

Article

Offices after the COVID-19 Pandemic and Changes in Perception of Flexible Office Space

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Abstract: The pandemic is fast moving, accelerating rapid changes that lead to new challenges and making organizations suffer an impact. A big mark has been left on the workplaces - places where we do business, because an ongoing change to remote work challenges the role of the office. It is highly possible that as the change is progressing, it is not only the workplace that will change its design, but also the way in which work will be planned, organized, done and controlled. However, as the restrictions ease up questions appear: What is the potential of office sustainability? How has the perception of flexible office space changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic? This paper used an online survey as a quantitative research method. In this paper, we looked at the employer's vision of the office. We investigated employers' perspectives of where and in what settings the work will be done in the post-pandemic time. Specifically, we discussed the changes employers will apply in terms of work environment and office layout. The findings suggest that an increasing mobile workforce and expansion of the new workstyle will not mean an office exodus, but will certainly have an impact on office utilization.

Keywords: work environment; employers; office space; remote work; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The traditional role of the office is to provide a safe and comfortable place for employees to work effectively. In recent years, expectations of the office work environment have significantly changed [48] due to increased focus on employees' job satisfaction that determines employees' performance [43]. It is noteworthy that work environment can be considered as one of the most important factors for both sides of a work relationship as it affects the quality of work performance and achievement of employer results [7].

Over the past decades (prior COVID-19), demand for flexibility has transformed traditional workplaces to their flexible alternatives. Flexible, open, activity-based, coworking spaces and other remote locations where work is done have changed how work is conducted. Employees are more visible, accessible, connected and work more efficiently [40]. Another reason why organizations have decided to proceed with the transition is economic – cost reduction. Based on sustainability and ecological standards it has an important position in the attractiveness and occupancy of modern type of office space [19,39,35]. The set-up of such offices can be an effective tool in supporting the implementation of sustainability initiatives on matters related to sustainable development [15].

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) appeared in 2019 offices remained empty as employees stayed home limiting the spread of the disease. While employers in the ICT sector have not been so severely affected by the crisis [4], employees working for employers in other sectors have been forced to reconsider their approach to managing employees and adapt their perception of office and work environment [25]. Joining an "online world" was an absolute necessity and the only way to keep some departments in operation at all [45].

Many employees have enjoyed and benefited from an enforced "work at home" opportunity and experience, delivering gains in personal productivity, while also recognizing a new form of work, life and family balance [52].

Other employees found themselves in a home office setting permanently and have no need to return to the office. This group of employees has expressed a strong desire to retain these benefits and continue working from home as a standard way of work and life in the future [37]. Generally, the opinion of the employee working at the home office was not considered while it might be considered necessary [49]. With the remote work experience employers have realized that much of the work tasks can be done outside of the traditional work settings.

In this research we focused on two countries with different cultures and work habits. This paper is divided into five sections, where section 1 was an introduction. Section 2 presents an overview of the literature. In Section 3, research methods are described. In section 4, interpretation of the results, findings and discussion are explained. Section 5 is developed as a conclusion, research findings with limitations and future research directions.

2. Materials and Methods

Traditional Office or typical cell office can be defined as a room or part of a building where people work, especially sitting at desks with computers, telephones, usually as part of a business or other organization [11]. Poppel [42] defined office as the section that employs some of the lowest paid staff and, in general, its functions are not recognized as central to an employer’s activities or as a place where the files are lost and where it always takes longer than anyone expects to find them again. This type of arrangement provides the benefits of space policy, health due to the lower concentration of no more people and increased job satisfaction of employees [30,9,20]. Disadvantages can include the closure and unavailability of the employee, in terms of economic factors; it is a very expensive workplace layout for employers [50].

Flexible Office also known as flexispace. Flexible office space includes the fundamental features of traditional office (desks, chairs, phones, computers); but in addition, incorporates other elements of open office workspace, coworking workspace, and activity-based workspace what makes the work environment more dynamic and accommodates the diverse needs of employees [46].

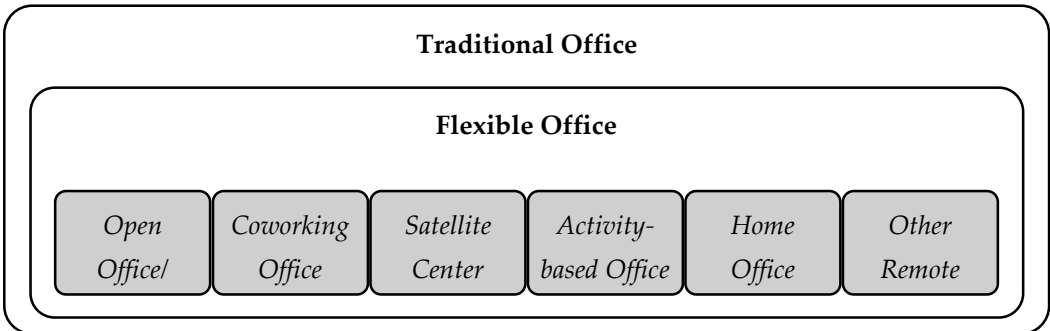


Figure 1. The Most Common Types of Office Setup

Open Office (Open Space) is an idea with all advantages. It was originally conceived by a team from Hamburg - Germany in the 1950s to facilitate communication and idea flow in organizations [22,32]. There is no standard definition of what constitutes an open office, but generally, space is considered separate or different from cubicle office rooms and is characterized by a short barrier or no barrier at all between employees [44]. Brennan [10] in research has shown that it is negatively related to employee satisfaction with their physical environment, distrust and perceived productivity. [8] in their research concluded

that the switch to open offices, face-to-face interactions fell by 70%. The employees suffered according to every measure: the new space was disruptive, stressful, and cumbersome, and, instead of feeling closer, co-workers felt distant, dissatisfied, and resentful [26]. Open offices also remove an element of control, which can lead to feelings of helplessness. Ability to control the environment had a significant effect on team cohesion and satisfaction [31]. For example, [41] have shown an elevated risk of sick leave in workspaces shared by six people or more compared with other workplaces.

Coworking is where a group of different employees, usually employed by different employers or self-employed, use a common, shared workplace. Generally, employees will also share a common set of values, with social factors being the most often-cited reasons for choosing a coworking space [17]. It is a new but fast-growing trend in the United States - from only 14 spaces in 2007, the number of coworking and other shared, collaborative office spaces increased to 4,043 in 2017 and are planned to increase to 6,219 spaces in 2022. In the United States alone, there were 542,000 people working in coworking spaces in that year [17]. In 2019, the most represented region was Asia-Pacific (APAC) with 11,592 coworking spaces and there were 6,293 flexible workspaces in the United States, these numbers were planned for 2022 [18]. This trend went worldwide when projections predicted 22,400 coworking spaces worldwide by the end of 2019 and 26,300 coworking spaces worldwide by the end of 2020 [13]. In 2012, there were an average of 38 members per coworking space worldwide. In 2019, there was an average of 185 members per coworking space worldwide [13].

Satellite Center (also called Hub) is based on localization flexibility, more flexible workspace and working style. It is a form in which an employee works in a center established by the employer outside the employer's premises, e.g. at the client's place in their location or region [53]. IT programmers, database administrators or start-up businesses are the occupations working typically in this mode. A typical manifestation of the recent period is the lower intensity of visits to these centers, flexible arrivals and job sharing in center [29].

Activity-based Office (Job Sharing) is based on employee mobility and suitable combination with telework. This work setting reduced costs of office space. It allows employees to work on various activities, whether alone or in collaboration with others, while changing multiple types of flexible work settings during the day with no fixed desk in the workplace [17]. The objective is to boost employee productivity, creativity, and cooperation [51].

The Home Office gives employees flexibility to work from home. The home office became an important part of the pandemic. As a result, close to 40% of those currently working in the EU began to work from home full-time [14]. While work-life balance, work efficiency and work control are identified as the main advantages of home office work environment, inadequate tools, home constraints and work uncertainties are seen as the main disadvantages of work from home [21] during the pandemic by knowledge workers in EU [24].

Other remote offices are alternative workspaces or locations that are open to the public, such as café, library, vacation home, street, highway, public park, car park or railway station. This form of office is usually tied to a quality Internet connection associated only with certain jobs [23].

Relevant research on the topic of office layout was created before COVID-19. Dissertation research dealt with the setting of office space in terms of greater flexibility. In the given research, questions were asked about the layout of an office in a traditional closed office or with openness, such as Open-space, Open-share [5]. The results showed that the interviewed organizations in Slovakia were the most popular open concept offices. Traditional Office and closed offices were mostly used in industry and production. Groups of experts (71.1%) had closed offices to the creation of new ideas and due to increased concentration, grouping of experts was approached in IT or finance groups, for example.

Open offices were mostly used in services related to finance, accounting, banking, insurance and consulting. Shared offices or a combination of offices were most widespread in services related to IT, consulting and telecommunications.

The trend of flexibility in the workplace has been one of the main facilitators of this transition. Kuwait does not fall behind. The supply of flexible office space is also, but slowly infiltrating to Kuwait offering coworking, virtual offices and other flexispace options [16], hence evolving new business practices. This can represent a strategic tool for employers to gain competitive advantage [38]. However, similar to Slovakia, traditional offices are prevalent in the public sector.

As 2020 began, work in all ministries and the public sector was suspended [27]. The Government of Kuwait released a document: "Remote Work Guideline for the Public Sector" [12]. A few weeks later, when the complete lockdown was applied, the work was being done from home in both sectors, where applicable [1]. Even with the five-phase plan of transition to normal life [28] and vaccination initiatives, employers have been slow to rebound due to the limited number of employees allowed in the workplace, hence utilizing hybrid working practices [36].

While there is a literature on the economic and environmental benefits of applying green building concepts in Kuwait [2] or on the implication of work environment on job satisfaction [3] there hardly exists research data on the office layout in Kuwait, hence we decided to address this gap and analyse not only how the office layout was before the COVID-19 pandemic, but also how it will look like in the post-pandemic time.

3. Research Methodology

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the potential sustainability of offices and identify the willingness of employers to change or adapt to the demands in the post-pandemic era. The secondary objectives of the work were focused on the attitudes of employers to future plans and changes regarding the layout of offices and proposed solutions for a more effective workplace and work environment in the post-pandemic time.

RQ1: How will employers approach the implementation of changes in their offices?

RQ2: What is the attitude of employers towards the Home Office/Remote Work/Hybrid work model?

RQ3: How will the work environment change in the near future?

We tested the following hypotheses:

H0: The two qualitative variables are independent. The country (Slovakia, Kuwait) does not affect answer.

H1 (alternative): The two qualitative variables are dependent. The country (Slovakia, Kuwait) does affect answer.

H2: Employers change their approach to office layout based on experience during a pandemic.

In this paper we used an online survey as a quantitative research method to collect relevant answers by representatives - employers. In this paper, we looked at the employer's vision of the office. This survey was designed to collect information and helped provide a clearer picture of the COVID-19 pandemic changes to the role of offices. Survey was divided into four sections.

We used logical induction, synthesis and deduction in developing results and drawing conclusions. Descriptive data analysis was completed using rankings and percentages for scale. 4-point Likert scale questions were recorded and converted to numerical.

We used test in Two-Way in Figure 2, 4, 5, 6 and table 2, when the first variable was answer to the question and two was country (Slovakia, Kuwait).

Test Statistic: $\chi^2 = \sum \frac{[n_{ij} - E_{ij}]^2}{E_{ij}}$ where $E_{ij} = \frac{R_i C_j}{n}$, has been calculated in software EXCEL.

Rejection region: $\chi^2 > \chi^2_{\alpha}$ (significant level is $\alpha=0.01$) where critical value χ^2_{α} has $(r-1)(c-1)$ df (degrees of freedom). Also hypothesis H_0 rejected, if $p\text{-value} < \alpha$ variables are dependent. Critical value χ^2_{α} was determined by using function CHISQ.INV and $p\text{-value}$ using function CHITEST [33].

Based on results from online survey and statistics and employers experiences from two different countries - Slovakia, representing the European approach to solving office space and Kuwait, representing the Arab model of approach to solving office space, conclusions were drawn, also further research directions and limitations were set. The impact of cultural differences could cause differences in performance across countries, but this factor was not the main subject of the research.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The sample was relatively balanced in gender division in Slovakia, in Kuwait the sample was unbalanced. In Kuwait, there were only 2 women among the higher positions (higher than the manager), in Slovakia and at the base of the sample, women predominated in higher positions. From the point of view of the size of the organization where the respondent worked, medium and large organizations were the majority represented in Slovakia (86.8%), in Kuwait large organizations (37.2%) had the largest representation, medium and small organizations were in approximately the same representation, followed by micro organizations (27.9%). From the point of view of sectors, in Slovakia Government and Public Services were largely represented, in the private sector it was the Information Technology and Services sector. In Kuwait, Oil & Gas, Health Care or Financial Services and Insurance were largely represented.

Table 1. Breakdown of Gender and Job Title

| | | Slovakia (N=38) | | Kuwait (N=43) | |
|-----------|----------------|-----------------|------|---------------|------|
| | | N | % | N | % |
| Gender | Female | 21 | 55.3 | 9 | 20.9 |
| | Male | 17 | 44.7 | 34 | 79.1 |
| Job Title | Manager | 14 | 36.8 | 21 | 48.9 |
| | Senior Manager | 7 | 18.4 | 9 | 20.9 |
| | Director | 16 | 42.1 | 7 | 16.3 |
| | Owner | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4.6 |
| | Others | 1 | 2.7 | 4 | 9.3 |

3.1. Work Environment and Office Space before the COVID-19

Did employees in your organization have flexibility to work from home or other remote locations BEFORE the pandemic?

The work option was primarily office-based, but work from home or other remote location was an option (63.2%) in Slovakia. The intensity was set at once a week or 5 times a month as a benefit. In comparison, 32.6% of employees in Kuwait had the opportunity to work from home or other remote location as an option. 20.9% of employees in Kuwait worked from home or other remote location. Highest number of employees (46.5%) had only office-based work. Open offices were more adaptable and open for remote work. Based on the results from employers, the traditional arrangement of offices was more preferred in Slovakia. This phenomenon was obvious due to the nature of the work of individual departments. The results showed more balanced responses in the case of Kuwait, where the traditional arrangement of offices was preferred, but only in 58% of employers'

response. There was a benefit from a presumption in excess flexible time employment as teleworking or Open-share.

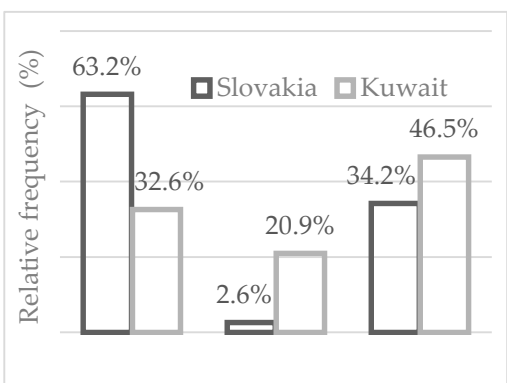


Figure 2a. Pre-pandemic: Work Option

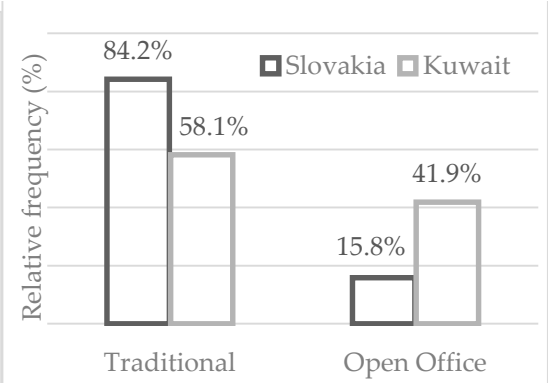


Figure 2b. Pre-pandemic: Office Layout

How important was the following for the purpose of the physical office BEFORE the pandemic?

This question examined differences in perception of the physical office In Slovakia and Kuwait. On a scale from not important to very important employers in Slovakia reported higher importance differences in building community and corporate culture, enabling collaboration and socialization of employees compared to Kuwait. Lower or negative importance were reported by employers in category attracting, retaining and nurturing talents in Kuwait.

- 1) Building community and corporate culture.
- 2) Increasing productivity of employees.
- 3) Collaboration and socialization of employees.
- 4) Providing space for meetings with clients.
- 5) Providing learning and career development opportunities.
- 6) Providing access to equipment and documents.
- 7) Onboarding new hires.
- 8) Innovating products or services.
- 9) Attracting, retaining and nurturing talents.

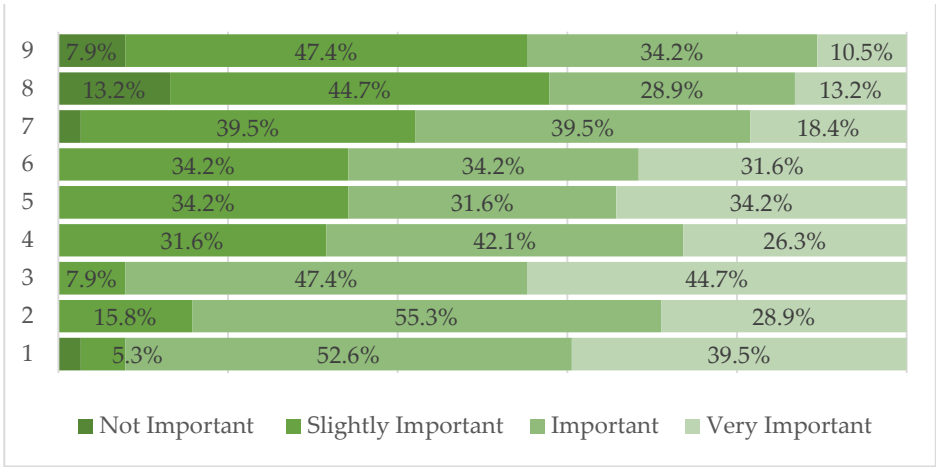


Figure 3a. Importance in Selected Categories (Slovakia)

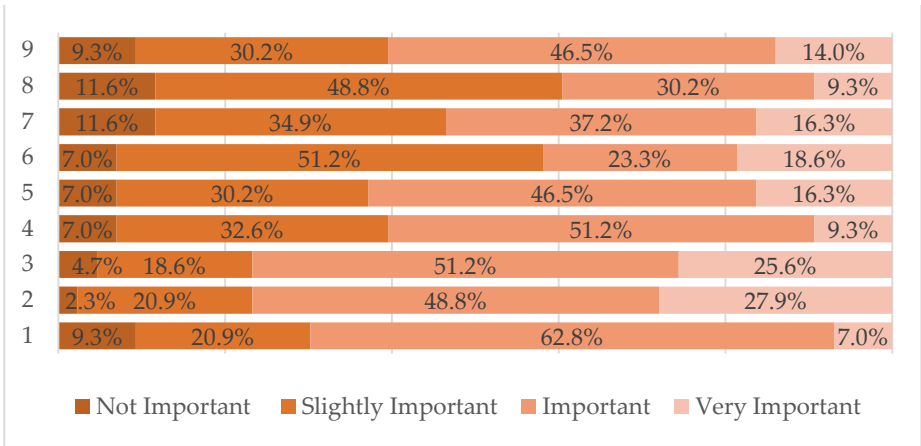


Figure 3b. Importance in Selected Categories (Kuwait)

3.2. Work Environment and Office Space before the COVID-19

Employers were asked about changes caused by the pandemic. In Slovakia, 82% of employees worked remotely during the pandemic full or almost full-time. In this case, the office layout played no role during the pandemic. Everyone who had the opportunity to work remotely had this form ordered. In Kuwait, only 33% of employees worked remotely during the pandemic. More than 26% had not worked remotely.

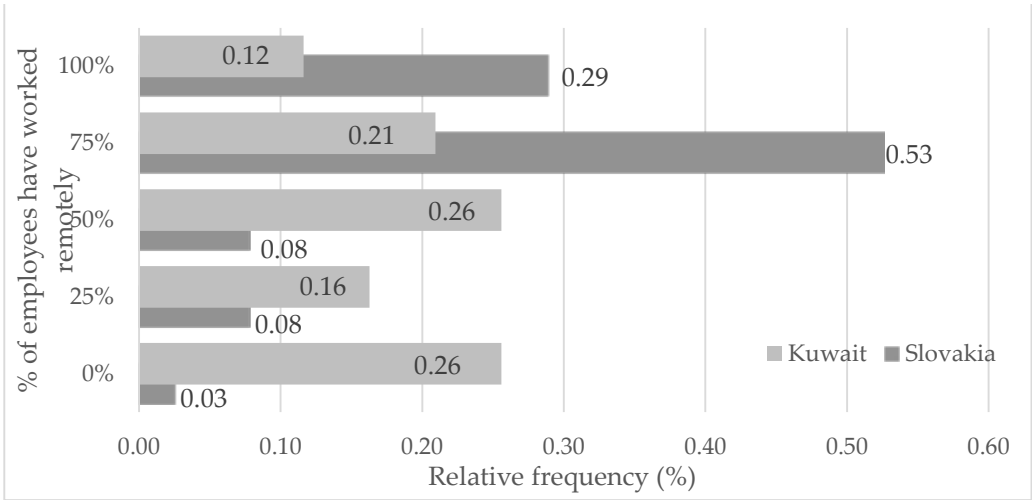


Figure 4. Relative Remote Work Frequency

Figure 5 shows the number of days that employees were allowed to work remotely during the pandemic. In Slovakia, the most available options were to work 3 days or 5 days a week outside the office. In this case, the dependence was that the higher the number of employees working from home, the more days could employees use to work online outside the office. In Kuwait, the most available options were to work 3 days or 5 days a week outside the office. In this case, almost 26% of employers did not work remotely. There was no significant dependence, because the variance of options was too large and employers had a more balanced mix of offices.

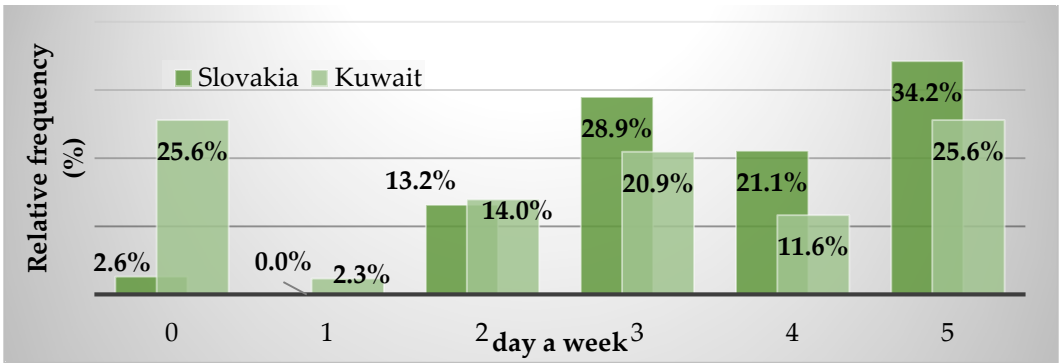


Figure 5. Remote Work Possibility

Employers were asked to make statements about remote work. Figure 6 shows statements of employers about remote work. Employers in Slovakia declared increasing the level of remote work (26.4%), but 31.6% of them preferred limited remote schedules with fixed rules. Employers in Kuwait (30.2%) declared necessity to return to the office, but 14% of them declared that office space was completely unnecessary in combination with remote work. Responses from our survey showed that almost 58% of employers in Slovakia did not want to proceed with redundancies and reductions in the number of employees, but rather see this form as an opportunity to reduce operating costs at an increased or permanent rate of remote work. Employers in Kuwait have admitted redundancies (14% of responses), seeing an opportunity in investing in technology and developing online or IT services (48.8%).

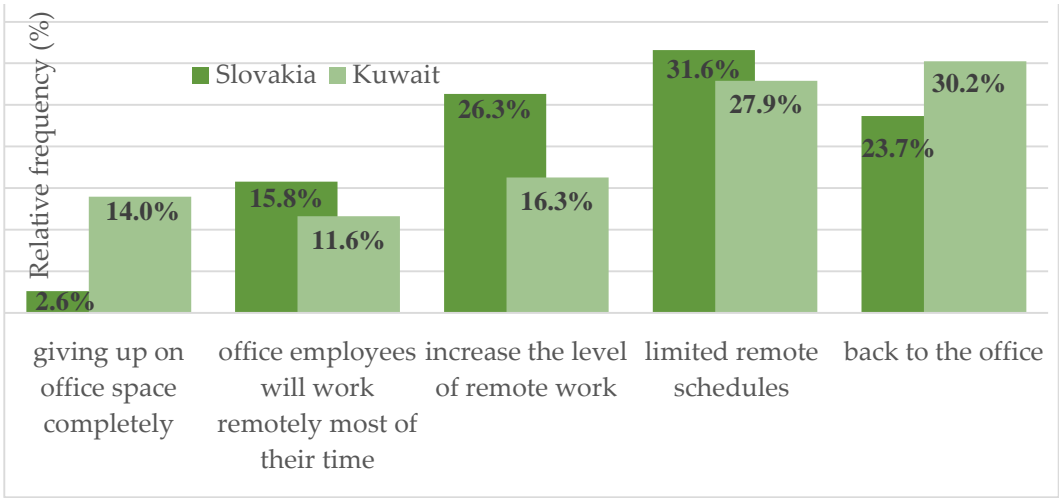


Figure 6. Remote Work Statements

Employers were asked to identify (three) barriers to remote work in their organization. Many organizations learned to work in the online space and use technology during the lockdown. As most significant barriers to remote work in Slovakia mentioned by employers were:

- (1) Face to-face contact is required (71%).
- (2) Internet and other IT related issues (47.3%).
- (3) Mental health and well-being of employees (39.4%).

In the Government and Public Services sectors, it was common to work in a closed office using technology or to be in direct contact during meetings. The move from the office to the home was widespread and therefore the second significant barrier was that many households did not have sufficient internet coverage, which made work difficult.

Long lockdown, low socialization acted as a barrier that decreased productivity and corporate manners. Employers wanted to disrupt the routine of working from home as much as possible with new incentives to protect the health and well-being of employees.

Same question were set in Kuwait. As most significant barriers to remote work in Kuwait mentioned by employers were:

- (1) Face to-face contact is required (55.8%).
- (2) Fairness, as not all employees could benefit from remote working due to nature of their work (44.2%).
- (3) Physical presence to operate equipment is required for monitoring performance of employees (both 37.2%).

Fairness was the second most frequently cited barrier that employers did not want or could not deal with. Since the nature of the work did not allow everyone to work outside the workplace, the employers followed the rules that in such a case there will be no one.

Employers considered access to the workplace necessary due to the availability of documents and equipment, without which the quality and productivity of the work performed decreases. The equality and non-disadvantage approach has helped to maintain the work ethics and well-being of employees during the period of government action. Thus, it was clear that based on the responses of employers from various sectors, in sectors such as oil and mining, a physical presence was required for the operator even during the lockdown.

3.3. Work Environment and Office Space Settings after the Pandemic

Employers were asked to rank team scenarios AFTER the pandemic. In Slovakia, as shown in Figure 7a, full team working remotely full-time (52.6%) or part of the time (44.7%) and part of the team working remotely full-time (50%) was not acceptable. One of the most acceptable answers (21%) was the possibility of a hybrid work model, where part of the team worked remotely part of the time (3+ days / week). In principle, working from home will become a regular part of the work option, because it is mostly acceptable for employers. Occasionally, teams will have to meet face to face as an essential. After a thorough analysis, employers will allow employees to work part of the time remotely, once or twice a week, and a presence of 2 or 3 days at the workplace will be required. The most preferred option was full-time work in the office (26.3%).

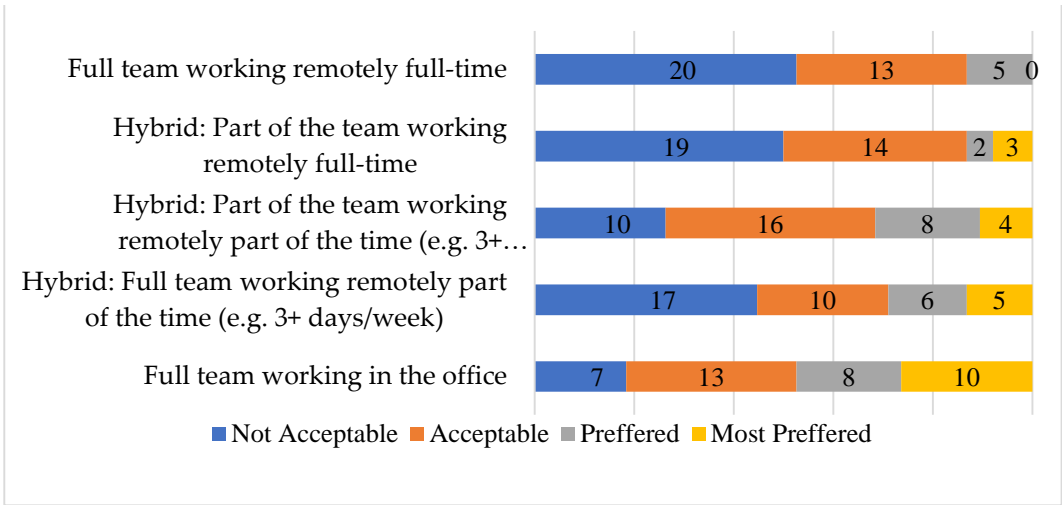


Figure 7a. Team Preferences in Slovakia

In Kuwait, responses were similar to Slovak employer’s preferences. The most acceptable answer (20.9%) was the possibility of a hybrid work model, where part of the team works remotely part of the time (3+ days / week). More employers preferred full-

time work from the office (18.6%) or a hybrid work model when part of the team works remotely part of the time (18.6%). However, the results showed that the transition to a purely remote way of working is unacceptable (46.5%).

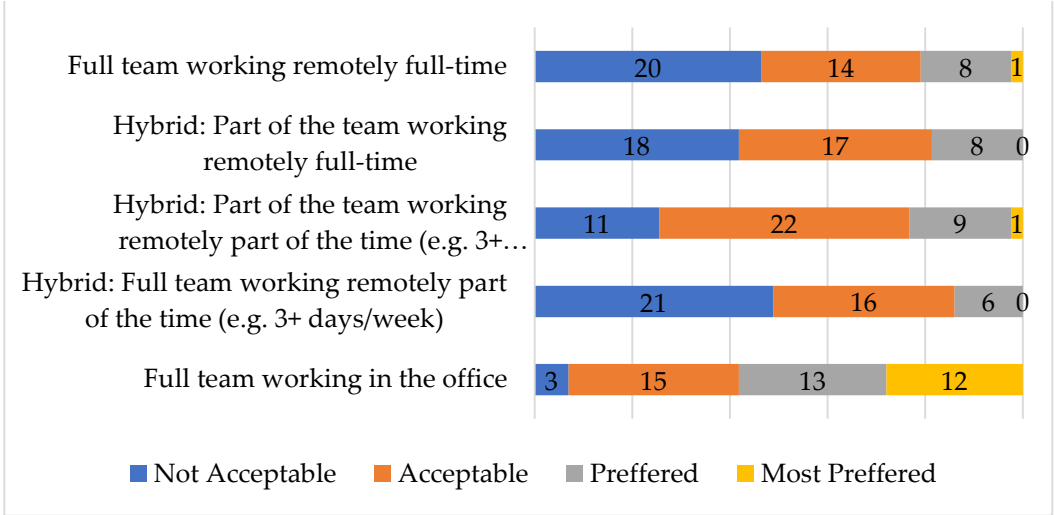


Figure 7b. Team Preferences in Kuwait

These two countries had very similar conclusions for the private sector. When looking for connections, it was mainly the case that private organizations wanted to make their premises safer, because coworking or complete open space is useless in this situation. Is the end of open office coming? Still the most popular office layout would be an open office - but with high partitions, which can be considered as one of the elements of a new flexible office. Employers primarily try to use all the space, save money and protect employees. This office layout and activity-based office most supports greater flexibility of employees and remote work, regular team rotation or work in smaller groups could support a hybrid work model to maintain employee well-being, ensure sustainable productivity, and promote organizational culture and personal contact.

Table 2. Preferences of Flexible Office Spaces in Post-Pandemic

| | Slovakia (N=38) | | Kuwait (N=43) | |
|--|-----------------|------|---------------|------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Flexible office space – open office –cubicle with high partitions | 12 | 31.6 | 9 | 20.9 |
| Flexible office space – open office – cubicle with low partitions (6-10 employees) | 3 | 7.9 | 7 | 16.3 |
| Flexible office space – open office –limited parti-tions (11+ employees) | 2 | 5.3 | 8 | 18.6 |
| Flexible office space – coworking office | 7 | 18.4 | 9 | 20.9 |
| Flexible office space – satellite center | 4 | 10.5 | 2 | 4.7 |
| Flexible office space –activity-based office | 10 | 26.3 | 8 | 18.6 |

5. Discussion

We investigated employer’s perspectives of where and in what settings the work will be done in the post-pandemic time. Specifically, we discussed the changes employers will

apply in terms of work environment and office layout. The findings suggest that an increasing mobile workforce and expansion of the new workstyle will not mean an office exodus, but will certainly have an impact on office utilization.

RQ1: *How will employers approach the implementation of changes in their offices?* Based on our research, up to 85% of employers in Slovakia and almost 68% of employers in Kuwait returned employees back to their office as of 1st of August 2021. When employees returned to office-type work after the pandemic, a number of questions remained open. What needs to change in relation to the relationship with employees? It is impossible for an office to be 100% secure. According to employers, many employees in Slovakia have preferences to work from home (55%). In Kuwait, according to employers, 67.5% of employees have concerns about maintaining social distance in offices.

The key to unlocking the individual and organizational high-performance opportunities of the future is the design, development and implementation of a new safe workplace model [37]. The workplaces we have left will not be the workplaces we return to. Coronavirus does not erase office culture because it is essential to the organization's success and key for successful corporate culture. In our research, 84% of employers in Slovakia and almost 84% employers in Kuwait agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

However, office layout will significantly change for a shorter or medium-term. The question is whether some changes will not be only temporary on the basis of regulations. Equipment of individual offices, flexibility of premises leading to a flexible office - ready for any quick adjustments and changes that might require the arrival of an unpredictable situation. Employers should focus on the sustainability of the settings and productivity [6]. Employers can use managers to apply different approaches to change in office space. A very common response was that nothing would change after the pandemic. Many employers, primarily in the Government and Public Services sectors, will not respond to changes in office space settings in future. In our results, in the short-term, almost 63% of employers in Kuwait did not confirm changes in real estate strategy and almost 87% of employers in Slovakia agreed with this statement. More approach that is open was in the private sector, where plans were intended to consolidate office space in one business location.

After the end of the protective measures and the pandemic, everything will return to "normal". However, due to the unclear end of the pandemic, employers must adhere to the set measures. The solution is the 6 feet office as a model and a new standard typical for office space [34]. The 6 feet office model is characterized by typical features such as greater distance between desks, alternating teams in open space offices, regular disinfection and a clean climate are a matter of course.

Table 3. Office Space after Returning Employees

| 6 Feet Office | More Remote Work | Sustainable Space |
|--|---|---|
| The same size only fewer people at once | Employers will support work from home | Employers will start reducing their office space |
| The current size of the offices will remain unchanged. Flexible working conditions, fewer people in the office at once, sufficient distance at the social distance in the office. | Without offices, everything takes place online and outside the common areas. Transition from office work to telework, formally defined in contracts. | The workplace will no longer be a single place, but an ecosystem of different places to support the safety, functionality and quality of working conditions of employees. |

| | | |
|--|---|-------------------------|
| | Employers will pay for the equipment and work needs of employees. | |
| Continued work in the office HO as a benefit | From Classic Worker to Mostly Teleworker | Hybrid Work Model / Mix |
| Fixed Desk | Share Desk Policy / Flexible Desk | |

RQ2: *What is the attitude of employers towards the Home Office/Remote Work/Hybrid work model?* It is possible to draw several conclusions for the issue of access of employers to the office space. Employers will apply the three approaches mentioned above - 6 Feet Office, More Remote Work or Sustainable Space. The attitude of employers towards the home office was perceived at the level of crisis resolution during pandemic constraints. In the short-term, measures have been taken to resolve the situation in terms of compliance with the measures and safety of employees in the workplace, typical of the 6 Feet Office. In the first wave, the pandemic measures shutdown all offices for several weeks except essential positions. If this was not the case, remote work or a hybrid work model was used. Certain changes to the premises have occurred in terms of the use of the premises. In the case of permanent telework, employers in Slovakia (65.7%) and employers in Kuwait (58.1%) stated that they would not have unused office space despite unclear pandemic developments.

In the long-term, employers do not plan to significantly change their office layouts. Employers do not plan to change their office space to flexible in the near future, minor changes were made, depending on the office's possibility. The fact remains that after the end of the pandemic measures, employers will require employees to enter the offices. Subsequently, office pandemic measures were taken to reduce office movement. Typical features were the rotation of teams and their non-mixing, the transfer of many essential activities to the online space, and an attendance system that can control the number of people in companies.

Over time, it should be noted that the enthusiasm of the home office began to disappear. Today, the home office is perceived as an option and is more accessible to a larger number of employees than before the pandemic, the benefit has become the solution to many problems. More remote work or more affordable remote work opened up new possibilities for situations that previously seemed unsolvable. This type of office could be defined as a *new flexible office*. This type of office has all the elements of the above-mentioned approaches (see Table 3) and can respond quickly to the needs of employers and employees. The great benefit is that it combines online and on-site space, thus supporting a hybrid work model.

RQ3: *How will the work environment change in the near future?* Future office has the key in 3E – economic office with higher value for employers and employees; environmental office with focus on green and sustainable technology and an efficient office with a suitable and secure layout that can be flexibly changed as needed. Office layout is one that optimizes for safety, comfort, and functionality.

It is important to note that the reconstruction of the current office space is demanding and financially unprofitable, or completely impossible. In the next three years, according to the answers, a major reconstruction or change of office space will not take place in Slo-

vakia (65.7%) and Kuwait (48.8%). This is the main reason why employers chose a different path, as employers know that if the pandemic worsens, employers can move their activities completely online. In the most likely case, the office size will be expanded by 15% of their current capacity.

Almost 53% of employers in Slovakia responded that one of the options for attracting “old” office spaces would be to provide upgrades of employee’s hardware and equipment. Employers in Kuwait responded similarly (34.9%), they also will import some of the home comforts (planting, soft furnishing) and support a healthier lifestyle with a relaxing area, juice bar or small gym space.

In the case of the construction of new office space, flexible, sustainable and independent offices are the new standard. Modern office spaces will help to overcome possible further crises in the event of closure, because the office layout will be flexible enough. The number of open office spaces will be reduced. *Green Office* - things about the operation are not addressed because the provider of the space will take care of it with an emphasis on the green environment, independence and sustainability of the premises.

Our research brought findings and answers to our formulated hypotheses.

H₀: *The two qualitative variables are independent.* **H₁:** *The two qualitative variables are dependent, country (Slovakia, Kuwait) does affect answer.*

Based on final results showed in Table 4, we rejected Hypothesis H₀ for figures 2a, 2b and 4 - variables country and answer were statistically significant dependent. Hypothesis H₁ could be accepted in limited explanations. Especially for Figures 2a, 2b, the opinions on work option and office layout in Slovakia and Kuwait were different. For Figure 4, reactions to work possibility were inequalities in these countries too. On the basis of the Cramér's V and Pearson's correlation coefficients we found a medium dependence between the variables. Other potential dependency in all selected tables were rejected for small or trivial dependency.

Table 4. Office Space after Returning Employees

| Figure | Statistic χ^2 | Critical value χ^2_{α} | p - value | Cramer's V | Pearson's C |
|---------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| 2a | 6.58 | 3.84 | 0.01 | 0.285 | 0.274 |
| 2b | 10.25 | 5.99 | 0.006 | 0.356 | 0.335 |
| 4 | 20.70 | 9.49 | 0.0004 | 0.505 | 0.451 |
| 5 | 10.21 | 11.07 | 0.069 | - | - |
| 6 | 4.63 | 9.49 | 0.328 | - | - |
| Table 2 | 6.48 | 9.49 | 0.262 | - | - |

Conditions required for the chi-square test was met for all figures and table.

- (1) N observed counts are a random sample from the population of interest.
- (2) Sample size is large, with E (n_{ij}) at least 5 for every cell.

H₂: *Employers change their approach to office layout based on experience during a pandemic.* Approach was influenced by the situation, but definitely not changed. Some sectors did not change their philosophy as they depend on a physical office because of the clients and the services they offer. In the sectors of the government and public services, traditional office space – enclosed shared (office shared by 2-5 employees) was set for a long time before pandemic. The results are clear in this area, employers do not plan to change anything in the future in Slovakia or Kuwait. However, the good news is that the layout of the office has undergone changes, at least in the case of the open office, which is the least

suitable for the current situation and protection of employees. Several architectural studios are working on a new, ideal office layout. It will not take long and instead of using the handles, the door will open in front of you automatically or using a card. Upon arrival at work, the temperature will be measured automatically. All these elements will be the definition for *Flexible Office Space* - spaces that can be changed, adjusted, with a sufficient distance between individual worktables, separate zones and high-quality, clean divided air conditioning.

6. Conclusion

This section is not mandatory but may be added if there are patents resulting from the work reported in this manuscript.

What is the future of offices? It can be argued that, in principle, offices will not disappear so soon. Employers in this research claimed that it is a place where organizational culture is formed; it is a space for creating ideas and socialization of employees. However, the shift from defined office space to a new model and functionality is visible. Premises can be divided into smaller spaces or modified according to the needs of individual departments in organizations.

Some employers have found that it works for them from home, while others are looking for a compromise and reach for coworking spaces. In some organizations, when working from home, they may switch to monitoring activity on a computer using software. Compensation packages will be determined on a site basis. Employees will be able to choose their option, it will depend on the goals of the organization, and how they prepare their preferences. However, the number of job positions working remotely even after a pandemic will continue to depend on teamwork, contact with customers or even manual work in the workplace. By losing office space, we can lose the main aspects that add additional value to work - socialization and the feeling that work makes sense.

In the COVID-19 era, therefore, positives can also be found. Those elements of flexibility and flexible office space, which were inadmissible in the past, are now at least part of the benefits and employers offer them as part of increasing employee protection and comfort. Online meetings have been set up, online education has started and localization restrictions have disappeared. The term locality has lost its meaning because new technologies have opened up new possibilities at a global level. These possibilities will clearly not disappear in the future. In particular, employers that have used the benefits of flexible offices before, plan to keep it today and in the near future, or expand their layouts with telecommunications and online rooms.

From this point of view, we can summarize our findings as successful in terms of changing the approaches of employers towards office space. From short-term approaches, there were restrictions and adjustments of premises due to the established measures. According to employers, medium-term and long-term approaches are unsettled or still undecided. Only the time and the development of the situation will be the driving force for further changes than before.

6.1. Research Limitations and Research Directions

COVID-19 has affected all industries worldwide. The world began to recover from the initial shock during the spring of 2020. The online questionnaire was distributed in two countries during 2021, when many employers overcame the shock of the new situation and had new procedures in place. Time lag and other types of restrictions could have led to a more subjective perception of measures and changes in approaches to office space. Second limitation was an uneven sample of respondents in the field of gender, job titles, organizational size or sectors in Slovakia and in Kuwait. An important limitation is also the time shift. Opinions, attitudes and attitudes may change depending on the circumstances. What is relevant today tomorrow can only be an insignificant event in the context of events.

We encourage future researchers in this topic to compare specific sectors in different regions or countries and find common features, dependencies or differences in the attitudes of individual employers.

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