

Home office strategy in the automotive industry after the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT: The basis of this research paper is a literature search and a survey to evaluate work-related psychological stress during the corona pandemic, following the grounded theory model. The main part and aim of the article is a strategy for home office after the Corona crisis with the hypothesis: A hybrid model of presence and home office increases the efficiency for employees in the automotive industry. For this purpose, a home office survey was created to determine employee preferences, subjective effectiveness depending on the working environment, as well as possible measures to be taken by supervisors to support the employees. The result of this research paper shows an efficiency increase of 40% for office and 60% for home office in the automotive industry - the hypothesis is supported. A possible application of the results can be fluctuation retention measures, including remote office after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Automotive Industry, Corona crisis, COVID-19, home office

I. INTRODUCTION

Global automobile sales had already been declining before the Corona crisis and had fallen by four percent in 2017 [1]. That was the first minus in a long, long time, because even in the financial crisis ten years ago, thanks to China, global automobile sales had only stagnated. With this downward trend and the considerable effects of the COVID-19 crisis, a total of 1.4 million employees in the European automotive business are affected, as stated by [2], which is by far the most complete EU-wide statistical summary currently available, integrating all available data and sources for persons directly employed by automobile, truck, van, and bus makers.

With all the bad news, one could almost forget the Volkswagen diesel scandal, which had preceded the downward trend in the German car industry in 2015 (the software of the diesel vehicles was manipulated in such a way that better emission values were achieved on the test bench than in everyday life operation on the road). The current topic - climate change - also unsettles car buyers and the industry is reacting drastically in some cases. Climate change harbors more risks than opportunities for the auto industry. The return to the pre-crisis level will be extremely difficult for this industry sector and will require numerous adjustments.

Not only the sales of the large automobile groups are suffering from these multiple burdens, but the employees in this sector have also been working for two years in "crisis mode". Under these circumstances, the risk increases that top performers, key functions and talents will leave this business to take on new challenges in other areas. It is the job of executives - of good leadership - to keep these critical employees in the corporation. The economic psychological analysis of the corona crisis in the book "Psychology in Crisis Times" [3] represents research into how the crisis affects people's social environment. The authors describe one of the biggest changes in behavior in the crisis as "Working in the Crisis". The automotive industry is used to home office due to its global orientation and the employees had already been familiar with this working model. The quick switch to home office after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was also not a problem for the executives and as well as "management at a distance", even with a high proportion of employees at home, as well as in short-time work business could be mastered well - surprisingly well!

Based on the experience gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, an increased proportion of home offices proves to be positive. Even models with mobile office - the extension of the home office without being tied to the place of work "at home" and being able to work anywhere - proves to be an enrichment for employees as well as for the company in some areas. But what is ideal? At what proportion of home office do the employees perform most effectively? What do employees in the automotive industry say after just two years

of experience? Is it possible to generalize across employees / departments or is a combination of home office to presence different from department to department, different from employee to employee? What negative influencing factors are there in home office and where do employees see advantages? This paper is intended to deal with these and other questions.

The starting point of this research is, in addition to the literature research, a detailed analysis of work-related psychological stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey by the General Austrian Accident Insurance Fund (AUVA). On the basis of this data and the experience from the work style in the pandemic, a home office survey was created to determine employee preferences, subjective effectiveness depending on the work environment and possible measures taken by supervisors to support employees. The hypothesis of this publication is: A hybrid model of presence and remote office increases efficiency for employees in the automotive industry after the Corona crisis.

II. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYEES IN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Before going into detail regarding work-related psychological stress during the pandemic and possible improvement by a combination of office and home office, it is important to understand how the crisis influences the social environment of employees in the automotive industry.

In their book „Psychology in time of crisis” Erich Kirchler, Julia Pitters and Barbara Kastlunger [3] conducted research with an economic-psychological analysis of the Corona crisis, going into detail in which social areas humans are affected by in the crisis. This book was the basis for a publication of the author with the title “Leadership influence on employee’s behavior in the automotive industry in the Corona crisis” [4], where the hypothesis was supported, that there is a strong correlation between people’s behavior and leadership in the crisis. In the table below the summary of employee’s behavior in the crisis on the left side and the corresponding leadership with research reference to prove the correlation on the right side can be found.

Table 1: Influence of leadership on employee’s behavior in the Corona crisis

Employee’s behavior	Leadership research paper
Communication	de Vries, Bakker-Pieper and Oostenveld, 2009 [5] Ebner, 2020 [6] Harrison and Mühlberg, 2014 [7]
Social imagination and decision making	de Vries, Bakker-Pieper and Oostenveld, 2009 [5] Drucker, 1967 [8] Ebner, 2020 [6] Harrison and Mühlberg, 2014 [7] Kayode, Mojeed and Fatai, 2014 [9]
Social habits	Grant and Hoffman, 2011 [10] Kotter, 1997 [11]
Adaptation strategy	Blickhan, 2015 [12] Ebner, 2020 [6] Grant and Hoffman, 2011 [10] Kotter, 1997 [11]
Coping strategy	Blickhan, 2015 [12] Ebner, 2020 [6] Fook and Sidhu, 2010 [13]
Virtual work	Ebner, 2020 [6] Thomas, 2014 [14] Harrison and Mühlberg, 2014 [7]
Fairness	Blickhan, 2015 [12] Ebner, 2020 [6] Khaola and Oni, 2020 [15]

Source: authors research [4]

There are two important facts in the table, that are essential for this research work. First, there is a big impact on the area of work – changing from working only in the office to mainly home office due to the COVID-19 pandemic and strict government regulation, visible in the table below in employee’s behavior “virtual work”. Second, this behavior is connected to leadership, meaning that leaders are able to influence this behavior.

It is good to know that virtual work has a big impact on human behavior in the COVID-19 crisis, but only the scientifically proven connection between virtual work and leadership provides the leverage for possible improvements based on a home office strategy.

Several corporations were resistant to encouraging their employees to work from home but within a few days entire corporate offices in the automotive industry were closed and staff were sent home with laptops

and headsets. Home office, remote and smart working has become one of the pillars of work during the crisis. The automotive industry has been used to working in home office for years. Therefore the employees were already familiar with this working model as home office arrangements and regulations existed. Also the use of different software, developed for teams working on the same document from different locations all over the world like TEAMS, SharePoint or cloud-services are standard in the automotive industry as well as leading virtual teams all over the world has been a requirement for managers and leaders for years. It was absolutely no problem to switching to home office [4].

Following the leadership research paper in table 1 above, Thomas [14] describes long before COVID-19 in his book "The virtual catastrophe" how teams are led to performance over distance, with lots of examples and best practice. Thomas reduced the strategy to "the big four".

- Pens identity
- Fight isolation
- Bridging distances
- Be assertive even without the authority to issue directives

Looking at a virtual team, these four challenges are glaringly obvious once the specifics of such teams are considered. The team members are isolated from each other, act in disastrous isolation from each other and therefore do not develop the WE-feeling, which gives a team its special productivity. To make matters worse, with these three challenges they usually face a fourth: In many cases, project managers have no authority to issue directives [14].

In "Leadership and Communications", Bruce Harrison and Judith Mühlberg walk us through their experience, share insights and stories from fascinating leaders, and lay out a point of view that is rich, fresh – and thought – provoking. The quality of leadership in any organization – business, social, military, and government - is enhanced or limited by the quality of its leadership communication [7]. They point out already in the preface "Communicating to create communities" the importance of team spirit for leading across distance and support this with many examples.

Based on the PERMA model, developed from Martin Seligman's positive psychology, the book "Positive Leadership" [7] is the continuing development regarding how leaders can use this model.

Table 2. The PERMA model

P	E	R	M	A
Positive Emotions	Engagement	Relationship	Meaning	Accomplishment

Source: authors graph

In the chapter "R for relationship", Ebner characterizes how beneficial working relationships are designed and lists the relevant factors [7].

Knowing that relationship and communities are important for virtual collaboration in home office, the further question is: Which work-related factors can put a strain on that collaboration? A study was carried out to investigate this influence, with the background, implementation and evaluation in the following chapters.

III. WORK RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

The first paragraph The Austrian Federal Law on "Safety and Health Protection at Work" is the most important basic legal regulation for the technical and hygienic worker s' protection in Austria and came into force in January 1995, with a new amendment in January 2013 [16].

In this legal regulation, the employer's obligation to evaluate work-related psychological stress is expressly emphasized, as a special measure for screen work has always been required. The benefits of this legal requirement are obvious:

- Inclusion of people in the hitherto technology-heavy worker s' protection
- Economic success
- Optimizing the organization of work
- Stronger employee loyalty to the company
- Less downtime and retention of ability to work
- Improvement of the working atmosphere

The evaluation is a unit of assessing work-related psychological stress, determining and implementing measures (the involvement of employees is recommended), documenting (safety and health protection documents) and checking and updating the effectiveness.

The assessment of work-related psychological stress only deals with the conditions or circumstances under which work takes place. It is not about measuring job satisfaction, burn-out, performance, stress or the like for individual employees, but about specific influencing factors from the following dimensions [17]:

- Work environment (e.g. noise, climatic conditions, lighting and exposure, work equipment and materials, software, etc.)
- Work task and activities (e.g. emotional stress from dealing with difficult customers, high level of responsibility, constant attention during monitoring activities, etc.)
- Work organization (e.g. work pace, break arrangements, shift work, unclear responsibilities, frequent interruptions, etc.)
 - Organizational climate (e.g. leadership behavior, communication, solidarity, room for maneuver, etc.)

If dangers due to psychological stress are identified, suitable measures should be determined and implemented with the participation of the employees, and their effectiveness should then be checked. The diverse psychological stresses can be reduced if, for example, work processes, work requirements, work organization, social relationships and the work environment are improved and optimized. Work organization also includes the organization of working hours. The goal of the change is the humane design of work [17].

Mental working conditions have a strong impact on the health of employees and must be taken into account in occupational safety. The aim of employee protection is to enable working people to have a professional life without health concerns or long-term effects. Mental stress is one of the main reasons for work-related illnesses and absence from work. In addition to human suffering, they also cause high costs.

The following working conditions are particularly often cited as harmful to health in studies [18]:

- Room for maneuver

Opportunities to exert influence are an essential part of a working design that promotes learning and personality. People have the need to be able to decide things in terms of content, time or organization. The risk of depression and cardiovascular diseases is increased if there is little room for maneuver.

- Social support

Social relationships with superiors and other employees have a proven impact on health. A lack of social support increases the risk of burnout, depression and negative experiences of stress. Employee absenteeism also increases. Social conflicts increase the desire to change jobs.

- Leadership behavior

Destructive leadership (authoritarian, irresponsible, aggressive or punishing behavior or inappropriate criticism) and a lack of leadership skills (including inaccessibility) pose a risk. Employees who are led destructively suffer more from burnout, stress and health problems. Psychological functioning (e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy) is also restricted.

- Justice and Recognition

If one's own effort or (work) performance is perceived as greater than the reward received (salary, appreciation, ...), there is an increased risk of depressive disorders and coronary heart disease. The immune system is weakened and musculoskeletal disorders are increasing - in men more in the shoulder/neck area, in women more in the lower back.

As part of the occupational health and safety strategy, the Federal Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection developed a guideline for the Labor Inspectorate for evaluating the psychological stress in control and advisory activities [19].

This guideline describes the objectives, the tasks and the procedure of the labor inspection in its control and advisory activities. The basis for the evaluation of the workplace regarding psychological stress by the labor inspectorate can be found in a catalog of criteria and an overview table. Section six contains detailed information on the suitability and use of measurement methods for the determination and assessment of work-related psychological stress, as well as detailed explanations of the guideline in Appendix 1.

The document "A decision aid for measurement methods" [20] serves as a guideline in project planning for the evaluation of work-related psychological stress. The division of the activity groups and the subsequent selection of the appropriate measurement methods are discussed. These two decisions form the essential basis for the evaluation. This procedure should therefore be implemented with care and specialist knowledge, considering the statutory rights of participation (e.g. works council, specialist for occupational safety, safety confidant, ...) to avoid later difficulties. The target group of this document are employers, prevention specialists, industrial psychologists and other specialists who have been introduced in the topic.

IV. AUVA SURVEY – EVALUATION OF WORK-RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

From a number of ten employees, this guideline from the ÖAS [20] recommends an online questionnaire for work analysis to determine psychological stress in the work situation, commissioned by the "Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt" (AUVA). The AUVA is an institution of the Austrian social insurance system and is part of the statutory accident insurance [22].

The target group comprises all employees of a globally acting company in Austria, one of the world's top five automotive suppliers according to worldwide sales [21]. There are 197 employees at that location and 99 of them participated in the survey. The data collection instrument is an online survey, designed by the AUVA. The questions are rated on a Likert scale. These are statements that the respondents agree more or less strongly with on a given multi-level answer scale or that they can reject. In order not to ask the respondents to position themselves specifically, a scaling with a middle category was chosen in the example mentioned. In addition, the focus of this survey is on the percentage distribution of top box versus bottom box. The evaluation of each individual question goes from "very little" (0-1) to "very much" (4-5), that means up to a value of 2.5 "contra" and above "pro". The individual characteristics are summarized into the binary option pro/contra in order to sound out the mood around the topic of home office based on several individual questions with the complete result shown in the table below:

Table 3: Survey result - Evaluation of psychological stress in the work situation



Source: AUVA [22] (analyzed by the author)

Remark: The survey is in German, the translation was done by the author, taking care to reproduce the meaning of the question as authentically as possible.

Referencing the aim of the article to develop a strategy for the home office after the Corona crisis, the analysis of this survey focuses on specific factors influencing work-related psychological stress. In this context, high expectations are attached to the results, because at the time of the survey, the employees had already worked in the corona pandemic for a year, had gathered experience with the topic of home office and evaluate the efficiency very well.

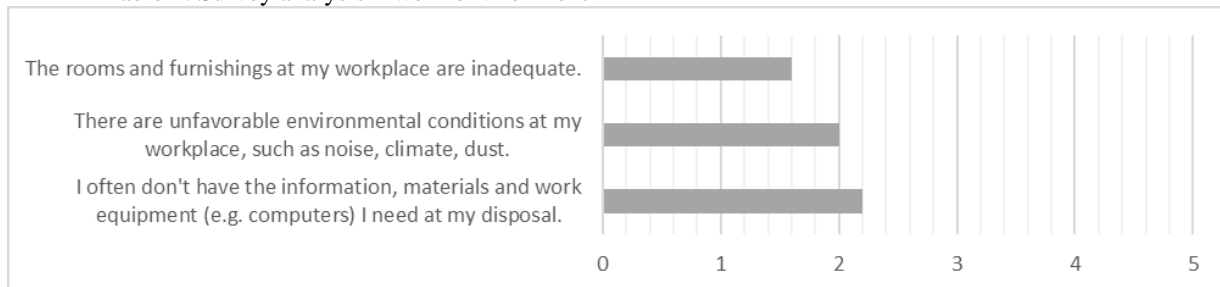
4.1. Work environment

The survey examined work-related psychological stress only, which means dealing with the conditions or circumstances under which work takes place. In case of the work environment, the influence factors are noise, climatic conditions, lighting and exposure, work equipment and materials, available software, etc. In order to get the results of the working environment, the survey was filtered for this area - the corresponding questions can be found in Table 4.

The evaluation of the questions gives very clear feedback from the employees, that neither the rooms or furnishing, nor the climate such as noise, temperature, dust, right up to work equipment such as computers, headsets and corresponding software for communication in the home office is a limiting factor. On the contrary, these environmental conditions were rated below the average of 2.5 in the range between 1.6 to 2.2 –see Table 4.

The result is not surprising, since home office has been established in the global automotive industry for years. In summary, for this area it could be said that the work environment has already been created and, thus, the basis for home office.

Table 4: Survey analysis – work environment



Source: AUVA [22] (analyzed by the author)

4.2. Work task and activities

This is exactly where the advantages of home office are, as employees can deal much better with emotional stress in the familiar environment at home compared to dealing with difficult customers or increased attention to control activities in the company.

Table 5: Survey analysis – work task and activities



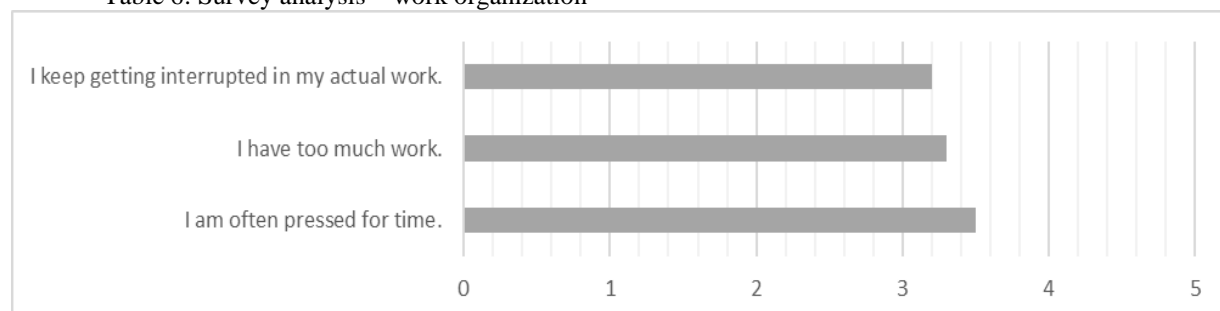
Source: AUVA [22] (analyzed by the author)

Similar to the previous chapter, the evaluation is clear and the results are all in the same range (3.3 to 3.9). This means that the basis for home office is also given here - even more, an increase in efficiency through home office can be expected in this area.

4.3. Work organization

As in the "work task and activities" area, there are advantages in home office since factors like work pace and break regulations can be organized by the employee at home in order to avoid unplanned interruptions shown in table 6 below and to increase and optimize work life balance.

Table 6: Survey analysis – work organization



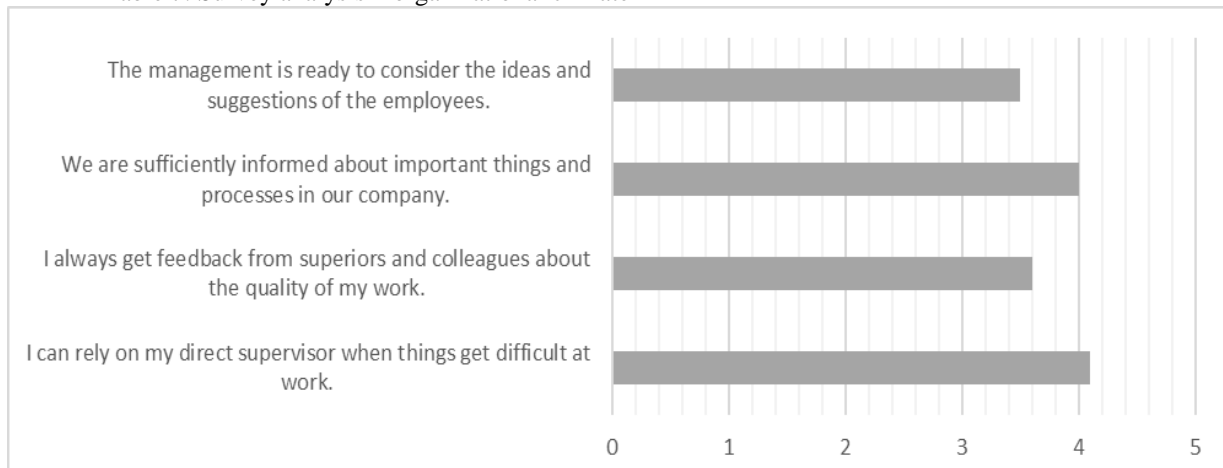
Source: AUVA [22] (analyzed by the author)

4.4. Organizational climate

The part of the survey, assigned to the organizational climate, essentially deals with the areas of leadership behavior, communication, solidarity and room for maneuver.

Summarized in the table below, again all result are in one, good area between 3.3 to 4.1 which represents ratings of pretty much to very much. Anyhow, a lot can be improved in this area in particular – buzzwords: ownership, empowerment, leading people, positive leadership. The company in which the survey was carried out has started the initiative "ownership" in this area, in order to give employees more responsibility and freedom to act. The idea behind the workshop is to create a common understanding of ownership, clear expectations of what the company expects from its employees (taking the topic of personal responsibility) as well as creating an environment for personal responsibility (leadership).

Table 7: Survey analysis – organizational climate



Source: AUVA [22] (analyzed by the author)

The initiative is promoted by the board members and designed to change mindsets to influence culture over time so that every employee is proud of their contribution. In our ever faster changing world in the automotive industry, we need more than ever an organization in which each individual takes responsibility for their work, for their learning, for their contribution to the organization in the context of this big picture. The managers of this organization have the responsibility to create an environment in which people can take responsibility - keyword empowerment!

It is important to use the talents of each individual (strength-oriented leadership), to enable employees to be independent in creative and entrepreneurial activities and at the same time to provide clear orientation in uncertain times.

V. SURVEY – HOME OFFICE

After more than a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was carried out in summer 2021, in a globally acting development department of a company in the automotive industry in the branch in Vienna. The company is one of the world's top five automotive suppliers in terms of global sales [21]. The survey was carried out online as the entire development department employs almost 200 people. A total of 126 employees took part in the survey. The type of question differed depending on the goal and is explained accordingly in the following chapters. Before the implementation, a so-called "all-hands meeting" was held and the background and the aim of the survey was explained in detail to all employees.

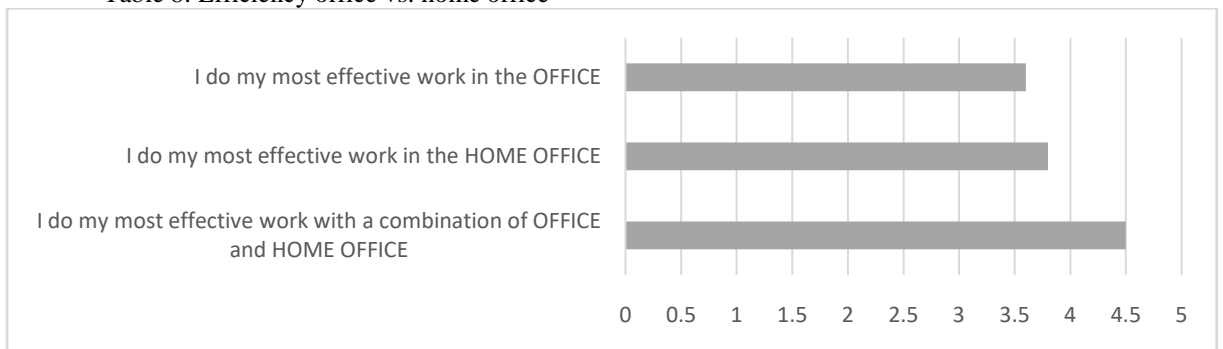
Note: The fact that 99 people took part in the AUVA survey and 126 people in the home office could already give an initial indication that home office is a very important component for employees.

5.1. Efficiency office / home office / combination

The survey about the efficiency of work in the office or home office was carried out using a Likert scale, designed with an integrated middle category. This means that the respondents agree more or less on a given multi-level answer scale or can also position themselves neutrally. The evaluation of each individual question goes from 0 (I totally disagree) to a value of 2.5 (neutral) to a value of 5 (I fully agree).

In the table below, the result regarding the efficiency according to the place of work – office, home office or a combination in average of the complete development department with 126 employees is visualized.

Table 8: Efficiency office vs. home office



Source: authors survey analysis

The result shows a first indication that most employees can increase their efficiency in the home office and, even better, a combination of office and home office shows a further increase. The responsible department

leaders confirmed the efficiency increase, which was impressively visible over a six month period with 80% short work, where even with that 20% less time no big problems occurred.

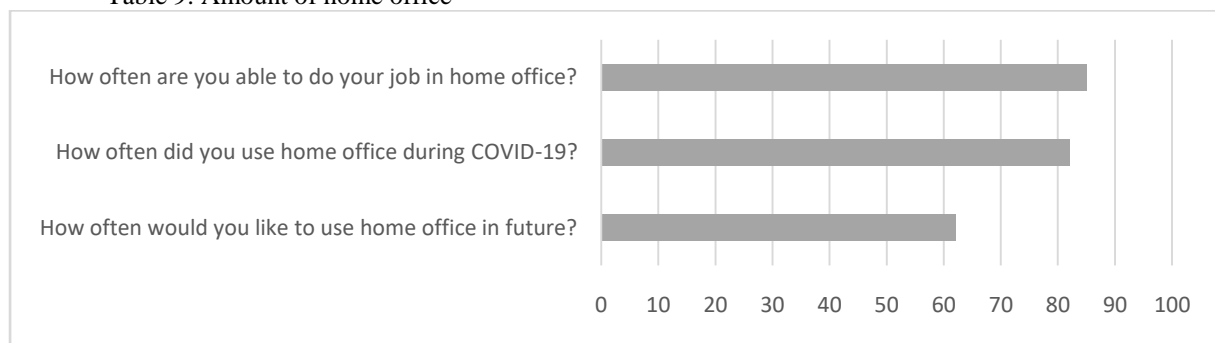
This means that hybrid work - working on the equipment in the office, combined with home office - is confirmed by employees, as well as by their managers as being maximally efficient. The hypothesis is supported: A hybrid model of presence and remote office increases the efficiency for employees in the automotive industry.

5.2. Amount of home office during COVID-19 vs. future home office

Considering the knowledge gained that a combination of office and home office increases the efficiency of most employees, another question inevitably arises: What is the ideal ratio of office to home office?

In order to answer this question, the employees were asked to give their feedback in the range from 0% to 100%. Since the employees had already had more than a year of home office experience in the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as six month short time work, the management has high hopes that these values will provide a good basis for a future home office strategy.

Table 9: Amount of home office



Source: authors survey analysis

The first question confirms the experience in the pandemic and shows the possibility of home office. Based on this question, the employees were also asked how much they used the home office during the COVID-19 pandemic.

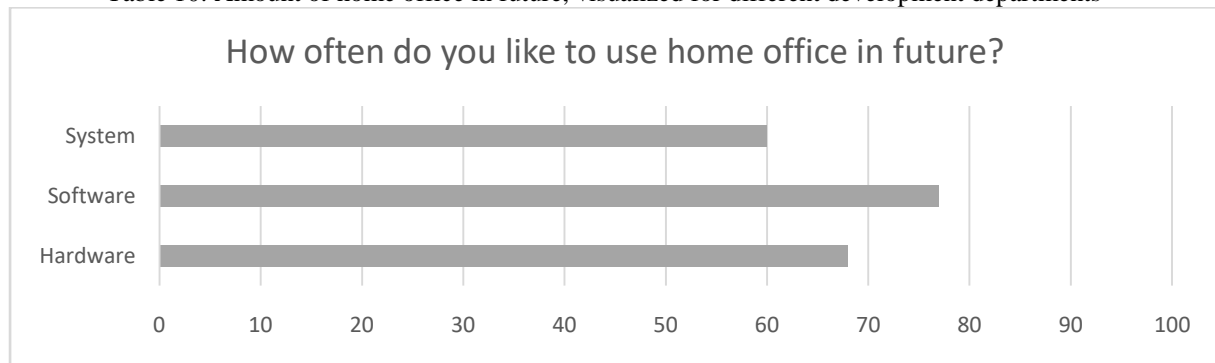
Last but not least, the crucial question: How often do you want to use home office in future? Comparing the answer of the first two questions with over 80%, the employees wish is a future home office share of "only" 60%, which does not seem logical.

But the answer is very logical and was explained through interviews with employees and managers: The clear recommendation from the management was "preferably home office for everyone who can, to avoid getting infected with the virus". For this reason, employees did more home office than they actually wanted, because the tools and equipment that make work easier are in the company. So they only came to the office when it was really necessary to do the work with the appropriate equipment and then went back home immediately to continue working in home office.

Another important point is that the analysis of the survey is an average of all employees at the location. This means, depending on the department, some can use home office more, others not that often, which raises another question - the distribution according the departments.

The table below shows the tree main departments in the development for automotive products – the Hardware -, Software - and System - group

Table 10: Amount of home office in future, visualized for different development departments



Source: authors survey analysis

. As already explained in the previous chapter, there is a good reason to come to the office - some work in the company is either impossible or difficult to manage without appropriate equipment and tools. This is also very clearly visible in the table below. Departments such as the software group mostly only need a laptop for the daily work and want to work more at home in the future. The system department (with a large part being a testing group) is least able to work at home, because they need very big and non-transportable equipment in the office. The hardware department lies between the two extremes. While this area used to require a lot of prototype building for product development in the past, modern hardware development uses a lot of simulation and, similar to the software department, almost only a laptop is required for this work.

Generally speaking, one could say that an optimal share is in the range of around 60% home office for departments with high equipment usage and up to almost 80% home office for departments that do not need any special equipment for their work. These results were confirmed by interviews with the relevant department heads, who reported an increase in efficiency.

VI. RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

In the AUVA survey, developed by the Austrian general insurance company and evaluated by the author and its detailed analysis regarding the influence factors according to [17] the positive effect and basis of a future efficient home office strategy can be seen:

- Work environment
- Work task and activities
- Work organization
- Organizational climate

Based on this initial knowledge, a home office survey was developed, with a result of 60% home office on average for the complete location (development, project management, purchasing, sales, human resources and administration).

More details are, as presented in table 8, distributed across the development departments Software, Hardware and Systems, where the effects of needed tools in the company become visible and so a distribution for the development department in the area of 60% home office (correspondingly much use of equipment) up to a home office share of 80% (for employees with less or no use of equipment and tools, which means that presence in the company is less necessary) was found.

The hypothesis is supported. A hybrid model of presence and remote office increases the efficiency for employees in the automotive industry.

VII. CONCLUSION

In our very rapidly changing VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity ambiguity), it is important to react quickly and flexibly. The executives gave the clear feedback during the interview that the analyzed home office share is just a basis and the employees need to act according to their own responsibility to find the best fitting compromise. Therefore, a common understanding has been defined in the company in which the survey was carried out: Home office goes hand in hand with "taking ownership" on the part of every single employee!

The conclusion of the company where the survey was done is to implement a home office share of maximum 60% as a default per month for all employees in 2022 as well as a cancellation of the core time (core time is a period specified in the employment contract in which attendance is mandatory for employees). At the same time, the company has already recognized the issue of "ownership" as a decisive factor and there are training courses rolled out around the world so that employees act in accordance with their own responsibility. Furthermore, the geographical limitation of the home office location is currently being expanded from the "registration address" to "Austria".

Should this strategy prove to be successful, an absolutely free choice of workplace and working hours could be possible in the future, based on the ownership of every individual employee.

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