

## **EXPERIENCES WITH WORK-FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS IN ORGANIZATIONS DURING COVID-19: ELEMENTS OF INNOVATION**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to identify elements of change and innovation in work-family arrangements at the employer level during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of Czech work organizations. We conduct a secondary data analysis of the discussion forum of the internship course at the selected university. The research population consists of master's degree students in the field of human resource management in combined form who are enrolled in a course focused on reflection of experiences from professional internship. The students discuss and comment on the changes in human resource management caused by the pandemic and the main challenges they faced in human resource management. Based on this analysis, we distinguish three areas of the measures: flexible working arrangements, support for employees' care commitments, and other supportive mechanisms and arrangements. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the conflicts between work and family, employers have been extensively impacted by them. Arrangements supporting work-family balance seem to be no longer "nice to have" but something "must have" from the employer's perspective. In this respect, the most significant innovative improvements include: 1) the development of home-office regimes and tools for dealing with day-to-day practical problems, 2) the ability to match the individual needs of employees with the performance of their work ("tailored solutions"), and 3) ability to address emergency care needs when there are disruptions to usual care.

### **Keywords**

Work-Family Policy, Employers, HR Practitioners, COVID-19, Post-Pandemic Time

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### **I. Introduction**

Compared to western European countries, Czech employers have traditionally tended to be relatively inactive in introducing family-friendly policies after the so-called Velvet Revolution (e.g., Den Dulk et al. 2010). However, in recent decades, some Czech employers have implemented various arrangements to support a friendlier work-family balance. This change of attitude has usually been caused by labor shortages, general trends in HR management, changes in public opinion and the pressure of national and EU legislation (cf. den Dulk et al. 2010, Allen et al. 2013, Homfray et al. 2022, Kuchařová et al. 2019).

Since the pandemic began, families with children have been hit exceptionally hard due to measures designed to protect against COVID-19 infections (Reimann et al. 2022, Zoch et al. 2021, Eurofound 2020). External childcare facilities were closed, and the support provided by other family members (grandparents) or friends was limited due to strict contact restrictions. Most parents then had to compensate for this lack of childcare opportunities by caring for their children at home. Following the prevailing division of paid and unpaid work, mothers took on most additional care demands (ibid.). Consequently, the outbreak of COVID-19 forced many companies to adopt and/or modify workplace flexibility and other work-family arrangements, and many employers who previously had

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not supported such kinds of arrangements were forced to consider them on a wider scale for the first time (e.g., Homfray et al. 2022, French and Shockley 2020, Rudolph et al. 2020).

This article aims to identify elements of change and innovation in work-family arrangements at the employer level during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of Czech work organizations. Since our data does not represent the entire population of Czech employers (see Chapter III. Methodology), we do not aim to comprehensively analyze the work-family policies of all Czech employers during the pandemic time. However, our results can provide a basis for developing an in-depth statistical survey tool for Czech employers and employees and their experiences with work-family arrangements in the pandemic period.

## **II. Theoretical Assumptions about Work-Family Arrangements at the Level of Employers in the Czech Republic**

Generally, we can define work-family balance as an acceptable level of balance in which individuals satisfy the demands of paid work (work commitments, expectations of employers) and the demands of family (especially caring) responsibilities at the same time (cf. Bartáková 2008; Voydanoff 2005; Greenhaus and Allen 2011, Clarke et al. 2009). Families' difficulties in this respect are a major source of frustration and can result in important welfare losses. Formal arrangements (e.g., family policy, employers' social policy) and/or informal arrangements (e.g., grandparents' role) usually help parents meet the expectations of both employers and family needs. Therefore, work-family balance is given by (1) opportunities that are available for parents and by (2) the congruence between the opportunities offered and the expectations and preferences of parents for them. Considering these key aspects of work-family balance, we cannot explore work-family arrangements at the employer level without considering the context of the national work-family policy and the parents' needs.

### **Work-family arrangements and employer decision-making**

As some studies show, employers' work-family arrangements are relatively strongly influenced by welfare state regimes (Den Dulk, Peters, and Poustma 2012, Ollier-Malaterre 2017). In line with arguments of institutional theories, employers adopt work-family arrangements only if they are seen as socially accepted, successful, and legitimate practices and/or in response to powerful institutional pressures (e.g., Den Dulk, Peters, and Poustma 2012; Evans 2001). On the one hand, well-developed work-family policies at the national level can increase employers' sensitivity to parents' needs. On the other hand, insufficient public policies can pressure employers to substitute them at least to some extent (ibid.). For example, as the pandemic has significantly further strained the already insufficient availability of childcare facilities, employers can be motivated by ensuring business continuity to provide some arrangements to compensate for the absence of childcare services. However, the responses of different employers to external changes and pressures can vary strongly as economic rationalists and/or critics of institutional theory pointed out (e.g., Oliver 1991, Osterman 1995, Den Dulk, Peters, and Poustma 2012). We cannot overlook the goals and concerns of organizations nor the role of active agency in response to institutional pressures (Oliver 1991). In accordance with the theory of economic rationality, employers introduce work-family arrangements only to the extent that such practices increase profitability (Evans 2001; Den Dulk, Peters and Poustma 2012). From this perspective, the employer's adoption decision can be framed as a 'business case'. Within the business case, the focus is on the outcomes of work-family arrangements for organizations and how organizational conditions affect the costs and benefits of the arrangements (ibid.). Employers are more likely to introduce work-family arrangements when this is expected to increase the productivity, recruitment, and retention of valuable workers, to improve commitment and engagement among employees, and to decrease absenteeism and turnover rates (ibid.). Considering the previous example of expanding childcare support during the COVID pandemic in line with institutional arguments, economic rationality can offer the explanation that employers will be motivated mainly by net gains. Employers can weigh up, for example, the cost of providing individual childcare against the output a given employee/parent would not be able

to achieve without this help. Although the character of our data does not allow us to test hypotheses or otherwise develop the theoretical concepts mentioned above, it is reasonable to expect that the changed environmental conditions during the pandemic have induced employers to innovate or alter work-family arrangements based on employer cost-benefit calculations.

### **Typology of work-family arrangements**

Although there is expected heterogeneity in the needs of working parents (depending on gender, family structure, income, residence, number of children, etc.), several primary types of work-family arrangements have the potential to meet these needs (under certain conditions). These arrangements typically include (cf. Leitner 2003, Den Dulk 2001 etc.):

- Facilitating the leaving of the labor market in the case of parenthood and/or emergency care demands (schemes of maternity, paternity and parental leave and related benefits, short-term leave for family reasons);
- Childcare facilities for the youngest children;
- Flexible working regimes.

Some of these arrangements are provided directly by the state (mainly parental and maternal leave, parental allowances, maternal benefits, and sometimes childcare services). Other arrangements are more dependent on the attitude and will of employers (particularly flexible workplace arrangements and extra leave for family reasons). However, the variability of work-family arrangements at the employer level is extensive (e.g., work-life management training, employee counseling, family days, summer camps for children, career break scheme, child-friendly offices, etc.) (Den Dulk 2001).

### **Work-family arrangements in the Czech Republic and the perspective of employers**

It is obvious that employer-driven policies are significantly influenced both by national policies and by parents. Therefore, it seems necessary to briefly introduce the work-family policy on a national level and settle the issues and problems affecting employers. Some of these problems probably intensified, and others emerged during pandemic times. In general, Czech work-family policy has historically been characterized as rather conservative and strongly familialistic (cf. Leitner 2003, Esping-Andersen 2002, Sirovátka 2006). The Czech familialistic regime not only strengthens the family in caring for children through long paid parental leaves (up to three years), but it also lacks the provision of an alternative to family care (childcare services for children up to three years) (cf. Sirovátka 2006). Nonetheless, the Czech welfare state has a hard time adapting to the changes which are in motion in current labor markets (high labor market dynamics and flexibility, globalization, and so on) (Sirovátka 2006). So, we can see the shift in understanding the heterogeneity of families' needs and strategies in balancing work and family life and consequently in the work-family policies (mainly the change of parental leave schemes). Some employers are/will be able to take advantage of this shift and gain a new source of quality labor. Mothers are more willing to work at least part-time during the long parental leave, which is encouraged by the expansion of flexible working arrangements and the (slow) development of new forms of childcare. Still, the Czech work-family policy generates some problematic issues from the perspective of employers.

In the following subsections, we provide characteristics and attributes of all three basic types of formal work-family policy in the Czech Republic and discuss their problematic aspects or challenges from the perspective of employers during the COVID pandemic.

#### *Arrangements enable leaving the labor market in the case of parenthood and/or emergency care demands*

Compared to other European countries, the Czech Republic is characterized by very long paid parental leave (to the child's third birthday). This setting seems to align with the prevailing practice and the preferences of Czech parents (e.g., Hamplová and Šalamounová, 2015). Considering the unavailability of childcare services for children up to the age of three, this family policy model

results in one of the lowest employment rates of mothers with children up to six in Europe (cf. Eurostat Database 2021). However, some qualitative studies show that mainly highly qualified and younger mothers maintain contact with their job and employers through some form of flexible work arrangements during parental leave (cf. Bartáková 2008, Křížková 2005 and Křížková et al. 2006). In this respect, the setting of parental leave and parental allowance allows for a wide range of variability because the parental allowance is not means-tested so that parents can have a paid job during parental leave. From the employer's perspective, these mothers may represent a good workforce source in the case of labor market shortages. On the other hand, employers may perceive mothers with small children as risky employees because 1) prohibition of dismissal during maternity and parental leave and guarantee of jobs (cf. Labor Code) could mean complications for employers under rapidly changing market conditions. Also, (2) the obsolescence of skills during long parental leave, (3) frequent absence due to illness of the child, (4) disinclination to work overtime due to childcare/family reasons, and (5) requirements for extra-ordinary leave for family reasons could result in additional costs and complications for the employer. Thus, the higher protection of parents could paradoxically be the reason to refuse actual or potential parents (mainly mothers) already during the recruitment process or during or after parental leave (e.g., Kuchařová et al. 2006, Hašková et al. 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic increased demands for care at the expense of paid work, i.e., via repeated requests for extra leave. At the same time, other employees were under compulsory quarantine and these situations could have made the regular operation of the company completely impossible. Although some parents could postpone their return from parental leave, others had already had to return, and staff shortages could make parents difficult to re-adapt after a long absence. Consequently, these problems bring additional costs to employers.

#### *Childcare services and facilities*

The system of childcare services in the Czech Republic is based on the so-called magic three-year age line. As mentioned above, the availability of childcare services for children under three years of age (children's groups<sup>1</sup>) is among the lowest in Europe (according to the OECD Family Database 2019a, the enrolment rate of children under three years of age is around 7,4 % compared to the EU-26 average of 33,9 %). Furthermore, children's groups are usually available mainly in bigger cities, and fees are often ten or more times higher than the cost of public kindergarten for children over three years of age (cf. MPSV 2020). Despite all this, the capacity of children's groups seems filled to overflowing (e.g., Hospodářské noviny 2022) although, again, reliable data are lacking. The overall enrolment rate of children from 3 to 5 years in the Czech Republic (86.7%) is roughly comparable to the EU-27 average (88.5%) (OECD Family Database 2019b). Again, the capacity of kindergartens is overcrowded mainly in larger cities. In the admission process for the school year 2020/2021, more than 36% of applications (approximately 46 098) were rejected (MŠMT 2022). Besides children's groups and kindergartens, there is also the option of individual childcare, nannies, on a commercial basis. However, these for-profit services are relatively expensive and available mainly in larger cities. Childcare facilities at the company level are rare in the Czech Republic. Reliable data are again unavailable; however, the recent survey among 78 Czech employers shows that only 8% of employers provide company childcare facilities and 7% offer financial benefits to help parents cover the costs of childcare services (Byznys pro společnost 2020). The relative paucity of employers offering childcare services is probably due to high administrative and financial costs to employers. While the costs of setting up childcare services are at least tax-deductible for employers, the financial

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<sup>1</sup> Children's groups (*dětské skupiny*) provide non-profit childcare service for children from 6 months of age until compulsory schooling (i.e., up to 6/7 years). Children's groups are regulated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs under the terms of the Act on Children's Groups. They can be established by employers (private, public and state organizations) for their employees, by various non-profit entities (municipalities, regions, church organizations, benevolent corporations etc.), and in groups up to 4 children also by the childminders (Eurydice 2022).

benefits to parents for this purpose do not belong to the most tax-advantageous for either employers or employees (cf. Act 586/1992 Coll., Income Tax Act).

From the perspective of employers, the limited availability and/or affordability of childcare services mean the limited availability of parents (mothers) with young children in the labor market (part-time wages often do not cover the cost of childcare services and full-time jobs are not in line with parents' preferences and working hours must be compatible with the opening hours of childcare services). The situation was further complicated by the pandemic. All schools in the Czech Republic closed for several months in 2020 and 2021. Thereafter, some children's groups, kindergartens, and schools were repeatedly closed at various times for durations between one and two weeks depending on the local epidemiological situation. Grandparents and other sources of informal care were also unavailable due to fears of infection and government restrictions. Extended care needs (management of all family members working from home, assistance with distance learning, provision of meals, etc.) neglected paid work in many families, especially for mothers with young children and some fathers (Česko v datech 2021).

### *Family-friendly flexible work*

Flexible working regimes could facilitate the balance of work and family life in some way, but in other ways could complicate it. In the perspective of balancing work and family life, flexibility has positive benefits when parents can use flexible working time, part-time or home-office regimes if these arrangements are used with respect to employee's care needs. Other forms of flexibility like short calls, continuously varying work schedules, and insecurity about working hours can pose difficulties for maintaining a stable family life, particularly in terms of gender equality (Knijn and Smit 2009: 10). As Evans (2001: 11) writes, "work hour arrangements introduced by companies to suit their production needs may be labeled as family-friendly simply to show the employers in a better light. Of course, this is not to deny that there are situations in which both companies and families can benefit from flexible work arrangements. However, there is no reason to suppose that flexibility introduced to meet a company's needs will coincide with the flexibility that best suits a family". A so-called win-win scenario assumes that the timing of workers' family needs will coincide with employers' needs to trim costs; moreover, it assumes that employers can cut costs and still meet caregivers' needs for adequate income (Glass and Estes, 1997). Czech employers have significant discretion and latitude in implementing flexible working regimes since the Labour Code (No.262/2006 Coll.) is built on the principle "what is not forbidden, is allowed". Even if flexible working regimes are currently used more than ever before, most Czech women and men are now still employed on fixed and full-time. According to the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS 2015), 12 % of Czech men and 14 % of Czech women can adapt their working hours within certain limits, which is the lowest level of this type of flexibility in Europe.

The picture is slightly different when discussing fully autonomous determination of working hours. Czech men are in the middle level of this type of flexibility level in Europe (19 %). Still, Czech women remain again in the group of countries with the lowest level of full autonomy (13 %) (ibid.). When we look at the newest available data, we can see that in 2021 Czech women worked in part-time jobs 3.8 times more often than men, but still only 9.6% of women work in this regime (compared to the EU average for women of 28.8 %) (Eurostat Database 2022a). Regarding home office arrangements, COVID-19 has changed the picture relatively significantly. The EU average of employed adults working at home was around 14 % in 2019, with almost no gender differences. However, in 2021, this share exceeded 23 % in mild favor of women (Eurostat Database 2022b). The Czech Republic was around 10 % in 2019 and 14.5 % in 2021 (ibid.). When we look at the differences between parents and childless employees, we can see that in the group of mothers with at least one child under six years of age, 20.5 % of women in the Czech Republic worked from home (compared to the EU-27 average of 25.6 %) in 2021. In the group of fathers with at least one child under six years of age, 15.3 % of Czech men worked from home (compared to the EU-27 average of 24.8 %) in 2021 (ibid.).

According to Eurofound (2020) data focusing on the COVID-19 period in EU countries, women were generally more involved in caring for children and grandchildren and doing household work. On average in the EU-27, women reported spending 35 hours per week caring for children or grandchildren (compared to 25 hours per week for men) and 18 hours per week doing housework (12 hours per week for men). Regarding employment status and age of children, working women with children under 12 years of age in the household spent 54 hours a week on childcare (compared to 32 hours for men). Eurofound data (2020) also supports the hypothesis that the home-office regime during COVID-19 usually meant a more significant work-family imbalance (for respondents with children under 17) and increased overtime work.

Considering these data and the result of case studies in EU countries (mainly during COVID-19), family-friendly flexibility requires employers to systematically reflect the individual needs of their employees (cf. UNICEF, ILO, and UN Women 2020, Homfray et al. 2022, Campo et al. 2021). COVID-19 also intensified some of the risks of flexible working arrangements that are widely discussed in many research studies. These risks include mainly: interruptions of working time by family needs, longer working hours, problems with isolation, communication, and right to disconnect (mainly in home-office regimes), not achieving the required work performance in the required time, conflicts between the employer's need to manage and oversee and the employee's right to privacy, lacking competencies of managers/workers to cope with flexible working, etc. (cf. Homfray et al. 2022, French and Shockley 2020, Rudolp et al. 2020, Zoch et al. 2021, Eurofound 2020, Campo et al. 2021).

### **III. Methodology**

Considering the lack of representative data in the Czech Republic, we decided to conduct a secondary data analysis of the discussion forum of the internship course at the selected university. The research population consisted of master's degree students in the field of human resource management in combined form who are enrolled in the course focused on reflection of experiences from professional internship. In the discussion forum, students were asked primarily to comment on and discuss the changes in human resource management caused by the pandemic and the main challenges they faced in human resource management. The students commented on the topic from the position of an expert on people management, they are working or doing an internship in a position of human resource specialist or some department or team leader. As part of their job role, they are involved in developing and implementing support arrangements for employees and collecting feedback from employees. They therefore have an overview not only of what arrangements exist in the organization, but also of how they work or do not work. Each student was required to contribute at least one post to the discussion forum. The topic of the discussion forum was not primarily intended for research purposes; the main purpose was to share and reflect on experiences from practice. However, the students were informed that the posts in the discussion forum could be used anonymously for research purposes.

In the first phase of secondary data analysis, we used open coding (Strauss, Corbin, 1999). We created three main categories with various subcategories taken from informants' own words and concepts: flexible working arrangements (with the home-office regimes as the major and most-mentioned subcategory, followed by the hybrid regime subcategory and the flexibility of on-site work), support for employees' care commitments (with the primary support coming from general recognition and acceptance of the need for care in work planning, meetings and shift staffing as the main and most mentioned subcategory, then there were the two subcategories of childcare support in the workplace and support in using those facilities) and other supportive mechanisms and arrangements (with the responsiveness to employees' needs as the main and the most mentioned subcategory, followed by the subcategories of employee substitutability and additional measures and benefits). In each subcategory, we distinguished between a description of the formal setting of the measure and an evaluation of the formal setting (what worked and what did not).

Then we did axial coding and looked for connections between these categories and subcategories (Hendl 2016). The phenomenon is the increasing creation and implementation of work-family arrangements in the context of COVID-19 and the greater threat of absenteeism. The positive or negative experience with these arrangements was mainly influenced by employers' previous experiences with flexible working arrangements and with a generally positive management attitude towards flexible measures. Of course, there was overlap, where there was a positive management attitude; in most cases, there was also previous experience with flexible measures.

In the last phase, we did selective coding (Hendl 2016). The main topic was the sustainability of these measures after the end of the pandemic. Those employers with positive experience with work-family arrangements will continue and possibly continuously innovate and expand those arrangements after the pandemic. Those employers with negative experience with work-family arrangements will tend to return to the "old path" as the pandemic weakens, which is more likely in traditional organizations and the public sector.

Discussion forums of the internship courses in 2020-2022 were included in the secondary data analysis. Employers operating out of the Czech Republic were excluded. The resulting research sample consists of a total of 136 informants (29 informants in 2020, 58 informants in 2021, 49 informants in 2022), 11 of them men. All students have at least half a year of experience with their employer or internship provider. The sample consists of the private, public, and non-profit sector organizations from, in more detail: manufacturing (27), finance (3), IT (10), logistics (1), business (8), services (45), non-profit services (9), education (7), arts (1), public administration (22) and healthcare (3). In terms of location, employers are represented mainly from Prague (51) and the South Moravian Region (62), the Central Bohemian Region (2), the Moravian-Silesian Region (5), the Olomouc Region (4), the Pardubice Region (2), the Pilsen Region (2), the South Bohemian Region (1), the Vysočina Region (4) and the Zlín Region (3). A total of 254 discussion posts were analyzed (58 informants made at least one post, 43 informants made at least two posts, 31 informants made at least three posts, 3 informants made four posts and 1 informant made five posts). All informants mentioned in their posts the topic of flexible working arrangements, more than half of the informants mentioned the topic of support for employees' care commitments, and less than half of informants mentioned the topic of other supporting arrangements.

Since the research sample is not representative, we do not aim to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the work-family policies of all Czech employers during the pandemic. We do not draw conclusions regarding the overall frequency and extent of changes in work-family arrangements in Czech employer organizations but focus solely on answering whether any changes in these arrangements have occurred. Of course, the validity of our results is also limited by the fact that we cannot say whether respondents did not mention some topics in their post(s) because there are no such measures in the organization, or there are but they did not consider them important enough to mention it. Additionally, analysis of data from a discussion forum that was not primarily intended for research purposes has limitations. The original topic of the discussion forum was broader than the research topic, so the discussants did not elaborate on the research topic as much as if the discussion forum had focused on work-family arrangements only. A limitation is also that the researcher cannot inquire about any ambiguities and go into more detail about the topic during the secondary analysis of the discussion forum, as would be the case when conducting in-depth interviews (e.g., associations between pandemic phases and the timing and other characteristics of arrangements). Using the available data, we show examples of changes and elements of innovation in employers' practices which appear as ad hoc solutions to problematic situations in pandemic times.

#### **IV. Results**

Generally, our data confirm that the evolving COVID-19 pandemic crisis has put pressure and demands on employers and managers to adjust their policies and practices. Some employers implement the necessary changes relatively quickly (mainly those with past experience), and some

implement changes step-by-step due to ad hoc situations. Many informants perceive the attitude of employers as helpful and accommodating to the individual needs of employees. Some informants contrasted this with state policies, which they viewed as contradictory, insufficient or chaotic (e.g., I108 manufacturing, I42 services).

### **Flexible working arrangements**

First, let us look at the arrangements that were put in place where it was impossible to work remotely. Shifts were flexible and had to be individually adjusted (I114 manufacturing) to ensure work and work-life balance. However, the balance of work and home was very difficult due to unexpected shift changes during the pandemic due to COVID infections and/or related illnesses (I25 business, I26 business, I85 public administration, I109 manufacturing, I111 manufacturing, I135 health care). Communication and sharing of information and knowledge in organizations have become more flexible. The working documents were made available to all concerned through clouds. Communication with the team was handled through chat tools and online meeting tools. If possible, face-to-face seminars became webinars. Meetings with clients also moved to a virtual plane (I18 non-profit services, I27 business, I43 services, I60 services, I107 manufacturing, I115 manufacturing). Using online tools and online working has changed from something occasional to a natural part of working (I40 services). Previous experiences and settings of online work influenced the positive or negative perception of online work. Even in cases where this experience was absent, but management was open to it, online work was positively received, and workers were inclined to continue to use convenient online tools that had become a 'natural' part of everyday work.

*'Anyway, I can say that the pressure to change working conditions in the context of the pandemic has opened new opportunities for us, namely online work, which has become more natural than ever for all of us' (I40 services).*

Now we will focus on remote work. Full home office and hybrid regimes were used. It was necessary to: 1) identify processes and roles that can be reallocated to the home office in order to ensure and maintain business continuity; 2) check the availability of IT systems, data, and information in electronic form; 3) develop business continuity management strategy; 4) identify different home office scenarios, set their rules, simulate and test them (I1 finance, I4 IT sector, I6 IT sector, I39 services, I43 services, I88 public administration, I108 manufacturing). In some rare cases, the home office has been enabled even in seemingly impossible circumstances.

*'We have one long-time production employee who is very ill and cannot stand at the machine during the scheduled working hours. The necessary equipment has been purchased for him directly at home in the garage and he is working on the machine at home office' (I112, production).*

The tough challenge for employers was occupational health and safety and work conditions for the home office regime. Therefore, it was necessary to set transparent conditions and rules, functioning, and flexible substitution systems (I3 finance, I6 IT sector, I56 services, I70 services, I110, manufacturing). There was also the challenge of work monitoring and controlling, cybersecurity and personal data protection and privacy. Arrangements for monitoring and analyzing employee activities, mapping, and designing the control environment and cybersecurity also had to be set. Protecting data from children was also a risk when working with data in the home office (I7 IT sector, I63 services). Setting these conditions was not problematic for organizations with remote work experience and access to the necessary communication technologies (I58 services, I65 services). However, many employers did not provide employees with the necessary computer technology and stable internet connections and/or did not develop effective substitution systems (I9 IT sector, I55 services, I94 public administration, I97 public administration). So, it negatively influenced employees' experience with the home office.



*“Home office didn't exist until then, so we weren't even ready for it. We did not have office equipment at home for work, communication, etc. Everyone had to use their own devices”* (I55, IT sector).

Organizations had the burden of providing the technological conditions for remote work and appropriate access to the employees and their needs to achieve the organization's goals. Work performance and efficiency during the pandemic depended on the number of social tasks required for the activity, the ability to use communication technologies, and the ability to structure time effectively. Therefore, it was necessary to set solutions for management, team communication, coordination, and motivation and to develop the competencies of employees and managers to cope with working in flexible modes, considering the individual needs and personal settings of the employees (I11 IT sector, I29 business, I60 services).

*“Our company has therefore published tips and advice on the intranet on how to eliminate possible causes of connection problems. HR has also prepared several tips, advice and workshops on how to prepare for online meetings, presentations, and how to manage your time effectively”* (I29, business).

The management approach is the key. The effectiveness of alternative work settings depends on the company's approach to people management and policies on remote working – the setup of a remote regime, the type of remote monitoring, job characteristics, and granted autonomy. How employers approached monitoring home-office workers affected loyalty and job satisfaction. Some employers strictly monitored the entire workflow (connection time, etc.), while others took a more relaxed approach and focused more on outcomes monitoring. Consequently, the latter group of employers changed their key performance indicators (from time-put-in to focus on outputs).

*“The employer has realized that they can trust their employees, which is why we have unlimited home office options and flexible working hours. We don't have fixed core hours, but we can tailor the working day to suit our needs. The important thing is to get the job done, as it should be”* (I6, IT sector).

The line manager's role was challenging; they spent far more time managing people and reassigning tasks to reconcile individual needs with the company's needs. If possible, it was necessary to apply an individual approach in shift planning and flexible working hours and to provide verbal support and appreciation (I8, IT sector, I21, non-profit sector).

*In my opinion, regular communication is very important to motivate employees. Online meetings, videoconferences, and online training have proven to be very useful in our work. I also feel better supported and connected to other team members”* (I21, non-profit sector).

This worked and will continue after the pandemic where employers had home office experience and provided support to managers through further training. Where this experience and support were lacking, and/or line managers did not see managing a flexible workforce as a legitimate part of their job, there were tendencies to revert to the old arrangements.

*“Home-office workers do the same job, but there is a need for more follow-up, and, in many cases, it is necessary to task workers. I find it more time-consuming to schedule each person separately for the daily work they have to do and then double-check everything afterwards. When I have a personal contact at the workplace, I do the back-checking "on the fly". So, I am addressing the time that is now spent just handing out work, and it costs me the business work that is the main focus of my position. (...) Once this pandemic period is over, the company will return to commute for all current employees ' (I131 manufacturing).*

The flexibility provided by alternative work arrangements meant that employees save time and costs associated with traveling for work, enjoy more flexible scheduling of working hours, and are thus better able to reconcile family commitments. In addition, they enjoy more options in choosing where to live. However, employees spent the time saved by working from home by caring for children, home maintenance, and work duties with minimal time set aside for leisure activities and self-care. Employees in home-office regimes also tended to work overtime (I1, finance, I14 logistic) because

they were constantly available due to the proximity of work equipment, which interfered with personal and family life. On the one hand, there was more peace of mind when working because colleagues were less disturbed. On the other hand, since the whole family shared the workspace, workers often faced distractions and disrespect for work, so it was relatively tricky to maintain attention. That is why time management, setting working conditions, home office rules and boundary management were so important (I21 non-profit services, I28 business, I35 services, I37 services, I40 services, and I124 manufacturing). Employers' attitudes toward these areas have influenced employees' views on working from home. Most employees faced physical and mental difficulties in coping with the pandemic. Increased isolation from others and feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion after the working day were counterbalanced by the support and assistance of co-workers and supervisors, as well as the sense of performing meaningful work (I28 business, I55 services, I89 public administration, I118 manufacturing).

We also identify sources of potential conflict if employers continue with home-office regimes in post-pandemic time. This conflict can stem from the perceived inequity between employees allowed to work remotely due to their care needs and employees not allowed due to their manager's attitude or the nature of their work. It is questionable whether reasons associated with work-family commitments will be a sufficiently legitimate reason for allowing home office even after a pandemic regarding perceptions of fairness in the workplace. As the informants in our sample also pointed out, it is essential to set transparent rules in companies related to the conditions and availability of the home office regime for employees after the pandemic, including the 'fair' distribution of responsibilities between on-site and remote workers (I3 finance, I25 business, I35 healthcare, I88 public administration).

*“In any case, late but still, the hospital management started looking into the possibility of a home office for at least a few employees (...). But I don't know whether it would be possible to maintain friendly relations if someone worked in the warmth of their own home and someone had to go to work at 6 a.m.” (I135, healthcare).*

### **Support for employees' care commitments**

The primary support came from general recognition and acceptance of the need for care in work planning, meetings, and shift staffing, which was mentioned and described across almost all of our research sample. Even in organizations that did not change their attitudes to work-family balance much, informants described that in the case of necessary childcare, e.g., home-office was individually allowed. On the other hand, some informants associated this reflection of individual care needs with serious complications regarding completing work tasks in the required time and generally extending time to complete work tasks because employees could not balance their (individual) schedules.

*“As an employee, we faced many challenges, dealing with the fact that not all colleagues were available when we needed them right away, delays in projects, and orders for clients. Many of us had to deal with unusual situations on our own. There was a general feeling of increased nervousness, errors, and pressure on performance” (I39, services).*

Although support for childcare facilities was not very common in employer organizations before the pandemic, it appeared that some employers were able to respond to the absence or failure of usual childcare arrangements. Some organizations directly provided and paid for individual childcare in case of need (perceived mainly from the perspective of the employer's need). Some employers first tried to provide care on a self-help basis and only after some time proceeded to more formal solutions.

*“We had to face another challenge...staff with children who could not be in their school/schools for a period of the pandemic. They were first taken care of by me [HR specialist] along with the receptionist, and finally we hired a nanny who could attend to them fully and help them with their homework also” (I4, IT sector).*

Employers in our sample sometimes did not use only one arrangement, but a combination of different childcare arrangements for different occasions (I4 IT sector; I41 services; I43 services; I91 public sector).

*“In the absence of childcare arrangements for some colleagues during the closed periods of kindergartens and primary schools, they would take their children to work in agreement with other colleagues in the office and their supervisor. Other measures taken by the ministry included increasing the capacity of the ministry's kindergarten so that children of employees who normally took their children to other kindergartens and children of health workers, police officers, and other IRS units could also attend” (I91, public sector).*

Although these measures were seen as ad hoc and crisis measures, it is evident that the quality and conditions of provision would need to be addressed as time progressed. I92 from the public sector is slightly critical of the provision of the care services mentioned, noting that it was "only" childminding, and the educational aspect was left out for operational reasons. Additionally, I4 from the IT sector emphasized this *“full attention of caregiver”* and *“help with homework”* as a remarkable improvement (see the excerpt I4 above).

In addition to the fact that the company provided childcare in temporary children's corners or provided a nanny/individual care, in our opinion, there was a noticeable change in the perception of children in the workspace in some organizations. The informants described the experience that during regular meetings and/or office hours, children were allowed to be in offices (if other colleagues agreed) (I91 public sector and I39 services) or "visible" on camera (I43, services). In the case of an *“important meeting,”* when children could potentially disturb the proceedings, the employer hired a nanny (I43, services).

### **Other supportive mechanisms and arrangements**

The variation in other measures and arrangements was quite broad in our data, ranging from fundamental helping activities to small things that could also be significant for employee motivation and engagement. The most appreciated supportive mechanism is responsiveness to employees' needs in general. In this respect, it was not just about specific measures, but the overall *“friendly and human approach”*, the *“warm human word”*, *“the opportunity to make an agreement”*, and the fact that the employer and managers *“did not stress and frighten them”* were particularly appreciated (I87 public sector, I88 public sector, I85 education, I27 business, I42 services, I108 manufacturing, I114 manufacturing). Many authors discussed this supportive supervisor behavior as a key work-family arrangement even before the pandemic (e.g., den Dulk et al 2011, Plasová 2008) and has been strengthening during the pandemic (e.g., Campo et al. 2021, French and Shockley 2020).

A frequently discussed issue in our data, as well as in the many studies on work-family policies on the employer's level, is employee substitutability in the case that care commitments (e.g., child illness) prevent the employee from working (e.g., Plasová 2008, Kuchařová et al. 2006). This problem is extensively emphasized by COVID-19. If we consider that, in the past, the company perceived the absence of one or two parents as a serious problem, suddenly they discovered that up to a third of the employees could at various times be absent due to illness of adults and/or children, quarantine, or closed schools and kindergartens. In addition, of course, other common diseases did not disappear as well, so parents could find themselves exiting COVID-19 quarantine but still unable to return to work due to smallpox and tonsillitis, for example. Childcare services and schools strictly refused children even due to the standard runny nose, commonly tolerated before COVID. The shortage of staff was associated mainly with project delays, errors, barriers to cooperation with business partners, and reduced efficiency of some departments. Of course, these negative impacts were moderated by a general slowdown in order processing and a decrease in demand (but only in some sectors). Except for (often non-acceptable) reduction of orders, employers have coped by providing more time for particular orders, reducing administration, changing work specifications, work rotation and extending the competencies and thus the substitutability of employees.

*“The employer has reduced the number of orders, set new rules in processing orders, extended the processing period, reduced administration, increased the scope of competencies of individual employees, etc.” (I39, services).*

The question remains whether employers, having found the tools to deal with collective absenteeism/crisis, will be willing to do the same in the case of individual absenteeism/crisis (e.g., emergency care needs).

Additional measures and benefits that were a direct response to COVID-19 also included the following:

1. *Individual counseling and psychological support* were provided or mediated (and paid) by employers (e.g., I8 IT sector, I38 services). The HR department often consulted on changing conditions of national policies like sickness leave, attendance allowance, and the combination of attendance allowance and home-office regime. Furthermore, they helped employees with the associated administration, which was perceived as highly demanding (I38 services, I87 public sector, I129 manufacturing);
2. *Vitamin packs, provision of supportive medications, COVID-19 testing for employees and for their families* (I28 business, I87 public sector);
3. *Little treats for employees to show appreciation* (e.g., smoothies, fruits, or toys in the workplace) (I25 business, I39 services, I91 public sector);
4. *Offer to lend computer equipment* so that children can participate in online lessons (I111 manufacturing);
5. *The development of employees' competencies* (usually through special workshops and courses) focusing on mindfulness techniques, ergonomics, and prevention of physical disabilities (I28 business), burnout prevention, work-family balance (I41 services), and online yoga (I110 manufacturing; I28, I30, and I31 business, I8 IT sector);
6. *Some employers made space for employees to take a role in volunteering* (I28 and I31 business).

## **V. Conclusion**

In summary, our data suggest that new elements of measures that support employees in work-family balance have appeared among a specific sample of Czech employers. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to all the negative impacts on our society, has opened a window of opportunity in work-family arrangements. We can say that some employers have opened this window wide and are likely to continue a new path. Those who had no prior experience with work-family arrangements found themselves at least needing to initiate novel arrangements.

Other employers will want to return to the "old path" as the pandemic weakens, which is more likely in traditional organizations and in the public sector. The question is whether this is a sustainable strategy under the conditions of current labor markets (e.g., labor market shortages, preferences of the young generation for flexible work, and the entrance of Ukrainian mothers with children).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated already existing conflicts between work and family. Some of the resulting problems have affected employers extensively. Thus, work-family arrangements seem to be no longer "nice to have" but something "must-have" from the employer's perspective. In this respect, the most significant innovative moments include:

- The development of home-office regimes and tools for dealing with the day-to-day practical problems associated with this regime for a wide range of work types/positions;
- The ability to match the individual needs of employees with the performance of their work ("tailored solutions");
- Ability to address emergency care needs when there are disruptions to usual care.

The common denominator in the implementation of work-family arrangements seems to be a tendency to recognize and acknowledge the heterogeneity of employees' needs, not only those with care commitments. For many employers, the essential experience they had was to run their daily

operations on an ad hoc basis. Therefore, they had no choice but to meet their employees' individual (emergency) needs, as most of them were in various crises. Facilitating factors were the relatively high solidarity among employees and employers, responsiveness, and teamwork ("*we are in this together*") and, in some cases, the decrease of pressure to deal with orders, projects, or a decline in the number of clients. Although, of course, in some sectors, they were faced with an increase in work (e.g., healthcare sector, eldercare services, delivery services).

Employers have gained considerable experience in coping with the problems associated with the work-family imbalance and have developed a range of tools to address these imbalances (home-office regimes, communication technologies, the development of employee substitutability and employee competencies, and having the ability to cope with emergency care needs). In this respect, we have to ask if employers are willing and able to apply them to address individual crises/problems of their employees with work-family imbalances or only in collective crises such as pandemics. Of course, our data cannot represent all employers in the Czech Republic. Still, we believe that they provide clear signals that we need to investigate this field further using representative data and monitor future developments.

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