

The Digitalization of Personnel Recruiting in Romania During the COVID-19 pandemic

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Дигитализацията на набирането на персонал в Румъния по време на пандемията от COVID-19

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Abstract

The existing literature argued that online recruitment is the future, assessing that online interviews will be appreciated by both recruiters and candidates. The central aim of the paper is to analyze the changes made possible by the COVID-19 pandemic in the recruitment process. The research method used in this article was the individual interviews made on a sample of six former candidates for a job who made an online interview in the last year and four recruiters from Human Resources companies. Three research hypotheses were tested in the research project and only two were confirmed by the data. The results showed that candidates who apply for certain positions prefer that the recruitment interviews be conducted via the Internet because they consider that as an easily accessible means. On the other hand, the results stressed the fact that recruiters declared that they prefer to make face-to-face interviews, the argument for this option being that offline interviews allowed them to create a connection with the candidates and enabled them to analyze the non-verbal behaviors of the candidates. As regards the future of recruiting this is uncertain now and only the passing of time could tell us if the digitalization will succeed or not.

Keywords: recruitment, COVID-19 pandemic, future online interviews, Romania, digitalization

Резюме

В съществуващата литература се твърди, че онлайн набирането на персонал е бъдещето, че онлайн интервютата ще бъдат оценени както от набиращите персонал, така и от кандидатите. Основната цел на статията е да анализира промените, станали възможни от пандемията COVID-19 в процеса на набиране на персонал. Изследователският метод, използван в тази статия са индивидуални интервюта, направени с извадка от шестима бивши кандидати за работа, които са участвали в онлайн интервю през последната година, и четирима рекрутери от компании за човешки ресурси. Три изследователски хипотези са тествани в изследователския проект от които две бяха потвърдени от данните. Резултатите показват, че кандидатите, които кандидатстват за определени позиции, предпочитат интервютата за наемане на персонал да се провеждат през интернет, тъй като смятат, че интернет е лесно достъпно средство. От друга страна, резултатите подчертават факта, че специалистите по подбор на персонал декларират, че предпочитат да провеждат интервюта лице в лице, като аргументът за тази опция е, че офлайн интервютата им позволяват да създадат връзка с кандидатите и да анализират невербалното поведение

на кандидатите. Що се отнася до бъдещето на набирането на персонал, то сега е несигурно и само изминаващото време може да каже дали цифровизацията ще успее или не.

Ключови думи: рекрутиране, пандемия от COVID-19, бъдещи онлайн интервюта, Румъния, дигитализация

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The Digitalization of Personnel Recruiting in Romania During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes worldwide, mainly in the way we have worked (Fraij, 2021). Although digitization has become more important in our daily lives, some authors (Gupta et al., 2023) agreed that it could not replace face-to-face interaction and communication. In the domain of workers' recruitment, a new approach had been developed and it was centered on the idea of replacing the rush for talent in the labor market by training talent on the job (Kwon & Jang, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic made the direction in Human Resources much more accessible and profitable by stressing the fact that the future of companies and businesses is a digital one, and only those companies who prepare intensively for this stage will be successful (Saarikko, Westergren & Blomquist, 2020).

After the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit both Romania and the whole world, the classic office workplace has turned to telecommuting, so that employees are as safe as possible (Barath & Schmidt, 2022). Also, after the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies choose to make recruitment strictly online, arguing that it represents a plus for both employers and future employees, and invoking the fact that this process takes place in a much easier and safer environment (Burrell et al., 2021; Barath, & Schmidt, 2022).

One way of digitalization in the human resources domain was the introduction of telework. As the existing literature had stressed (Kazekami, 2020) telework productivity is not affected, on the contrary, it even increased because people no longer had impediments such as lateness and loss of concentration. In addition, by using telework, workers could combine work from the office with work at home, thus having time to carry them out and finish all (Šmite et al., 2023). In addition, as Baruch stressed, “teleworking can lead to an increase in worker productivity and a reduction in absenteeism” (Baruch, 2001).

In Romania, the first legal telework regulations appeared only in 2018, according to Law No. 81 of March 30, 2018 (Parlamentul României, 2018). Telework was defined as a “form of work organization through which the employee, on a regular and voluntary basis, fulfills the duties specific to the position, occupation or trade he holds, in a place other than the place of work organized by the employer, at least one day per month, using information and communication technology” (Parlamentul României, 2018).

According to data from the World Labor Organization Observatory, young people are more affected by the COVID-19 crisis and have suffered consequences in several ways, such as education or professional training being interrupted due to unemployment, not all students

benefit from online education, being indirectly “forced” to drop out of school (GiGrup, 2020). And of course, therefore, earning and looking for a job is much more difficult (GiGrup, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to sudden changes in the labor market, and the consequences were felt by the employees and candidates for a job. A common explanation offered for this state of fact was that (Abrihan, 2021):

The pandemic has greatly changed the entire recruitment process, employers continued to be active in contacting candidates, and in 2020 the total volume of direct contacts from the BestJobs platform increased by 19% compared to 2019. At the same time, the interest of employees in looking for a new job or, at least, in evaluating the offers of employers has increased (p.19).

The central aim of the paper is:

CA: To analyze the changes made possible by the COVID-19 pandemic on the recruitment process. As secondary aims of the research we have:

SA1. To identify how recruitment was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SA2. To determine if the recruitment process was easier online than face-to-face during the COVID-19 pandemic and after it.

SA3. To identify the barriers faced by the recruiters in the online recruitment process.

Method and materials

The present paper tried to offer answers to three research questions:

RQ1. Was the COVID-19 pandemic the main factor in the shift from face-to-face to online recruitment?

RQ2. What changes has the COVID-19 pandemic induced in recruitment?

RQ3. What does the future of recruiting look like?

Three hypotheses were considered for this research designed in such a way that made them testable and plausible. Thus, directly derived from the research questions, we had the following working hypotheses:

H1. The more digitized recruitment is, the simpler and easier the process is for candidates and recruiters.

The independent variable is “more digitized recruitment”– and the dependent variable is “simpler and easier recruitment”.

Thus we started from the assumption that the digitization of recruitment is an easy and simple process following the pandemic that has changed both our lifestyle and the work we do.

H2. If the pandemic had not started, the digitization of recruitment would not have happened so quickly.

The independent variable is “the start of the pandemic” – and the dependent variable is “the high speed of digitization of recruitment”.

In this second hypothesis, reference is made to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most important factor that led to the acceleration of the emergence of the recruitment process carried out in the online environment. If the pandemic had not occurred, digitization would most likely have been recognized later.

H3. If recruitment interviews are made online, then recruiters and candidates will be much more relaxed.

The independent variable was “online interviews” and the dependent variable was “both the recruiters and the candidates will be more relaxed”.

In the case of the third hypothesis, the focus was on the case that, because an online interview has fewer questions and, as such it is a recruitment tool that puts the stress on the things the employer wants, a situation that leads to a higher employment rate.

The research project used a qualitative framework. More precisely, the research method was the individual interview. The interviews were made online, just like the recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were conducted online with respondents living in Romania. Individuals who received the interview in electronic format were subsequently asked if they worked in human resources, on recruitment, or if they had participated in at least one online interview in the past year. The sample size was 10 people, of which four were recruiters and six were people who had at least one online job interview during this period. As regards the internal structure of the sample this was the following: the majority of respondents were from Bucharest (eight out of ten respondents).

The instrument for collecting the data was an interview grid with 21 questions, from which 11 were for the recruiters and the rest (10) for the people who took part in the online interviews. The average duration of an interview was one hour and twenty minutes.

Results and discussion

The results showed that both the people who took part in at least one online interview for a job and people from the human resources departments expressed their hope for a return to normality, namely recruiting and conducting face-to-face interviews.

The pandemic period was assessed as a very difficult one for people who were looking for a job, especially for young people who had to wait even several months to find a vacant position or until they could get an interview:

“It affected me quite a bit for a long time. After finishing college I tried for 8 months to find a job. Everyone wanted experience, but no one was giving you the chance.”
(C3)

In addition, another obstacle those young people had to face was a lack of experience:

“In my situation, it was even more complicated because I had no experience and therefore the people who were hiring wanted people who knew what they had to do, not to collude with those like me, who had to be taken from zero”. (C2)

These factors have led to discouragement among young people, who hoped that after graduating from tertiary education they would be able to find a job easily, to put into practice the things they learned and acquired during their academic years, but apparently, this is so easy to achieve.

Moving from face-to-face to online interviews in the recruitment process

As regards the transition from face-to-face interviews to online ones in the recruitment process, the respondents said that it was quite sudden. In addition, for the recruiters, it was very difficult and they did not express their preference for it:

“I prefer the interview to take place face-to-face. Thus, the connection between the interviewer and the interviewee can be strengthened, the non-verbal language takes precedence and the candidate`s openness or shyness can be observed more quickly.”
(R2)

The recruiters declared that they prefer to analyze every gesture of the candidates, and every aspect of non-verbal communication, and this is easier to do in the case of face-to-face interviews. The reason for this preference, as they pointed out, is the fact that based on those factors they can make the best decision when it comes to employing the person for the available position.

This situation is obvious in the case of one recruiter who claimed that he prefers to see every gesture, feature, and even the facial expression of the interviewee so that he can tell if the person is suitable or not for the position:

“I really like interacting with people, seeing their features, the way I speak, mime. I find a face-to-face interview to be more enjoyable and encouraging, and in this case when I see that the person has emotions or is having a hard time finding words I like to help them get over that hop.” (R1)

As he concluded, those elements of non-verbal communication helped him in reaching the final decision, that is, whether the interviewee was suitable for the job or not.

The results for the candidates, that is, the people who take part in the interview, showed that they prefer to do the interview online. The central argument for that is the fact that online interviews were much easier and more comfortable for them, bringing them more advantages:

“To be honest, I prefer to be online. Car traffic is my enemy. I feel like I’m wasting too much time trying to get to the interviewer’s proposed schedule, plus the time to get to that address. It happened to me several times that I even lost an hour trying to reach the employer’s address. The GPS didn’t show the exact location and I had to walk through the same places several times to figure out where I needed to go.” (C1)

The responses from the candidates who made online interviews for a job showed that, in their opinion, this form of interview helps them save more time and energy. In addition, as those respondents have declared online interviews for a job helped them to avoid anxiety and agitation that could be an impediment or a disadvantage in the case of face-to-face interviews. The respondents assessed that in the case of online interviews, it was much easier for them to control their emotions, due to the fact that the environment (their home) was familiar and welcoming.

Problems that could be encountered during online interviews were also pointed out by respondents included in the study. Among the problems listed were: poor internet connection, issues related to the connection at the video platforms where the actual interviews had to be held, the negligence of the people who had to be interviewed, some of them not attending the interview when it was scheduled:

“Most impediments are related to the internet connection, being easily influenced by the weather. Many candidates don’t have access to better technology, so sound or camera problems may represent other barriers to online interviews. In addition, most of the time people did not show up for the online interviews. They changed their mind at the last moment, and, as such, it was a waste of time.” (R3)

The respondent, who was recruited, also added that she wished that the interviews were made face-to-face because in this situation such problems could be avoided.

Some recruiters said that even though they are accustomed to online interviews they experienced problems, even if they had previously chosen a top internet provider or had access to professional websites:

“My internet works quite well and if there were other problems, it was something minor, generally the cause was from the applications. I’ve always looked for a supplier with pretty good reviews so I don’t have to worry only about that.” (R2)

As regards the candidates, they declared that even if there were small problems, those were due to the specific applications of video calls, and they tried to solve them in due time to be able to hold the respective interviews. Among the problems mentioned by the candidates were also the lack of signal or the interruption of the connection during the interviews due to the Internet providers.

The influence of the pandemic on the recruitment process

Our results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has been assessed by our respondents as affecting everyone, both professionally and personally. As the candidates for a job had declared, from a professional point of view, they were the most affected by the pandemic:

“It was very difficult for me to find a job. I had barely graduated from college and now I had to `go out into the world` but there were impediments at every step because the pandemic represented an impediment in finding a job. If even before its appearance there were short periods when it was quite difficult to find jobs or the requirements for that job were much too high, this pandemic has made the situation even more difficult so that finding a job has become an objective increasingly difficult to achieve.” (C4)

On the other hand, for recruiters, the biggest impediment was the interviews taken via the internet

“The interaction and physical proximity to the candidate has disappeared. It is much more difficult to analyze the non-verbal behavior of a possible candidate if the interview is not conducted face to face.” (R2)

From the perspective of recruiters, the lack of face-to-face interaction can lead to misjudgments about the candidates. One direct consequence of this problem in the recruitment process was the fact that after the interview, when the candidate is employed she or he might not be the best fit for the job, and the managers would blame directly the recruiter for this situation. This situation was noticed by a recruiter who argued that:

“The pandemic has affected everyone when it comes to the professional plan, and that’s because most companies were caught by surprise by this and had to adapt to the new `rules` and changes in a relatively short time. In our company, all employees worked physically, but the onset of the pandemic and the establishment of the state of emergency `forced` us to change things a little, so that all employees switched from physical work to online work and along the way to hybrid work.” (R1)

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional office work has turned either into telework or, in some cases, the work has become hybrid. Our respondents declared that this situation has led to changes within companies or firms, the most important being the rapid pace of digitization. Those changes were assessed as being sudden and difficult to understand not only by the current employees but also by the recruiters who had to do their work in a rather new environment, a digital one.

In addition to the professional activities, the personal life of the candidates was also affected, the main characteristic of the period being the lack of socialization and the development of anxiety:

“Socialization had reached a zero point, where I didn’t feel like talking to anyone anymore and I wasted almost all the time watching TV series and movies. Physically I was always tired”. (C6)

On the other hand, the candidates for a job included in our sample also assessed that the COVID-19 pandemic was a period that helped them a lot to get closer to their families.

When the respondents discussed digitization they considered it a good thing and expressed appreciation about it. When she asked the question "Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has helped the digitization of recruitment?" one recruiter told us that:

“This pandemic helped a lot the digitization of the appeal and because the interviews could no longer be done face to face, people could no longer work physically, and that because there was the risk of even more people getting sick, which would have affected both the companies and the employees themselves, and the medical system would have been brought to the ground.” (R3)

The recruiters who were interviewed expressed their opinion that digitalization has opened new channels for recruitment, and helped during the pandemic, because the interviews were made online, and the employees had not worked in the office before.

Online recruitment and its future

When it comes to discussing online recruitment, candidates who have taken part in at least one online interview consider that to be much easier. As one respondent had declared during the interview:

“It was easier because you get in front of a computer and the interview can start. No more wasting time in traffic to get to the location sent by the interviewer. Even for the recruiter, it saves a lot of time because he no longer waits for candidates who are late. I find it much more organized that way.” (C6)

One of the interviewees claimed that “many people are shy, they have physical tics in a state of stress. Thus, these things can be hidden much easier in the case of an online interview.” (C4). As he continued his argument, shy people could easily hide not only certain involuntary tics during online interviews but also the state of stress or anxiety and emotions that inevitably arise could be diminished or even be completely in an online recruiting interview.

Even recruiters said that online recruitment was much easier because it made possible with certain facilities for both sides as a result of digitization. One of the recruiters declared:

“As much as I’m a fan of face-to-face interviews, I think online recruiting is much easier for both us and future employees. Interviews for example can be taken from anywhere, from home, from a more secluded or quiet place, stress is reduced and emotions diminished, costs are also reduced.” (R2)

When asked “What do you think the future of recruitment will be? Will it stay online, will it go back to how it was before (face-to-face) or will it be a hybrid form where the two will merge?” the recruiters’ response was almost unanimous that:

“It would be ideal to reach a hybrid form, to make it easier for future employees but also us, the recruiters. But there should also be a draw, and the employees who want to participate in face-to-face interviews to benefit from something extra or have an advantage, unlike those who want to participate in the interview in an online format.” (R4)

Our results indicated that the majority of the recruiters prefer to take interviews in a hybrid shape, even if they prefer to have also face-to-face interactions with candidates. More exactly, as they told us, they prefer the interviews to be face-to-face and the rest of the process to be completely digitalized.

When it comes to the recruitment process carried out online, one of the candidates who took part in such an interview also some interesting details. Thus, she assessed that:

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“From the perspective of both the pandemic and online interviews, I can say that the recruitment process has become easier and improved. An online interview allows the candidate to participate from another location, even from another county.” (C4)

The answers to the question "Do you think things will return to normal shortly?" showed not only the optimism of our respondents but also their reticence. Thus, one of the recruiters said that in her opinion the answer is “yes, because people feel the need for normalcy after these years of restrictions" and she quickly added that:

“I doubt that the world will return to that `normal`. I have seen a lot of people who want to work fully-remote from now on and they are asking their employers for this.” (R1)

At the end of the interview, the recruiters were asked to assess how they think the recruitment process should be improved during this period to be easier but also to have a higher yield, asking them to list three aspects/things that could lead to the fulfillment of this objective. One of the recruiters made a hierarchy of such elements;

“In my opinion three things are important. First, one can see a much more personal interaction between the recruiter and the candidate. Second, I can add flexibility for both parties. And thirdly, I can see easier access to the technology and the platforms on which the interview takes place.” (R3)

Other recruiters declared that they are content with the present stage of the recruitment process and do not feel the need for changes or improvements:

“At the moment I'm very happy with how online recruitment is going, I don't think anything should be improved, maybe just face-to-face interviews again, otherwise everything is going normally, and both we and the people interviewed are completely satisfied with this.” (R1)

Our results also showed that even if the candidates claim that they are overall satisfied with the recruitment process conducted online, there is still dissatisfaction related to the conduct of such interviews, the negative aspects being related to the access to the internet and lack of adequate abilities for some candidates.

Conclusions

The recruitment process is in continuous change and the pace of transformation has increased in the last years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021; Mikołajczyk, 2022; Li, Voorneveld & de Koster, 2022). As a result of increased digitization, more and more companies prefer online recruitment, but after the COVID-19

pandemic, a hybrid type of recruitment was considered more useful (Rachmanda, Reindrawati & Sos, 2022; Simmons et al., 2022; Sardo & Laggan, 2024).

The existing literature (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Hedenus, Backman & Håkansson, 2021) has argued that online recruitment is the future, assessing that online interviews will be appreciated by both recruiters and candidates (Fernandes et al., 2023). As our data showed, many candidates who apply for certain positions prefer that the recruitment interviews be conducted via the Internet, because they consider that as an easily accessible means. On the other hand, our results stressed the fact that recruiters declared that they prefer to make face-to-face interviews, the argument for this option being that offline interviews allowed them to create a connection with the candidates and enabled them to analyze the non-verbal behaviors of the candidates.

From the three hypotheses we have used in the research, only two are confirmed by our research, and the third could be confirmed for the entire sample of respondents.

The first hypothesis “The more digitized recruitment is, the simpler and easier the process is both for candidates and the recruiters” was confirmed by the majority of the interviewees, be they candidates or recruiters. Our results have shown that digitization has indeed opened new channels for personnel recruitment. For the candidates, the main arguments in favor of online interviews are based on saving time and energy. In the case of recruiters, the arguments for accepting the digitization of the recruitment process were directly related to the decrease in bureaucracy. As our respondents have stated, some of the documents could be signed digitally and then sent to the human resources department, and the rest could be signed at the company’s headquarters with a prior appointment.

Our project also confirmed the second hypothesis: “If the pandemic had not started, the digitization of recruitment would not have happened so quickly”. It was obvious that digitization was done quite suddenly, and it brought benefits to everyone involved in the process.

The third hypothesis “If recruitment interviews are made online, then both recruiters and candidates will be much more relaxed” could be confirmed in the case of the candidates but cannot be confirmed in the case of recruiters. Thus, the candidates who participated in online interviews for their jobs assessed that it was much easier to participate online, without being continuously stressed and avoiding such, anxiety and negative feelings. On the other

hand, recruiters were not very content with online interviews due to the lack of interaction and barriers in observing and assessing non-verbal communication.

Our research has pointed out the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought changes to recruitment, the most important ranging from digitization to work from home, and the shift from face-to-face discussions to online interviews. After these sudden changes, the recruitment interviews returned mostly to their original form of conduct, namely face-to-face. As regards the future of recruitment one can only imagine what it will look like shortly when there is a possibility that eventually, some robots will appear that will take over the duties of a recruiter, or even replace him or her completely. If this would be the case only the passing of time could tell us.

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