFIANNOOR, M. DEVINTA, F. R. M. 2021. Changes in motivation that affect employee performance during the Covid 19 pandemic. *Jurnal Aplikasi Manajemen*, **19**(2), pp. 435–447. ISSN 2302-6332.
[19] JÍLKOVÁ, P. 2021. Sustainable Corporate Strategy: The Role of Human Capital in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis. *TEM Journal*, **10**(2), pp. 699–706. ISSN 2217-8333.
[20] PRASAD, K., VAIDYA, R. W. 2020. Association among Covid-19 parameters, occupational stress and employee performance: An empirical study with reference to Agricultural Research Sector in Hyderabad Metro. *Sustainable Humanosphere*, **16**(2), pp. 235–253. ISSN 1880-6503.
[21] HAMOUCHE, S. 2021. Human resource management and the COVID-19 crisis: implications, challenges, opportunities, and future organizational directions. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 19 April 2021, 1–16. ISSN 1839-3527.
[22] DENNERLEIN, J. T., BURKE, L., SABBATH, E. L., WILLIAMS, J. A. R., PETERS, S. E., WALLACE, L., KARAPANOS, M., SORENSEN, G. 2020. An Integrative Total Worker Health Framework for Keeping Workers Safe and Healthy During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Human Factors*, **62**(5), pp. 689–696. ISSN 0018-7208.
[23] SANDERS, K., NGUYEN, P. T., BOUCKENOOGHE, D., RAFFERTY, A., SCHWARZ, G. 2020. Unraveling the What and How of Organizational Communication to Employees During COVID-19 Pandemic: Adopting an Attributional Lens. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **56**(3), pp. 289–293. ISSN 0021-8863.
[24] CHANANA, N., SANGEETA. 2021. Employee engagement practices during COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Public Affairs*, **21**(4), e2508. ISSN 1479-1854.

ORCID

Natália Vraňaková 0000-0002-9545-8887