

REMOTE, HYBRID, AND IN-OFFICE WORK: MANAGERIAL DECISIONS AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES IN ARAD, ROMANIA DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper examines why multinational companies from Arad, Romania, scaled back remote and hybrid work models after COVID-19, by providing a dual perspective from employees and their managers and supervisors, on topics such as performance, collaboration and costs. This research fills a local evidence gap by focusing on decision-making in Arad multinationals, an area which was not previously documented. This study contributes to the post-crisis work design literature by showing that a systematic manager-employee perception gap regarding performance and collaboration can help explain the return-to-office decisions even when remote work is perceived to reduce costs.

To conduct this research, the quantitative approach was used to provide empirical results from a structured survey grounded in Contingency Theory and Kotler's Change Model. The survey was applied to employees and managers from 5 multinational companies headquartered or operating in Arad. The survey was sent to both regular employees and their direct managers or supervisors to capture matched organisational viewpoints. The survey received 343 valid responses, comprising 312 regular employees and 31 managers or supervisors. Responses were coded and analysed in IBM SPSS.

Employees report that working from home increased their performance and improved relationships with co-workers compared with in-office work. Managers report the opposite, indicating perceived performance and collaboration were better in the office. Both groups agree that remote or hybrid arrangements reduced company costs.

This study explains why 5 multinational companies in Arad reverted to in-office from remote or hybrid work models, despite perceived cost savings.

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JEL Classification

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way that organizations from all around the globe operated, by forcing them to adapt to the crisis and adopt new working models that are different from the classic in-office work. As a result, the remote and hybrid working models were used at a scale like never before. However, even though these working models were initially used as a last resort to allow companies to continue their activity during the pandemic, they rapidly became subject to multiple debates on productivity, collaboration, and organizational culture. These working arrangement allowed companies to protect their employees from the risk of disease during the pandemic, but the sustainability of these models was questioned once the pandemic restrictions were lifted. As a result, many multinational companies opted to revert their working models to in-office work or to limit hybrid arrangements for only a select few. These have sparked discussions about whether these decisions were driven by managerial necessity or misconceptions about performance outcomes.

This research gap is relevant in transitional economies, such as Romania, where multinational companies are operating within distinct institutional and labor-market conditions (Cumpat et al., 2024). Arad is strategically positioned near Romania's border with Hungary, a major cross-border mobility corridor within the EU's Schengen area. This study addresses the gap by examining five multinational companies that are operating in Arad through a dual-perspective research design.

Even though prior research has explored remote and hybrid work at a global scale, focusing on employees well-being, cost efficiency and organizational resilience (Petitta and Ghezzi, 2025), (Aminuddin et al., 2025), there is limited evidence on the mechanisms behind return-to-office decisions in multinational subsidiaries, particularly the role of manager-employee perception gaps regarding performance and collaboration. This study has two objectives. The first objective is to compare the employees and managerial evaluations of remote and hybrid work outcomes. The second objective is to clarify which perceived outcomes are most salient in decisions to restrict or reverse these arrangements entirely. This study is based on the Contingency Theory (Kotler and Keller, 2016) and Kotler's eight-step change model. The Contingency Theory explains how managerial decisions are shaped by situational factors and the fit between organizational practices and environmental conditions, especially in crisis contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Kotler's model shows how change is structured, communicated and institutionalized. The dual perspective, that of the employees and of their managers, support an analysis of how contextual pressures and change-management considerations influenced the transition away from remote and hybrid work models after the pandemic was over. By focusing on the multinational companies

that are operating in Arad, Romania, this research contributes original empirical evidence to debates on post-pandemic work arrangements and, more broadly, it advances the understanding of the return-to-office decisions by highlighting the implications of managers-employees perceptual divergence regarding their performance and collaboration.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Hybrid & Remote Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges for many company managers from all around the world. One of these changes is the work model, which needed to adapt to the obstacles imposed by the restrictions during this crisis. It was a common occurrence for companies to change their work model from in-office work to fully remote work or hybrid work models. However, once the pandemic was over, an intense debate was sparked around whether the companies should continue using these models or return to the work models used prior to this crisis. The debate brought arguments related to the well-being of employees and organizational performance that was influenced by these work models. Petitta and Ghezzi (2025) argued that organizational belongingness served as a buffer against stressors such as work-family conflict, which supported both productivity and mental health. Similarly, Kesenheimer et al. (2025) showed that remote work fulfilled psychological needs for autonomy and competence, enhancing well-being, though it diminished relatedness. The research of Toscano et al. (2025) shows that working from home helped employees improve their concentration and engagement, improving performance, while social isolation emerged as a challenge. Aminuddin et al. (2025) emphasized the role of self-efficacy and telework motivation in driving job performance among academics, underscoring the need for supportive environments.

The Managerial Decision-Making During Times of Crisis

There is research that shows how managerial decisions that were taken during difficult times of crisis were shaped by complex internal and external factors and dynamics. The research of Cumpat et al. (2024) has examined Romanian hospitals and concluded that the decision-making process was influenced by the following factors: legislative, political and ethical consideration, with evidence-based and consultative approaches proving most effective. The research of Kanzola et al. (2024) further expanded the perspective on this topic, by incorporating emotions into decision-making, arguing that emotional culture interacts with rational planning to shape outcomes. The research conducted by Permatasari and Mahyuni (2022) was focused on a hotel in Bali and showed how contingency planning, leadership styles, and organizational culture influenced crisis management success. According to these insights, managerial decision-making cannot be reduced to purely rational processes, they must be understood as embedded in context and culture.

Adaptability and Organizational Resilience in times of crisis

Resilience is one of the most important and crucial topics that is studied when observing the organizational response to a crisis. Su and Junge (2023) conceptualized resilience as a multilevel process influenced by the severity of adverse events and contextual antecedents. The research of Liang and Li (2024) shows that there is a link between resilience and the growth of the organization, but it is influenced by strategic change and managerial myopia. The work of Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) framed resilience through enabling leadership, where adaptive spaces allowed innovations to interact with operational systems. Meanwhile, the work of Ancillo et al. (2023) described the “next normal”, where organizations redesigned workplaces and policies around flexibility and health security, thus showing resilience through structural change. These studies portray resilience as a context-dependent dynamic factor, which is also context dependent and fundamental for the survival of an organization.

Multinational Companies in the context of Transitional Economies

The role of multinational companies (MNCs) that operate in Central and Eastern Europe has been studied from both an economic and cultural perspective. Therefore, the research of Blajut (2015) analyzed investment patterns, showing that MNCs were drawn to the region by favorable tax regimes and skilled labor. The research of Brancu and Bibu (2014) assessed their impact on Romania’s labor market, finding that MNCs contributed to job creation during economic restructuring. The work of Nita (2013) explored organizational culture within Romanian MNCs, noting distinct leadership styles and climates compared to domestic firms. The findings of these researchers point out that there is a dual role of MNCs, having economic factors and cultural influences, and reshaping the host country’s employment landscape.

The Theoretical Application of the Contingency Theory and Kotler’s Change Model

The organizational response to a crisis has been impacted by different management theories. The Contingency theory has been used to account for relationship management and conflict. The research of Cheng and Fisk (2022) argued that organization public relationships in crises are shaped by predisposing, situational, and contextual factors, while the research of Christen and Lovaas (2022) suggested a dual-continuum model to better capture organizational stances. In parallel, Kotter’s Change Model has been applied across multiple sectors. The work of Hu et al. (2025) proves its effectiveness in improving compliance behaviors in healthcare, while the research of Davis (2022) and Fernandes et al. (2021) applied it to libraries and higher education, respectively. All of these studies show how structured frameworks like Kotter’s model can complement contingency-based flexibility, providing balance between order and adaptation.

The role of Employees in shaping the organizational change

The literature review also shows that there is an active role of the employees of an organization that ultimately shapes the organizational change. The research conducted by González et al. (2022) reviewed sources of resistance to change, arguing that resistance can be negative, positive, or neutral, and may contribute to learning. The research of Koch and Fortkord (2024) highlighted the role of opinion leaders in

organizational change, showing how their networks and expertise can accelerate or hinder transformation. The work of Ribas et al. (2025) added nuance by examining how job insecurity and work passion shaped employees' ability to balance work and family demands across different work arrangements. Therefore, according to these research papers, it results that employees are not passive recipients of managerial decisions, but active participants in shaping the outcome.

2. Research methodology

In order to research why multinational companies abandoned the remote and hybrid work models, certain elements were used to elaborate the design of the survey, selection of the company and respondents and data collection procedure.

Design of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire used to conduct this research had its questions designed in accordance with prior research to ensure relevance and validity. The research conducted by Szentesi et al. (2021) was the main influence on this framework for formulating the survey items, particularly in relation to digital transformation and the challenges encountered by Romanian companies. This specific framework was crucial in shaping the questions about technological adaptation in crisis management. The theoretical foundation offered by Kotler and Keller (2016) helped shape the questions regarding management strategies and decision-making practices. As a result, a 24 questions survey was elaborated, covering the demographics of its respondents, perceptions of remote, hybrid and in-office work and managerial strategies applied during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Company Selection

The target audience of this study was multinational companies with a headquarter in Arad, Romania. During the selection process, the authors of this study conducted direct discussions with official representatives of multinational companies in this region. Out of those approached, five companies agreed to participate in the research, with the condition that the respondents of the survey would be protected by anonymity. Fortunately, the advantage of conducting quantitative research is exactly this. The authors of this study personally contacted these organizations, facilitated by residence in Arad, and they allowed in-person engagement, which established trust between the authors and company representatives.

Survey Distribution and Response Collection

In order to capture the dual perspective, two versions of the questionnaire were developed using Google Forms. The first version was designed for regular employees, and the other for their direct supervisors and managers. Both versions contained the same questions. The company representatives then distributed the survey internally to their staff and supervisors. The instrument included control "trick" questions to ensure that responses came from the intended target groups. All responses were collected anonymously to encourage candidates to respond as honestly as possible, without the

fear of consequences from the company. This also helped to reduce social desirability bias.

Response Rate

The survey was distributed to 415 employees, 43 supervisors and managers. Out of these, 312 employees, 31 supervisors and managers completed the survey. In total, a number of 343 valid answers were collected for analysis.

Period of investigation

The survey was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, employees were invited to participate between August 25, 2025 and August 28, 2025. Their supervisors and managers were invited to participate in the second stage, from August 29, 2025, until September 7, 2025. This staggered distribution ensured clarity in response collections and reduced the risk of overlap or misattribution between the two respondent categories.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

The data was initially collected using Google Forms. Afterwards, the data was manually transferred into IBM SPSS for cleaning and analysis. The cleaning process involved checking for incomplete responses, verifying demographics, and excluding any responses that failed the control questions. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were initially generated using the built-in Google Forms graphics to provide immediate insights. These results were then complemented by more detailed statistics analysis in SPSS, where responses were coded, categorized and prepared for comparative analysis between employees and their supervisors and managers. To align the analytical strategy with the study objectives, the survey data was analyzed primarily through descriptive statistics and cross-group comparisons between employees and managers/supervisors. The interpretation was focused on the practical meaning of the differences in light of the study's theoretical framing rather than on statistical significance alone. Even though the empirical setting is local, the questionnaire was constructed around a construct widely used in the international literature, which supports analytical generalization: the findings are transferable to comparable multinational subsidiary contexts where managerial control, coordination and performance evaluation are contested after the crisis-driven flexibility.

Respondent Profile

All respondents were employees of multinational companies located in Arad, Romania, and all of their responses reflect experience within the Arad headquarters of these companies. Demographic information was collected regarding age group, years of experience in the company and organizational role (employee or supervisor or manager), ensuring a robust profile for interpreting the results.

3. Results and Discussions

The results of this study were processed using IBM SPSS. However, there are many details that should not be overlooked from the perspective of descriptive statistics. At

first glance, there is a high divergence between employees and their managers regarding the impact of remote and hybrid work on performance.

From the 312 employees that answered the survey, 52.6% perceived a slight improvement in performance and 45.2% reported that remote and hybrid work significantly improved their overall performance (Figure no. 1). However, Their managers and supervisors have a completely different opinion about this. Based on the answers received from 31 of the direct supervisors and managers of these employees (Figure no. 2), 64.5% believe that the performance of the employees significantly decreased, and 25.8% reported a slight decrease. This enormous discrepancy between the perception of employees and their direct supervisors and managers shows a perception gap between staff, who viewed remote and hybrid work as an enhancer to productivity and collaboration, while managers are skeptical about its benefits.

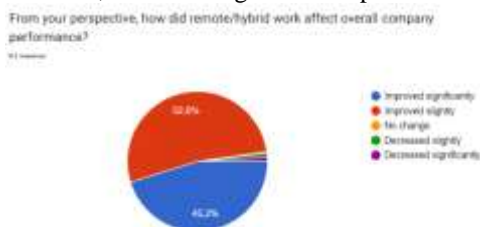


Figure no. 1: Descriptive statistics - Employee's answer.

Source: Author's research

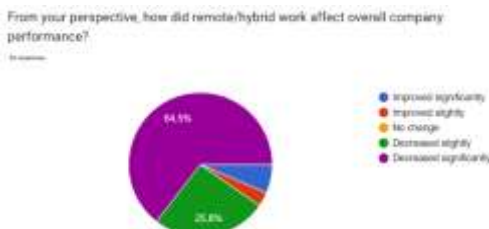


Figure no. 2: Descriptive statistics - Supervisors and Managers answer.

Source: Author's research

Even though the two groups did not agree on the level of performance, they both agreed that remote and hybrid work reduced operational costs for the company (Figure no. 3), (Figure no. 4), but with different intensities. Employees overwhelmingly affirmed this benefit, with 45.5% indicating significant cost reduction and 52.2% indicated reductions "to some extent" (Figure no. 3). On the other hand, their supervisors and managers provided a more conservative assessment, with 71% considering that cost were only partially reduced, and only 22.6% believing that costs were significantly reduced (Figure no. 4).

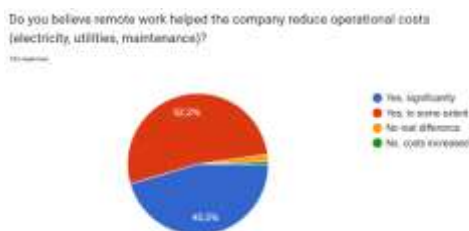


Figure no. 3: Descriptive statistics - Employee's answer.

Source: Author's research

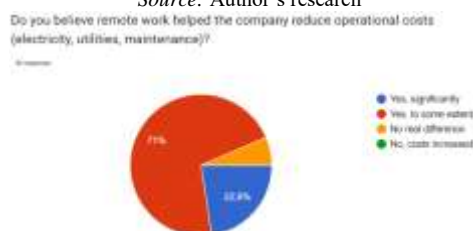


Figure no. 4: Descriptive statistics - Supervisors and Managers answer.

Source: Author's research

When analyzing the data using IBM SPSS (Table no. 1), using chi-square tests, further conclusions were developed.

Nr.	Relationship (hypothesis)	Chi- square	Phi	Cramer V	p-Power of the test	A/R
1	Remote Work - Performance evolution	6,174	0,446	0,446	0,103	
2	Remote Work - General performance	6,174	0,446	0,446	0,103	
3	Remote Work - Collaboration impact	6,174	0,446	0,446	0,103	
4	Age - Preferred model	12,294	0,630	0,445	0,056	
5	Remote Work - Reduce costs	1,314	0,206	0,206	0,518	
6	Age - If the decision was good	7,989	0,508	0,359	0,239	
7	General performance - Reasons to reduce RW	19,660	0,796	0,460	0,020	
8	Performance evolution - Cosolidate RW	3,171	0,320	0,320	0,366	
9	Decision adaptation - Performance evolution	29,137	0,960	0,686	0,000	

Table no. 1 Data analysis using the Chi-square test

Source: Author's research

1. Remote Work – Performance / General Performance / Collaboration (rows 1–3)

$\chi^2 = 6.174$, Phi and Cramer V = 0.446, $p = 0.103$

There is a moderate association (0.44) between remote work and performance/collaboration, but the result is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The relationship exists at a descriptive level, but we cannot say with certainty that it is real.

2. Age – Preferred model (row 4)

$\chi^2 = 12.294$, Phi = 0.630, Cramer V = 0.445, $p = 0.056$

Moderate–strong association between age and preferred work model.

The result is very close to statistical significance ($p \approx 0.05$), so age probably influences preferences, but we do not have firm evidence.

3. Remote Work – Reduce costs (row 5)

$\chi^2 = 1.314$, Phi/Cramer V = 0.206, $p = 0.518$

Very weak and not significant association. Cost reduction does not seem to be related to online work in our sample.

4. Age – Decision was good (row 6)

$\chi^2 = 7.989$, Phi = 0.508, Cramer V = 0.359, $p = 0.239$

Moderate but statistically insignificant association.

5. General performance – Reasons to reduce RW (row 7)

$\chi^2 = 19.660$, Phi = 0.796, Cramer V = 0.460, $p = 0.020$

Strong and statistically significant association ($p < 0.05$). General performance is clearly related to the reasons for reducing online work.

6. Performance evolution – Consolidated RW (row 8)

$\chi^2 = 3.171$, Phi/Cramer V = 0.320, $p = 0.366$

Weak and insignificant association.

7. Decision adaptation – Performance evolution (row 9)

$\chi^2 = 29.137$, Phi = 0.960, Cramer V = 0.686, $p = 0.000$

Extremely strong and very statistically significant association.

Decision adaptation is closely related to performance evolution.

Most important relationships:

Decision adaptation – Performance evolution (very strong, significant).

General performance – Reasons to reduce RW (strong, significant).

Potential but insignificant relationships: Age – Preferred model ($p = 0.056$, almost significant).

The rest of the relationships: either moderate but insignificant (e.g. Remote work – performance), or very weak and irrelevant (e.g. Remote work – reduce costs).

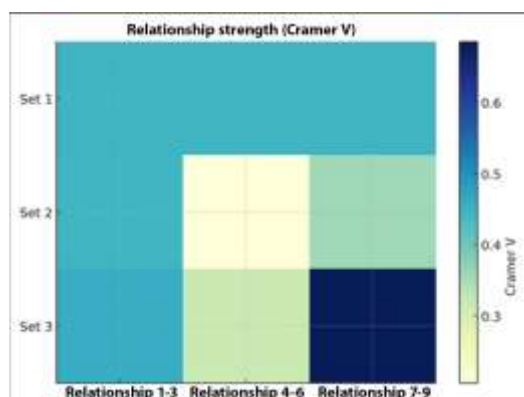


Figure no. 5: A heatmap showing the strength of relationships based on the Cramer V coefficient.

Source: Author's research

The darker color means a stronger relationship. It is clear that "Decision adaptation – Performance evolution" and "General performance – Reasons to reduce RW" stand out as the strongest (Fig. 5).

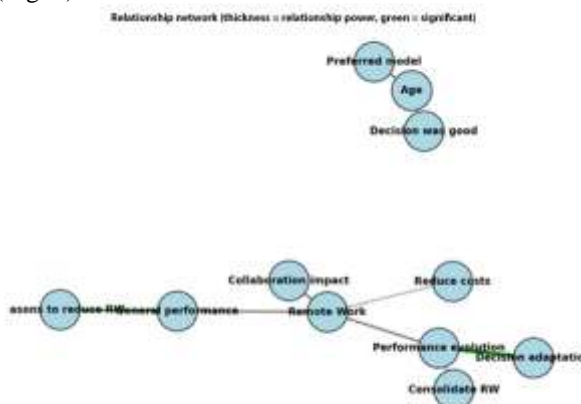


Figure no. 6: Network graph of relationships.

Source: Author's research

The nodes represent the concepts (Remote Work, Performance, Age, etc.). (Fig. 6). Thickness of the links = intensity of the relationship (Cramer V). Green color = statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$). It can be seen that "Decision adaptation – Performance evolution" and "General performance – Reasons to reduce RW" are the strongest and most significant connections. The following conclusions can be drawn Remote Work – Performance & Collaboration. The relationships between remote work and performance or collaboration are moderate, but not statistically strong enough. Message: people perceive a certain connection between remote work and performance, but there is no clear and consistent evidence. Age – Preferred Model & Decision Evaluation. Age visibly influences the preferred work model and decision evaluation,

but not with sufficient statistical power. Younger and older people tend to have different perspectives, but we cannot generalize with certainty.

General Performance – Reasons to Reduce Remote Work. Here we see a clear and significant link: overall performance is directly correlated with the reasons why organizations reduce online work. In practice: when performance is perceived as decreasing, stronger justifications for reducing remote work appear.

Decision Adaptation – Performance Evolution. The strongest relationship in the entire network. It shows that the adaptation of organizational decisions is closely linked to the evolution of performance. Essentially, organizations that know how to adapt to the decisions made (regardless of the work model) are the ones that also see their performance evolving positively.

The network shows that the perception of online (remote) work is complex and not always statistically significant, but two central cores stand out: Overall performance dictates the justifications for reducing online work; The ability to adapt to decisions is the main driver of performance evolution.

In other words, it is not a simple choice of work model (remote or not) that matters most, but the way in which the organization adapts its decisions and manages performance.

Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that employees and managers hold a fundamental different perception of remote and hybrid work. While employees reported that while working remotely or hybrid, they experienced increased personal productivity and better collaboration with their peers, their supervisors and managers reported that these arrangements were detrimental to the company's performance. Despite agreement on cost reductions, this factor alone was insufficient to convince managers to sustain remote and hybrid work models. The dual perspective highlights the tension between operational efficiency and managerial control. While employees valued autonomy, managers placed greater importance on oversight and collaboration. This study shows that adaptability in decision-making is more critical than the choice of work model itself. Companies capable of adjusting strategies in response to evolving contexts maintained stronger performance. This finding aligns with Contingency Theory, which emphasizes situational decision-making, and with Kotter's Change Model, which underlines the role of structured adaptation processes.

Further research using the qualitative method could shed more light on the reasons why managers believe that performance has decreased while using remote and hybrid work models, even though employees reported otherwise.

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