

Zesz. Nauk. UEK, 2022, 2(996): 85–97
ISSN 1898-6447
e-ISSN 2545-3238
<https://doi.org/10.15678/ZNUEK.2022.0996.0205>

Determinants of Employees' Occupational Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Czynniki decydujące o samopoczuciu zawodowym pracowników w warunkach pandemii COVID-19

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Suggested citation: Juchnowicz, M., Kinowska, H. (2022) "Determinants of Employees' Occupational Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie* 2(996): 85–97, <https://doi.org/10.15678/ZNUEK.2022.0996.0205>.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this paper is to explore the determinants of occupational well-being in employees under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design & Methods: The paper presents the results of a survey, conducted in January 2021, using the CAWI method, on a representative sample of working Poles ($N = 1,000$). Hierarchical cluster analysis, Ward's method and one-way ANOVA test were applied in the analysis of the survey results.

Findings: The empirical study identified three relatively homogeneous groups of employees depending on factors determining their occupational well-being. For the first group, interesting work and job security were the two most important factors, while work-life balance and good cooperation with the superior were the least important. The second group depends on one factor – job security – for its professional well-being, while it ascribes the least importance to job prestige and development opportunities. The third group also identifies only one factor – interesting work – as being the most important, and job security and job prestige as being the least important.

Implications/Recommendations: As a result, two key factors were identified: job security and interesting work. Polish workers fall into three groups: 1) those for whom both of these factors are important, 2) those focused mainly on job security and 3) those who put interesting work above all else.

Contribution: The article adds to the knowledge on the determinants of employees' occupational well-being, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are important for the conscious management of employees. They provide practical guidance to help motivate employees in the conditions that characterise work during a pandemic.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: occupational well-being, determinants of well-being, COVID-19, cluster analysis.

JEL Classification: M12, M54, J24.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem pracy jest eksploracja czynników decydujących o samopoczuciu zawodowym pracowników w warunkach pandemii COVID-19.

Metodyka badań: W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania, które przeprowadzono w styczniu 2021 r., metodą CAWI, na reprezentatywnej próbie pracujących Polaków ($N = 1000$). Do opracowania wyników badania zastosowano hierarchiczną analizę skupień, metodę Warda oraz jednoczynnikowy test ANOVA.

Wyniki badań: Badanie empiryczne pozwoliło zidentyfikować trzy relatywnie jednorodne grupy pracowników pod względem czynników decydujących o samopoczuciu zawodowym. Pierwsza grupa wskazała na dwa równie ważne czynniki: interesującą pracę i pewność zatrudnienia oraz dwa czynniki najmniej istotne: równowagę między życiem prywatnym i zawodowym oraz dobrą współpracę z przełożonym. Druga wyodrębniona grupa uzależnia swoje samopoczucie zawodowe głównie od jednego czynnika, jakim jest pewność zatrudnienia, a za najmniej istotne uważa prestiż wykonywanej pracy i możliwości rozwoju. Trzecia grupa także wskazała tylko jeden czynnik, który wpływa na jej samopoczucie zawodowe – jest nim interesująca praca. Najmniej ważne są dla niej z kolei pewność zatrudnienia i prestiż wykonywanej pracy.

Wnioski: W rezultacie wyodrębniono dwa kluczowe czynniki: bezpieczeństwo pracy i ciekawą pracę. Polscy pracownicy dzielą się na trzy grupy: 1) osób, dla których ważne są oba wskazane czynniki, 2) osób skoncentrowanych głównie na bezpieczeństwie pracy oraz 3) osób, dla których najważniejsza jest interesująca praca.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Artykuł wzbogaca wiedzę na temat determinantów dobrostanu zawodowego pracowników w warunkach pandemii COVID-19. Wyniki są ważne dla świadomego zarządzania pracownikami i dostarczają praktycznych wskazówek ułatwiających motywowanie pracowników w warunkach pandemii.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: samopoczucie zawodowe, determinanty dobrostanu, COVID-19, analiza skupień.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a transformation in employment, affecting how work is organised (e.g. remote work) and employees alike (e.g. social distancing, stress, unemployment) (Kniffin *et al.* 2021). The shift to remote work put the health and quality of life of workers into the spotlight. Research indicates that the pandemic contributed to a deterioration of well-being (Bakker & van Wingerden 2020), job satisfaction and family life (Möhring *et al.* 2021). During the pandemic, employee welfare became a priority for employers (*Raport...* 2020). In response to the circumstances, organisations introduced programmes to help improve employee well-being or embedded a supportive approach in their organisational culture.

Due to the pandemic, managers found themselves unable to experiment with solutions to identify the ones that maximise benefit, instead having to rely on their biases and observations. Insufficient awareness of effective practices disrupts an organisation's operations generally. During the pandemic, unforeseen changes in the workplace made it difficult to maintain work efficiency and commitment, affecting work-life balance. The extent of the changes brought about by the pandemic has resulted in a research gap surrounding the determinants of occupational well-being. Hence the need for up-to-date research.

The aim of this paper is to explore the determinants of occupational well-being in employees. The following research questions were formulated:

- What factors determine employees' occupational well-being?
- How do employees' opinions vary on the factors determining their occupational well-being?

The analysis was predicated on a study of working Poles' opinions on occupational well-being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, in January 2021. Cluster analysis was used in developing the results. The text of the article consists of three main parts, starting with an analysis of the literature to elucidate the key aspects of professional well-being, and the evolution of employment conditions in Poland as a result of the pandemic. It then describes the methodological aspects of the research conducted, including the aim and structure of the sample. Finally, the observations achieved from the study will be presented and analysed with the key points displayed in the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Factors Determining Employees' Occupational Well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased interest in the issue of employee well-being from individual and organisational perspectives. Numerous studies examine the level of employee welfare and its various effects (Johnson, Robertson & Cooper 2018). They demonstrate that organisations with higher levels of care for employees

perform better. This provides an impetus to investigate the factors influencing well-being levels. Researchers indicate that in the process of work, psychological well-being has the most significant influence on the sense of well-being (Johnson, Robertson & Cooper 2018). Therefore, employee well-being has been constructed using the foundation of psychological well-being. (Ryff 1989).

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon, one that can be analysed from two perspectives: that of hedonism, which deals with experiencing positive emotions and satisfaction, and that of eudemonism, which focuses on human potential and development (e.g. Ryan & Deci 2001, Czapiński 2012). In the eudemonistic view, well-being is an aggregate of feelings, experiences, and emotions that accompany a person's actions aimed at actualising their own potential, as well as living a life that is coherent and consistent with the true self (Ilska & Kołodziej-Zaleska 2018). Eudemonic well-being includes six key aspects: positive attitude towards oneself (self-acceptance), positive interpersonal relationships, a sense of freedom, autonomy, the existence of an overarching goal in life, and circumstances allowing for the development of one's craft (Ryff 2013). A separate stream of research on well-being has also emerged in the literature. It is close to the eudemonistic perspective, and it referred to as workplace well-being (Tabor-Błazewicz 2021). It is defined as the accumulated experience and functioning of an employee in terms of both physical and psychological well-being (Warr 2006). These concepts are relevant to both organisations and how they are managed, and they set the theoretical framework for the study presented in this article.

Well-being is a construct that is partly determined by the employee's personality. As such, in the long term, it is a relatively fixed characteristic over which the employer will have limited influence. In addition, employee well-being changes under the influence of many factors directly related to work. These are particularly crucial for management as they affect feelings at work. Their impact is direct and it is easier for organisations to change and improve work-related factors. For this reason, the scope of the research analysed in this article has been limited to determinants of work-related employee well-being. Identifying the workplace factors that influence employees' occupational welfare is essential in order to guide organisations on which factors to prioritise in well-being activities.

In the case of occupational well-being in the workplace, the employer has a particular role to play. In the literature, specific recommendations can be found as to what activities give rise to a desirable work environment. These include creating conditions in which employees: are paid living wages, have control over their work, have opportunities for professional development, flexibility, are protected from adverse conditions, are provided with disease prevention and stress management, the sick and disabled are supported and their return to work is facilitated (Marmot 2010).

Measures recommended for workplace well-being include ensuring: adequate resources and communication, control and autonomy, a balanced workload, adequate job security, good relationships and working conditions (Robertson 2016). Employers should provide employees with all the tools they need to do their jobs. They should not restrict employees' freedom to do their jobs – by delegating authority appropriately and ensuring a good work-life balance. They are responsible for ensuring that workers have transferable and up-to-date skills and are treated with dignity and respect at work. Employers should provide the best possible working conditions, including pay and benefits.

Occupational well-being is conceptualised as a state of feeling shaped by the quality of work life. The key determinants of work well-being are work and its context, workplace relationships and work-home relationships, the purpose and meaning of work, leadership and management (Johnson, Robertson & Cooper 2018). Tools designed for employees and employers are used to analyse occupational well-being. Diagnostic tools for employees investigate several dimensions: quality of work conditions, feeling of purpose, the probability of experiencing burnout, exhaustion, the relationship between work and life, as well as suicidal tendencies (e.g. Employee Well-Being Index, eWBI) (Dyrbye, Satele & Shanafelt 2016).

In human capital management, well-being is examined using the PERMA model, which identifies five elements of a good life: P – positive emotions (e.g. joy, recognition, comfort, inspiration, hope or curiosity), E – engagement (understood as a state of flow), R – relationships (being with people, working together), M – meaning (a sense of meaningful action), A – achievements (satisfying work outcomes) (Seligman 2012). In the present study, the Gallup Index was used to measure occupational well-being, which includes the well-being-shaping aspects of experiencing daily life. It includes five core components: purpose (maintaining a positive perspective on everyday tasks and sufficient stimulation to complete them), relationships (possessing nurturing relationships), finances (having an economic situation that does not contribute to undue stress and provides a sense of security), community (having a positive attitude towards the place where one lives, feeling safe and proud of the community), and physical health (being adequately fit to complete daily goals) (*Well-being 5 Toolkit* 2017).

2.2. Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Before the factors determining occupational well-being in Poland can be understood, a bit of background on the characteristics of the country's labour market is in order. Poland was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A low level of unemployment was observed alongside an increase in the working population.

There were 17.3 million economically active persons in the third quarter of 2021. That was 139,000 (0.8%) more than the results of the second quarter of 2021 (*Aktywność ekonomiczna... 2021*).

In December 2020, the registered unemployment rate in Poland remained low in Poland (6.2%) and increased by 0.1 pp. compared to the previous month. At the same time, the country's labour offices registered 1.03 million unemployed people (a decrease of 7.8 to the month prior), and 79,200 job vacancies were reported to labour offices (*Aktualności... 2021*).

The pandemic and resulting crisis caused a shift in how work was performed. For example, there was a proliferation of either partially or completely remote work, especially among office workers. These were new conditions for a large proportion of employees – as many as 40% of those who worked remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic had never done so before. At the same time, more than 80% said it was easy or very easy to adapt to remote working, flexible work schedules and greater autonomy. Two-thirds of workers expected to work remotely more often than they used to even after the pandemic ended (*Aktualności... 2021*).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was evident in the data on where work was performed. In Q1 2021, the number of people doing their work from home, usually or sometimes, was 3.2 million, or 19.6% of all workers. Among this collective, 2 million persons (i.e. 62.1%) worked at home due to the situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Q1 2021, 2.4 million persons (14.7% of all employed persons) performed all their work duties in the form of remote work. 89.7% worked in this form due to the COVID-19 pandemic (*Aktywność ekonomiczna... 2021*).

Given all the changes that have occurred in the labour market and the spread of remote working, there is a strong need for research on the factors determining the professional well-being of employees.

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

The aim of the research was to analyse the factors determining occupational well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected in January 2021.

The sample was purposive-quota and involved surveying 1,000 employees of companies of different sizes with a close to proportional distribution of demographic characteristics (gender, age). The survey was conducted on a research panel accredited by PKJPA and ESOMAR using the CAWI method. Only data from fully completed surveys were analysed. Prior to analysis, the data were carefully checked for accuracy and logical consistency.

Higher educated employees (52%), and those employed on the basis of an employment contract (77%) in the private sector (77%) were the most likely to respond to the research. The research sample was balanced in terms of gender

(men 55%, women 45%) and age (from 18% to 27% of respondents from each age group). Table 1 presents the detailed characteristics of the research sample.

Table 1. Structure of the Research Sample

	Specification	Percent
Gender	female	45
	male	55
Age	18–29	18
	30–39	28
	40–49	27
	50 and over	27
Education	vocational	8
	secondary	41
	higher	52
Form of employment	employment contract	77
	civil law agreement	9
	B2B contract	14
Company size	below 50 employees	42
	50–249 employees	27
	250–500 employees	12
	more than 500 employees	9
Sector	public	20
	private	77
	foundations, associations and others	3

Source: the authors.

The survey consisted of 22 questions addressing the respondents' views on different features of employee well-being, engagement and assessment of pay equity. For the purpose of this article, the responses to the question on factors determining occupational well-being were analysed. A list of factors determining employees' occupational well-being was developed based on the "Gallup-Healthways, Well-being 5 Index" tool (*Well-being 5 Toolkit* 2017). Based on the indications of the expert judges, the items from the Gallup tool were grouped and named in a way that relates to the motivational factors recognised by practitioners.

In the survey conducted, respondents were asked to rank the following eight factors:

- interesting job,
- job security,
- job prestige,

- sense of fair remuneration,
- opportunity for personal development,
- friendly atmosphere at work,
- work-life balance,
- good cooperation with superiors.

The respondents ranked the factors from most (first place) to least important (eighth place).

First, descriptive statistics of the individual factors determining professional well-being were counted in each place. Next, hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method with squared Euclidean distance was applied to analyse the data collected. The purpose of using cluster analysis was to extract homogeneous groups of employees in terms of their assessment of the factors determining occupational well-being. The results of the groups identified were subjected to a one-way ANOVA test. The tests confirmed statistical significance in the mean differences.

The application of the method proceeded in the following stages: 1) selection of diagnostic variables, 2) construction of observation matrix, 3) standardisation of diagnostic variables, 4) selection of similarity measure, 5) determination of taxonomic distance matrix on the basis of calculated distances between all pairs of objects, 6) selection of agglomeration method, 7) construction of dendrogram 8) selection of number of identified clusters, 9) characterisation of distinguished clusters and interpretation of results.

Calculations were performed using the SPSS statistical package, version 27.

4. Research Findings

On the basis of descriptive statistics, the mean positions assigned by respondents to the various factors studied to determine occupational well-being were calculated (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Factors Determining Occupational Well-being

Factor	Average place	Standard deviation
Interesting job	3.4	2.2
Job security	3.3	2.2
Job prestige	5.7	2.2
Sense of fair remuneration	4.0	2.1
Possibility of personal development	5.0	2.1
Friendly atmosphere at work	4.3	2.1
Work-life balance	5.0	2.1
Good cooperation with superior	5.3	2.0

Source: the authors.

The data obtained shows that, among the factors determining professional well-being, the employees surveyed ranked the following as the most important: job security (in third place on average) and interesting job (also in third place on average). The lowest positions in the ranking were job prestige (in sixth place on average) and good cooperation with superiors (in fifth place on average). The middle places in the ranking were rounded out by a sense of fair remuneration (fourth place on average) and a friendly atmosphere at work (also fourth place on average).

Table 3. Clusters of Factors Determining Occupational Well-being

Factor	Cluster I (N = 344)		Cluster II (N = 423)		Cluster III (N = 233)	
	average place	standard deviation	average place	standard deviation	average place	standard deviation
Interesting job	2.8	2.0	4.3	2.2	2.6	1.9
Job security	2.9	2.0	2.2	1.3	5.8	1.5
Job prestige	3.6	1.9	7.0	1.2	6.3	1.9
Fair remuneration	4.9	2.1	3.5	2.0	3.7	2.0
Possibility of personal development	4.5	2.0	5.8	1.8	4.4	2.3
Friendly atmosphere at work	5.3	1.8	3.6	1.9	4.0	2.1
Work-life balance	6.2	1.8	4.4	2.0	4.2	2.1
Good cooperation with superior	5.8	2.0	5.2	2.0	4.9	2.1

Source: the authors.

Cluster analysis was done to identify relatively homogeneous groups of employees in terms of factors determining well-being at work. As a result of its application, three relatively homogeneous groups (clusters) of employees were identified (Table 3). The description of the clusters was preceded by an analysis of the structure of each cluster (Table 4).

The first group included respondents who make their professional well-being dependent on interesting work and job security. Both factors on average ranked third in this group. The first group of respondents was characterised by low importance given to: work-life balance and good cooperation with superiors. Both factors ranked sixth on average. The first group consisted of mainly older employees: 30% were at least 50 years old. They were mainly employed on the basis of employment contract (73%), though a relatively high percentage of this group also worked on B2B contracts (18%). This group was dominated by employees of small (43%) and medium (29%) organisations.

The second group of respondents (cluster II) was more focused on job security, ranking this factor on average in second place. Respondents from this group

ascribed the least importance to the prestige of their work and opportunities for personal development. On average, job prestige ranked seventh and opportunities for development sixth. The second group consisted mainly of individuals on employment contracts (85%), and those employed in very large (22%) and large (13%) organisations. The age structure of the second group was similar to that of the surveyed sample.

Table 4. Structural Characteristics of the Clusters (in Percent)

Characteristic	Cluster I	Cluster II	Cluster III
Age:			
18–29	13	19	24
30–39	28	28	27
40–49	28	26	26
50 and over	30	27	23
Form of employment:			
Employment contract	73	85	70
Civil law agreement	9	6	13
B2B contract	18	9	17
Company size:			
Below 50 employees	43	37	49
50–249 employees	29	27	24
250–500 employees	11	13	11
More than 500 employees	17	22	15

Source: the authors.

The third group of respondents (cluster III) was more focused on interesting while not ascribing job security much importance. The second factor was indicated in both of the other separate groups as being crucial for professional well-being. Respondents ranked interesting work, on average, third. The lowest ranking in this group, in sixth place, apart from job security, was job prestige. Young workers (aged 18–29) made up a relatively high share (24%) of the third group. A relatively small number were employed on civil law contracts (13%) or on B2B contracts (17%). Similarly to the first group, the third group consisted mainly of those working in small (49%) and medium-size (25%) organisations.

5. Conclusions

The study identified key factors that determined employees' well-being at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results confirm the importance of having interesting work and job security. They also provide information on the diversity of factors specific to different groups of workers, indicating the existence of three

relatively consistent groups with different factors determining their respective occupational well-being. The research shows that a factor that is important to one group may be completely irrelevant to another. One such factor is job security, the second group in the study identified as crucial, and the third considered to be least important.

These findings provide important information. Understanding the factors that influence occupational well-being enables targeted interventions that can improve the psychological welfare of employees. Lack of clarity about the key drivers of occupational well-being leaves managers unsure of how they could improve or maintain the psychological well-being of employees, and results measures being largely ineffective. The study found that the importance of factors varies with the age of the employee, the size of the organisation and the type of contract. This shows that there is a need for an individualised approach in the personnel decision-making process, and, in turn, a comprehensive approach to how to influence occupational well-being.

Supporting the development of employee well-being requires a set complex instruments, among which the system of employee motivation is crucial. If properly applied, it will enhance well-being and the motivation to perform work. Using the right tools, the organisation will encourage employees to develop and increase their effectiveness. Contemporary management gives employees a wide range of tools in motivational systems (Juchnowicz 2012). These systems generally includes financial and non-financial benefits that an employee receives in return for their work. They form a package supporting the realisation of the company's goals and at the same time they take into account the needs and value hierarchy of particular groups of employees in a personalised way, creating an environment where work is challenging and rewarding and where employees know that their contribution matters to the organisation.

The study captures the determinants of occupational well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. While a static snapshot is presented, long-term relationships and degree of influence have not been examined. As the factors investigated are time-sensitive and susceptible to change, the investigation of the pandemic's effects requires further research. Moreover, factors determining job satisfaction may change over time, so it is recommended they be studied in a long-term perspective. Finally, this study concerns Polish employees. But to generalise the results, studies encompassing multiple regions and countries should be conducted.

Research on factors determining occupational well-being should consider the perspectives of both employees and employers. The research conducted for this article looked only at the former. To provide a more comprehensive view, the latter's perspective should also be studied. Additionally, the only source of assessment was employee self-assessment questionnaires. Other sources should be used.

Future investigations could explore the links between factors determining occupational well-being and their more detailed components. Furthermore, they could be extended to include the impact of contexts on the factor groups identified.

Financial Disclosure

This research was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland under Grant “Compensation justice”, 2016/21/B/HS4/02992.

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