

Needs and expectations of researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The aim of our research is to identify how the needs of researchers regarding the working environment and related endowments, professional relations with colleagues, as well as with the leader or coordinator of the research activity, information sources research opportunities during the pandemic COVID-19. At the same time, we followed how the researchers' expectations regarding the evaluation of the research activity, the provision of feedback in case of failure and the rewarding tools in case of excellence research were affected.

Our research methodology combines quantitative with qualitative research. In the quantitative one we used as a research tool a questionnaire, in the qualitative one we used four focus groups from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies community. The obtained results make an eloquent radiograph of the research during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the inhibitory and motivational factors that underlie the research, the ethics of the research activity as well as the defining aspects of the research.

Introduction

The issue of evaluating scientific research during the COVID-19 pandemic is becoming particularly important in the context in which research is one of the main areas that would reduce the gaps between economies at the international level (Profiroiu et al., 2020). Thus, competitiveness both nationally and internationally, becomes a general objective, which can be achieved by pursuing two fundamental objectives: the generation and exploitation of knowledge (Burlacu et al., 2021). As a result, we evaluate the approach through strategic management of the research and development activity in which an essential component of it could be innovation (Bodislav et al., 2020). In the specialized literature we find strategic approaches of the research and development activity in the sense of managing the components that make up the system to achieve the strategic objectives (Negescu Oancea, et al., 2020). The strategic dimension of research management can be analyzed as a strategic management system, because through it are established the necessary actions to be followed in support of research activities, to achieve the strategic objectives, set at the level of our institution (Jianu et al., 2019). Strategic research management is "how organizations formulate and implement their research strategies, helping managers achieve their innovation and development goals" (Cassiman & Gambardella, 2009). The strategic management of an organization focused on research and development cannot be

separated from the general management; on the other hand, the use of management techniques that are successful in general management are often not suitable for research and development (Sarbu et al., 2021).

Another important aspect of the strategic management of the research is the organization of the research activity, being aimed at creating a system through which to establish the formal realities between researchers, departments, faculties, and the university management (Radulescu et al., 2021). The most common ways of organizing research are the following:

Centralized organization - decisions related to setting research priorities and allocating resources are the responsibility of top management (for example: the vice-rector responsible for research).

Decentralized organization - based on the principle of interdepartmental autonomy, researchers, respectively research departments, propose a set of research priorities, which are then analyzed and selected at the level of strategic management. Mixed organization - the decisions are the result of a consultative process, which involves different institutional actors, both at the level of top management, which has the role of coordinator, and at the level of operational management.

The literature reveals that the researcher examines and challenges his own base of personal value and understands how values are socially constructed. This would culminate in the reflection of the process by which researchers reflect on how their own values, perceptions, behavior, or presence and those of respondents may affect the data they collect. Thus, a researcher becomes reflective in the sense that he becomes aware of the need to be explicit about his position in the research process and how the cultural environments of the researcher and the respondents interact (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002).

Methodology

Our research methodology combines quantitative with qualitative research. If in the quantitative one we used as a research tool a questionnaire, in the qualitative one we used four focus groups from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies community. An extensive qualitative research was carried out, consisting of four focus groups among researchers from the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. Three quarters of the respondents were academics - with a teaching degree from assistant to professor - and the fourth quarter consisted of PhD students and students of master's research programs. Each of the four group meetings was attended by eight participants. The answers were recorded in audio or in writing, and subsequently analyzed following the structure of the conversation guide. The three topics of the group discussion focused on the needs, expectations and perceptions of individuals conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The groups of respondents were characterized by diversity, as academics have a teaching degree from assistant to teacher, have different professional specializations and are part of several faculties and departments.

Findings

The first question in the questionnaire concerns the extent to which the needs of researchers in the work environment regarding the physical space in which they work are met and considers three aspects: ambiance, size, as well as its comfort & brightness. Regarding the ambiance of the workspace, about a third of the respondents consider that they are largely satisfied with this

aspect (35%), the percentage being similar in the case of the size of the physical space (28%). However, improvements can be made to the first coordinate (ambiance), considering that only 7% of respondents are very satisfied with it (Figure 1).

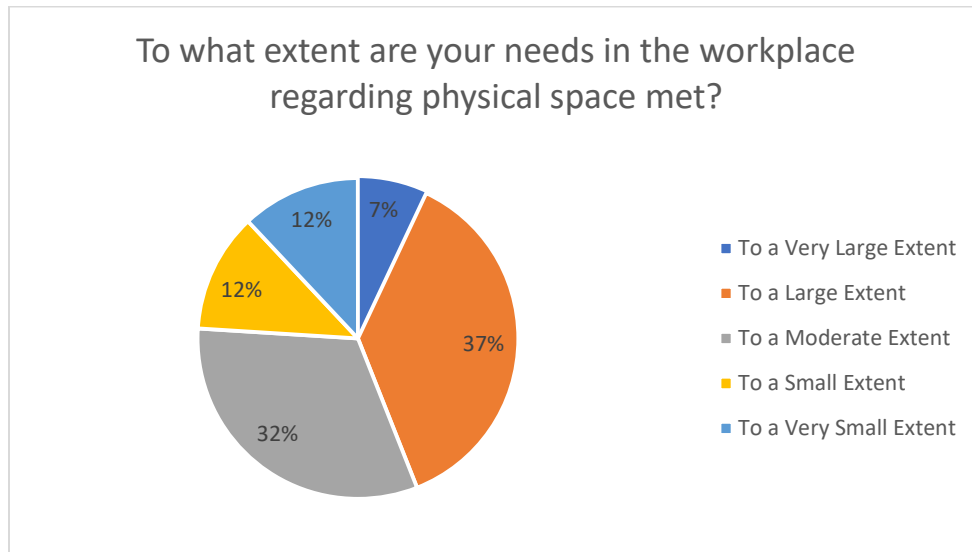


Figure 1. Satisfaction with the ambiance of the workspace

However, there is a relatively high percentage of respondents (about half of the sample) who are satisfied to a small extent and to a very small extent by the physical space in general (including the three components: ambiance, size and comfort / brightness).

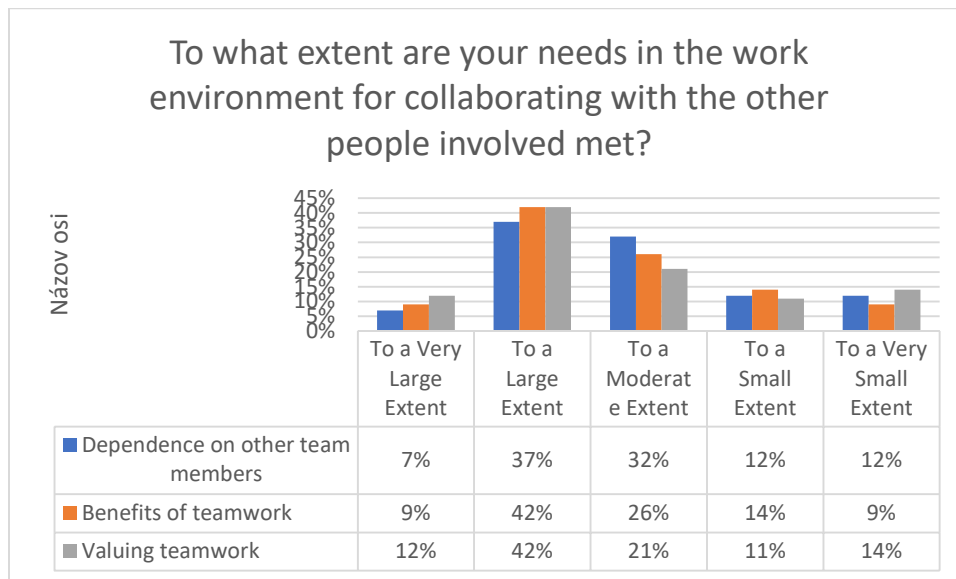


Figure 2 Workspace satisfaction

The research activity also involves other human resources, with distinct work tasks, responsibilities, and hierarchical positions, which by the nature of the professional relationships they develop can lead in a more or less easy way to achieving the proposed objectives.

Therefore, it is important to know the level of satisfaction that respondents feel when topics such as collaboration with other team members are brought up. Consequently, questions were asked to address both the relationships with teammates at the same hierarchical level and the hierarchical superior, and with those people who do not hold a leadership position but assume the role of coordinator in a research project.

Respondents are more satisfied with working with colleagues than with working with the team leader or coordinator. However, in all three cases, there were exceedingly small percentages of respondents who are satisfied to a small or very small extent with these collaborations.

However, the sample also includes researchers (approximately one third in the first two situations and one fifth in the third situation), who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the existing collaborative relationships in the research environment, which could have based on low emotional / personal involvement.

Also, professional, and collaborative relationships can be influenced by factors that are difficult for researchers to control. For example, the interdependence and interpenetration of work tasks could lead to the procrastination of the research process, but also to the increase of psychological pressure within the team. Therefore, respondents answered the question of how satisfied they are that individual work tasks depend on other team members (Figure 3).

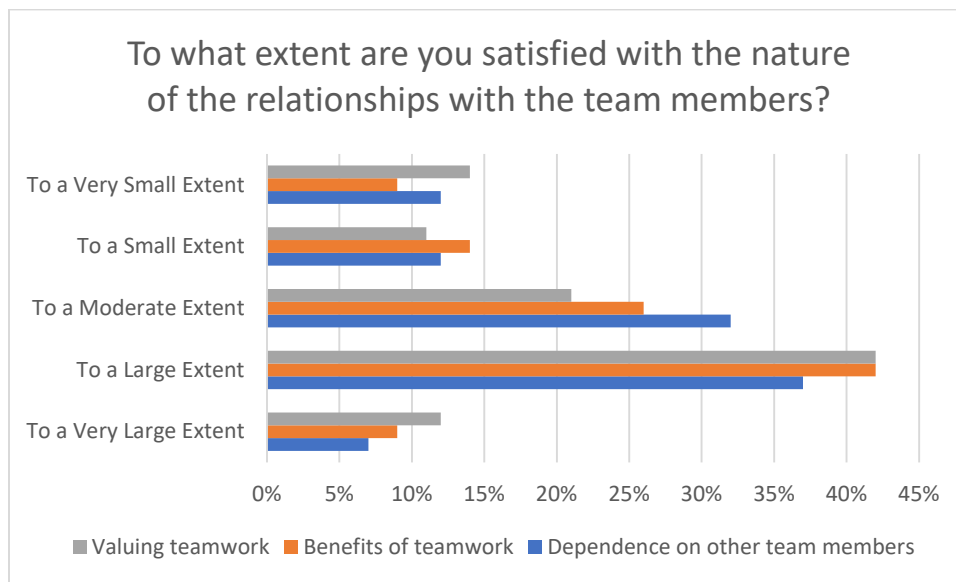


Figure 3. Satisfaction of teamwork

The results indicate that respondents have a positive, pro-active attitude towards the interference of their actions in the professional sphere. Thus, about half of the respondents are very and very satisfied with this aspect, and a third are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with this approach. Two other key points underlying a fruitful collaboration are the benefits of teamwork, as well as its value. In both situations, the respondents are rather satisfied (42% to a large extent), only

some of them being dissatisfied (9% and 14% satisfied to an exceedingly small extent, respectively).

Subsequently, the obstacles related to the teamwork faced by the researchers were identified, among them being frequently encountered not acting, pessimism in achieving personal and group results, but also the fear of not being criticized, the latter leading to non-recognition of mistakes. A first topic addressed in the four focus groups was the respondents' perception of the research activity. The answers highlighted two perspectives, one defining for the fundamental research activity, while the second reflected the specificity of the applied research. Respondents expressed their views by emphasizing one of the two components, depending on their concerns and areas of expertise. Only a few people have included them in a whole, but they said that there is a need to address only one of the two directions, because there is a risk of wasting yourself, i.e., to invest effort, time, and even financial resources without have results to match, if researchers would be involved in both types of activities.

One of the respondents even specified the structure of the research activity, starting from the objectives of each in a certain field of interest, continuing with studies, experiments or other actions necessary to achieve these objectives and ending with the dissemination of results in international publications. Another specified that the research activity is more than that, it means not only the study itself, but also the transmission of knowledge and scientific progress in the field of students, through the teaching activity. In this way, the applicability of the researched concepts can be identified.

To successfully carry out the research activities, the respondents identified their needs and expectations, which can be grouped into the following categories:

- Needs related to physical space and research facilities.
- Needs related to the research process, coordination, and evaluation.
- Needs related to communication within research teams.

Regarding the space in which the respondents work, the needs are multiple. As such, it can be said that they want first a pleasant, quiet, uninterrupted work environment, in which they can focus on topics of interest, where they can access certain resources (both online and offline), but where to have the possibility, at the same time, to keep their own books. In this sense, a solution identified by several respondents would be to schedule researchers to access a space dedicated to research, for a short period of time - possibly a few hours - during which no other person enters unannounced, so as not to disturb. Within this framework, meetings can be organized between members of the research community, both from academia and from the practical sphere, to launch new scientific ideas, which can later be developed in other meetings or other workspaces.

Most want a certain infrastructure, including in the physical space computers with internet access, printers, and the necessary work materials. One of the participants in the focus group insisted on the technical characteristics that work technology should present, as, from his point of view, they contribute to the ease of accessing programs, applications necessary for the research activity. According to another respondent, the pleasant and modern physical space greatly influences the research activities, because it can be highlighted as results both the pleasure felt by

researchers to spend time in that environment and the possibility of stimulating the creative side of individuals. Several responses provided additional information on the ideal work environment in the perception of focus group participants. It is important for them to have access to generous spaces, with ambiance, comfort and brightness, not only in the rooms dedicated to the study, but also in the rooms where they carry out their teaching activity.

However, respondents believe that there is flexibility in the workspace. In other words, they claim that they use institutional spaces to carry out research activities, such as meetings with specialists, in-depth interviews, consultation of resources, but once these data are collected, they are further processed in a more relaxing environment. more intimate, that is, at home. The COVID-19 pandemic forced, after its onset, work at home, which partially corresponded to the wishes of researchers.

In the view of most respondents, the research process should be continuous and not fragmented by other bureaucratic activities, which rob researchers of working time and may divert them from the main objective. A participant in the focus group considers that this research process has two components, one being mandatory - academic research - and the other additional - in research projects, which can bring not only personal and scientific benefits, but also financial. In this context, the subject of access to various sources of information also intervenes. For example, respondents argue that they need easy access to time series of data, microdata, market research, or up-to-date versions of the software needed to interpret the information collected. At the same time, they believe that participation in various meetings, colloquia and scientific conferences is also a valid source of information, especially as it promotes professional networking and the initiation of joint research.

The need to participate in scientific events held at international level is justified by respondents and by emphasizing its usefulness, to bridge the gap between the research environment in Romania and other European countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this need was quickly met by adopting collaborative information and communication technologies. Innovation and novelty were motivating factors for assimilating communication technologies. The enthusiasm to be part of a community is still present and partially replaces the extra effort generated by technology addiction.

It also identifies the need to support interdisciplinarity, as well as the need to identify potential research partners, paying particular attention to topics of common interest. Interdisciplinarity is seen by respondents both from an internal perspective, involving collaborations with researchers from the same institution and from an external perspective, with reference to partnerships with other educational institutions with similar or different profiles, research institutes and business units. A barrier to achieving this goal is, according to some respondents, the slightly flawed, incorrect approach to education. Thus, between universities or research institutes in Romania, regardless of their profile, there should be rather collaborative relationships, and not competition. At the same time, the need for partnerships with private universities is mentioned, but also with the business environment, based on which to be able to draw research directions from the practical sphere and not only those from the academic sphere. This proposed measure is more necessary as it could have a positive impact on student preparation and market demand. Another

argument is that some researchers have a penchant for practical topics, while others prefer to approach conceptual topics.

As such, without interdisciplinarity, no scientific progress can be highlighted, as an important, innovative idea will be associated with researchers from several fields of specialization. In addition, the equidistant approach to research topics and overcoming the challenges posed by the research agenda or funding policies adopted at institutional, national, or even European Union level are indicated. Therefore, one of the respondents' expectations is related to Romania's potential to insert proposals, starting from the topics of interest of Romanian researchers, in the European research agenda. At the same time, within the same discussion, the need to differentiate the research activity itself from the support activity is addressed, which consists of the set of management procedures and actions to manage all human, financial and time resources.

One respondent believes that these actions should nevertheless be undertaken by teachers familiar with the scientific content of the research, but who also have the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively manage all the resources involved in the project. However, respondents' expectations refer to the existence of a people pole and a motivational compensation system. A supplement comes from another respondent, who points out that the independence of researchers in choosing any topic of study they want can lead to a progress of the scientific environment, regardless of the work pace of everyone involved. However, according to some participants in the focus group, a real evolution of research cannot take place without a centralized vision at institutional level, or in the absence of involvement of decision-makers in the managerial sphere.

One of the expectations of the respondents is to ensure the transparency of the research activity, and for this purpose it is necessary, in their opinion, for each researcher to promote their ideas and work results - possibly online, on the institutional page - but also in within a common database at the level of the institution.

Regarding the evaluation of the research activity, the respondents state that they need and expect constant evaluation criteria, which should be maintained for a longer period, of at least 10 years. The unpredictability of these criteria would, in their opinion, be a demotivating factor in the way of being involved to a large extent in research. At the same time, as one of the participants in the focus group states, "the process can still be carried out based on the statements made by the researcher and then verified by the specialized department, but the standards and evaluation methods must be clear, not there are doubts about how to score each activity".

In addition to this idea, some respondents state that research results should be evaluated objectively and uniformly, and in the event of a failure in this activity, such as not accepting a research project for funding or not accepting a paper for publication, " feedback must be based on objective elements, related to specific requirements. Not only the shortcomings must be highlighted, but also a series of suggestions, advice, which will help in future corrections". The group discussion continues with two other interesting topics for the respondents, namely the inhibitory factors and those that motivate them and thus determine the level of their involvement in research.

Thus, the first category includes the unpredictability of evaluation criteria, research topics that change at short intervals, low frequency of competitions for research projects, lack of funding, complexity of applying for international grants, and the launch of announcements or transmission of information. useful shortly before the application or decisions are implemented. These were mentioned as the main difficulties faced by most respondents in the research activity. Other aspects were bureaucracy, subjectivism, and lack of consumables (paper, toner, printer, etc.). From the point of view of research ethics, none of the respondents mentioned that they faced this impediment.

Among the factors that motivate respondents to conduct research are personal satisfaction, the desire to promote in their careers, to enjoy professional recognition, but also the desire to update teaching materials, by including the results of their work - current results and valuable - in the courses they teach students, or in the case studies they discuss at seminar classes.

Only one respondent drew a link between the usefulness of the research results in the practical sphere and his / her own motivation to continue to be involved in the research activity.

The expectations of the respondents regarding the instruments for rewarding the results of the excellence of the research activity, they enumerate the possibility to take part in certain research internships within some profile universities abroad, or to benefit from sabbatical, which consists in a range six months in which researchers do not have teaching activities, but only research, as well as the opportunity to participate in preparatory workshops for application in an international competition.

At the level of several respondents, the idea is crystallized that a sustained effort is needed regarding the research activity and the involvement of human resources. Therefore, although currently the work teams are formed based on common interests, it is necessary to create and implement, at the level of each department, a coherent strategy. Its usefulness is all the greater, according to the respondents, as it can prevent situations in which there are difficulties of synchronization between different team members regarding the tasks of a research project.

Most focus group participants appreciate teamwork as an engine of professional development and outline the principles behind it. Also, among the key words defining the work team, mentioned in the qualitative research, are the free flow of information, total transparency, as well as the demonstration and application of team spirit.

Some respondents believe that interpersonal relationships are particularly helpful for professional progress, so in an ideal situation, teammates should support each other, help each other when they encounter difficulties in the research process.

However, some people acknowledge that it is difficult to create teams because they do not have a pro-active attitude and have not received proposals for collaboration from colleagues with similar topics of interest. A first reason identified would be the small number of those who find common research concerns, but also "asynchronous complementarity", as another respondent points out. He mentioned that it is ideal to find availability and complementarity in research, i.e., to allocate time and space to those involved, so that all tasks are completed in a timely manner.

These key points can be more easily achieved if the work team is smaller, otherwise there will be situations where some members work harder and cover the tasks of those who are hired to a lesser extent.

However, according to one participant in the focus group, a mixed approach is useful, namely the intertwining of the stages in which researchers work individually, with those in which each assumes tasks in a team.

Conclusion

From this discussion emerges the need for researchers to have a work plan, with human resources and time allocated to each activity, with commitments and promises respected, as well as a leader who can manage various moments of crisis when they affect the smooth running of research. Almost all respondents also addressed the topic of communication with the team leader, expressing their views on the leadership style they want.

Therefore, according to some of the participants, "it is necessary to have a close collaboration between the team members, and the coordinator to be a person who knows very well what each one must do, the level of involvement of each member and to correctly establish the tasks for each one. At the same time to be involved in the development of the project ". Regarding the leader or coordinator of the research activity, almost all respondents want a participatory style, but firm at the same time. Several key words could be extracted from the respondents' ideas regarding their expectations on the future of the research, at the end of the focus groups, among them the most common being: collaboration, performance, motivation, and internationalization.

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