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Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the functioning of companies from the perspective of employees

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Abstract

The main objective of the article is to indicate the impact of the pandemic on the Polish economy, with particular emphasis on businesses from the perspective of employees. The hypothesis is that the coronavirus pandemic negatively affected the functioning of the Polish economy. Taking up this topic is related to the various reactions of the government and European organizations to the emergence of a new threat and the significant role of health in the economy. This article is mainly empirical. The research was conducted using the method of standardized computer-assisted questionnaire interviews between March and April 2021. The questionnaire form was shared on social media in the student group and the group *Accounting – my passion* (in Polish *Księgowość moja pasja*). 120 entrepreneurs and employees (N=120) were surveyed. The negative impact of the coronavirus is perceived by almost all respondents and the mitigation instruments offered by the government are considered insufficient. It would be worthwhile to think about relief solutions in times of pandemic, the current opinion shows a negative perception of the measures introduced so far. The pandemic caused not only economic effects, but also affected many areas of people's lives, resulting in a negative perception of reality. The functioning during the lockdown was limited to the necessary minimum, therefore the quality of life was rated as average.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, human health has been tested many times, despite the development of medical innovations. Infectious diseases continue to pose a significant threat to social and economic life. The emergence of a global threat in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus influenced the choice of research problem. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that spreads very rapidly, it has contributed to the restriction of many civil liberties and those related to the conduct of broadly defined economic activities.

The main objective of this article is to indicate the impact of the pandemic on the Polish economy with a particular emphasis on enterprises from the perspective of employees. The hypothesis is that the coronavirus pandemic has a negative impact on the functioning of the Polish economy. Addressing this topic is related to the various reactions of the government and European organizations to the emergence of a new threat and the significant role of health in the economy.

2. Theoretical framework of the research

Health is of great importance in human life and society, and is an important contributor to human capital and of great significance for development. Throughout history, human health has been subjected to many tests, despite the development of medical innovations. Infectious diseases continue to pose a significant threat to social and economic life.

The COVID-19 acute respiratory disease, which has affected almost every country in the world, was caused by a new type of coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. A rapid increase in new cases, followed by an increase in secondary outbreaks was seen in many countries around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Czech, Karpio, Wielechowski, Woźniakowski, Żebrowska-Suchodolska, 2020, 20).

This disease appeared suddenly and spread very rapidly and intensively, making it difficult to assess its impact. For more than a year, the coronavirus pandemic has continued to spread, and its negative impact can be seen in everyday life. Despite a number of tools for risk identification and analysis, it was not possible to predict the threat that led to the global crisis. An economic crisis is defined as a deep and prolonged recession (Blanchard, 2009, 25).

According to many analysts, the current pandemic can be classified as a so-called “black swan” event. The source of this term is the title of Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s book *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. The coronavirus pandemic was an unexpected and unforeseen event on a global scale, with extremely powerful consequences (Szczepański, 2020, 55). Crises are such events and cause many changes. As a result of the lockdown in the first phase of the pan-

demic, many businesses in the service or manufacturing sector ceased to exist (del Rio-Chanona et al., 2020). The duration of the lockdown was one of the key elements that negatively affected the functioning of businesses (Bartik et al., 2020). Some companies failed, while others seized opportunities to grow. According to the Central Statistical Office (CSO) data, in 2020 there were 49 fewer enterprises operating than in 2019 (17,739 in 2019 compared to 17,690 in 2020) (Statistical Bulletin, 2021). Businesses belonging to the small and medium-sized enterprise sector experienced, either directly or indirectly, the negative impact of the so-called COVID-19 pandemic shocks (PARP, 2020). Data from the Central Statistical Office (Statistical Bulletin, 2021) indicate that in the second quarter of 2020 there were one-third (31.8%) fewer registered businesses in Poland than in the same period of the previous year, and there were 19.8% more business bankruptcies than in the same period of 2019. This means that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed worrying trends: a decline in the growth of new businesses and an increase in the number of liquidated companies. Therefore, it can be concluded that COVID-19 has negatively affected the economic situation and conditions for conducting business activities in Poland.

The decrease in the number of enterprises may be related to the uncertain situation in the country and the world, as well as numerous restrictions. In order to protect the state from the negative effects of the pandemic, the government adopted the law on special solutions related to preventing, counteracting and combating COVID-19 (Journal of Laws 2020, item 374). This act clarified the tasks of public administration bodies in preventing and combating SARS-CoV-2 infection and the spread of the infectious disease in humans. It also specified the principles of covering the costs of health care services and clarified issues in the area of child care and the granting of child care allowances to parents in the event of the closure of a crèche, kindergarten or school. Regulations were an extremely important aspect of socio-economic life (Ligaj, Pawlos, 2021, 44). In addition, the government introduced aid for entrepreneurs, called the anti-crisis shield (Journal of Laws 2020, item 695). The main objective of the anti-crisis shield was to protect the Polish economy and society from the effects of the coronavirus. The first part of the package was implemented on 31 March 2020, and as the epidemiological situation developed, subsequent solutions and amendments came into force. The objectives established by this instrument were to be achieved through a series of laws and a financial shield. Their value was estimated at over PLN 312 billion. The aid package was divided into five pillars: safety of employees, financing of enterprises, health care, strengthening of the financial system, and the public investment program. Each of them covered a different area of activity and the estimated value of the aid varied (PFR, 2021). Within the anti-crisis shield, PLN 212 billion are earmarked for measures under the five pillars described above, while the remaining amount, i.e. PLN 100 billion, is additional funding under the financial shield of the Polish Assistance Fund for Companies and Employees. The

funds are intended to support the financial liquidity of micro, small, medium, and large enterprises. The financial shield is also intended to minimize the effects of the spring lockdown and help entrepreneurs return to normality. The proper functioning of enterprises is of great importance for the economy, which is why such a large amount is earmarked for this purpose (PFR, 2021). Many businesses used this assistance to get through this difficult period.

3. Research methodology

The aim of this empirical study was to identify the changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic in companies. It was conducted between March and April 2021, using the method of standardized computer-assisted questionnaire interviews. The questionnaire form was shared on social media in the student group and the *Accounting – my passion* group.

The survey included 120 entrepreneurs and employees (N=120) who were first asked about their characteristics, i.e. gender, age, place of residence, place of work, number of people employed in the company, and economic sector. The respondents were from different regions of Poland.

The majority of the respondents are women, making up almost 70% of the sample. The number of men taking part in the survey is 37, half the number of women, representing more than 30% of the sample.

The largest group is made up of people between the ages of 21 and 30, which may be related to the fact they spend more time on social media, where the survey was published. The group of 21–30 year-old consisted of 96 respondents, with the second largest group being respondents aged 31–40, who make up 9.17% of the sample. There is only one person in the 61+ age group.

Most of the respondents, i.e. 54 people, live in rural areas. It is worth stressing the fact that from the large group of village residents only seven people work on a farm. Inhabitants of big cities (over 250 thousand people) are a little less numerous (37 people).

Most of the employed respondents, 81 people, declared employment in a private company. Six people, or 5% of the sample, owned a company. 26 worked in a state institution and seven in a farm, i.e. 21.67% and 5.83% respectively.

The penultimate parameter relevant to the study sample is the size of employment in the respondent's enterprise. It can be observed that contrary to other elements, the number of employees in micro, small, medium and large enterprises is comparable. Nevertheless, most respondents work in a company with a maximum of 10 employees and the fewest in a company with 50–250 employees.

In the case of farms, respondents indicated 0–10 people, probably because they run it independently with a spouse and sometimes with the help of an additional employee. Among the respondents, people working in private micro-enterprises had a significant advantage, as 29 people, i.e. about 24%, declared it. Those

employed in public institutions most often indicated medium and large entities. At the time of the survey, the company owners ran four micro enterprises and two small companies.

The most common economic sector was trade, with 25 people working in it, followed by finance and insurance with 14, and transportation with 10. These three economic sectors account for as much as 40% of the respondents. The lowest number of respondents came from housing and intangible utilities and forestry.

4. Results

Respondents agreed that the coronavirus has a negative impact on the Polish economy. As many as 94.17% of respondents gave such an answer, while the remaining 5.83% indicated a neutral impact of the pandemic on the economy. The above results indicate that the working population did not notice any benefits from the pandemic. It can be assumed that not only the employed would choose such an answer, and that measures aimed at limiting the spread of the disease are adversely affecting the activity of all sectors of the economy. The prolonged duration of the pandemic represents multi million-dollar losses for the state budget. The emergence of the disease has affected the functioning of society, in the form of a decrease in its activity. Reduced demand and restrictions in the form of lockdowns hamper economic development, eliminate jobs and may even lead to recession. The negative impact is therefore noticeable, but it is impossible to say how much the pandemic will affect the economy without knowing the duration of the lockdown.

The next question asked about the impact of coronavirus on company employment. The majority of respondents, 62.5%, indicated that employment in the company where they work remained unchanged. This included five business owners and 70 employees. According to 24.17% of the respondents, employment decreased, which was reported mostly by people employed in private companies. In the answers of the respondents the decrease of employment is more evident than the increase, however, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the development of enterprises in such a difficult time. Almost 11% of the respondents noted an increase in employment in their company, while the remaining 2.5% answered "don't know". An in-depth analysis of the survey revealed that as many as 30% of those who said they worked in trade reported a decrease in employment. Despite the small group from government, three out of seven responded that the pandemic had affected employment in a negative way. 80% of the respondents from the transport industry, saw no change in employment, while 20% indicated an increase in employment. Surprisingly, this industry is the fifth most affected by the pandemic according to the respondents.

Another question concerned the assessment of the current situation of enterprises and the country. The respondents could express their opinion on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant the lowest rating and 5 the highest.

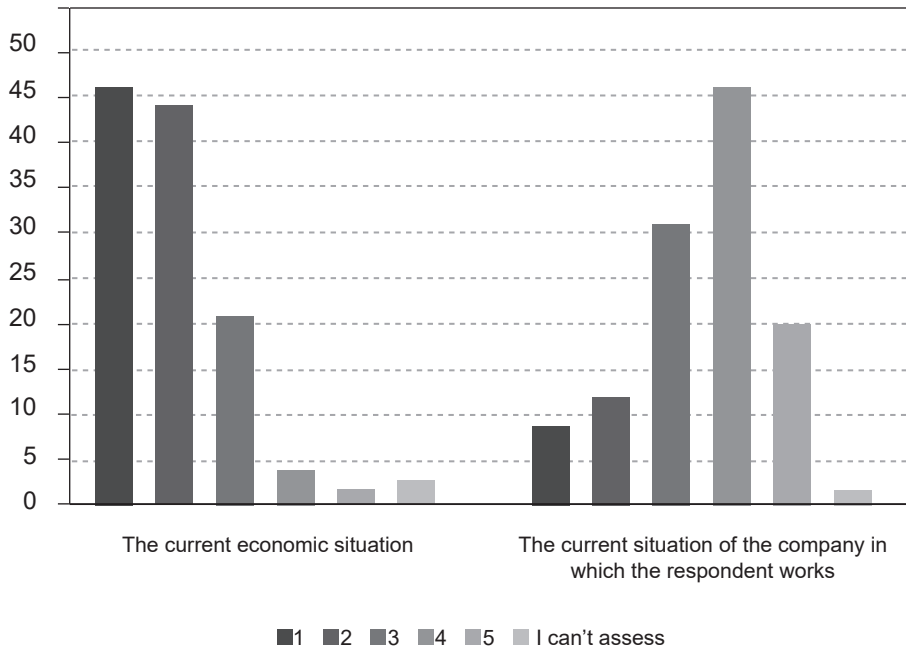


Figure 1. Assessment of the current state of business and the country

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

The research conducted shows that the current economic situation is poor in the eyes of working people (Figure 1). As many as 75% of the respondents rated the current situation of the country at 1 and 2 points, which are the lowest scores on the scale. 17.5% of the respondents marked the answer “3”, which can be interpreted as a neutral reference to the examined topic. Only 4% of the respondents, indicated answers 4 and above, and the rest marked the answer “cannot assess”. When evaluating the current situation of the enterprises they work for, the respondents most often marked 4, the largest group being people working in large companies, followed by micro-enterprises. The distribution of answers, in comparison to the previous chart, is much more shifted towards the highest ratings. Few people, 17.5%, indicated the lowest ratings of 1 and 2. It is worth stressing the fact that the economic situation of the country is rated much lower than the current situation of enterprises.

In the next question, respondents were asked to assess the government’s actions aimed at improving the situation in Poland. It was structured in a similar way as the previous one.

Figure 2 shows the overall assessment of the government’s efforts to improve the situation in Poland, as well as the most important instruments set up for this purpose. As can be seen, the lowest rating appeared most frequently among the

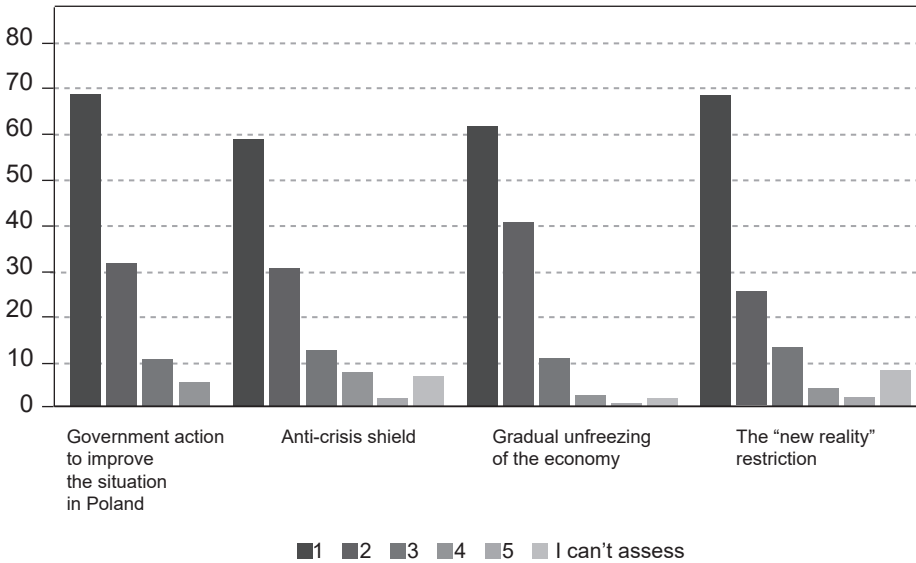


Figure 2. Assessment of government action to improve the situation in Poland

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

respondents' answers. It is worth stressing that the graphs evaluating general activities and specific solutions are very similar. According to the respondents, the support from the government is insufficient, which is evidenced by low ratings of the main aid instruments. As can be seen, the issue of enterprise support must be constantly adapted to growing problems. The actions of the government restricting the activity of the economy significantly affected the functioning of enterprises. The aim was to react quickly to the growing number of cases of COVID-19, nevertheless the society was not prepared for such drastic changes. The aid packages prepared by the government do not cover all enterprises, which is why the respondents' ratings are so low.

When asked about the use of government aid in 2020, the distribution of the respondents' answers is quite even. The largest number of respondents (37.5%) answered that no aid packages were used in their enterprise, followed by 34.17% who answered "don't know". Among the respondents who gave a positive answer (28.33%), the largest group are people working in private micro-enterprises. The aid tools prepared by the government are aimed at companies meeting certain criteria, despite constant extensions the support is insufficient for such a scale of the problem and therefore companies often have to cope on their own.

The next question sought to determine whether the sale of products/services had shifted to the Internet due to the pandemic.

The majority of respondents indicated that the sales of the companies where they are employed have not shifted to the Internet due to the pandemic (55.83%),

while 15% of the respondents indicated that the products/services of their companies can be purchased electronically. 17.5% of the sample declared that some sales had been transferred to the e-commerce market and the rest were unable to answer this question. Due to the diversity of economic sectors in the survey sample, the significant prevalence of “no” answers is due to the fact that not every business can be moved online, and such a step is a big challenge for the entrepreneur and employees.

In the next question, the respondents had to rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is a decrease in price and 5 is an increase in price, how the price of products and services offered by the enterprise has changed compared to the time before the pandemic.

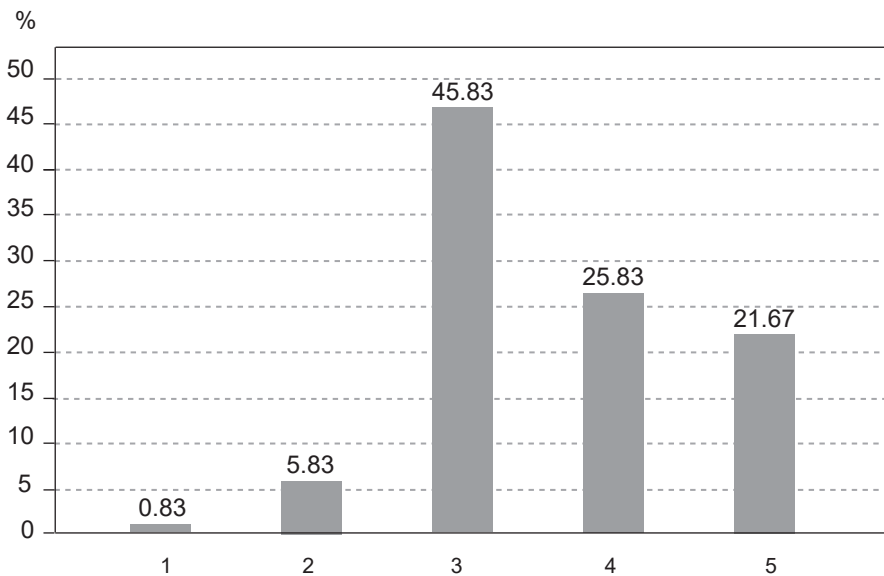


Figure 3. Change in the price of products/services offered by the company

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

Respondents were asked to indicate how the price of services/products offered by the company has changed compared to the pre-pandemic period. In most cases (45.83%), the respondents pointed out that the price has remained the same, this is evidenced by number 3 being the most popular answer. As can be seen in the graph significantly more people believe that prices have increased than decreased. 21.67% of the respondents noticed significant increases and 25.83% indicated that prices increased to some extent. Increases are declared by many sectors of the economy, among others due to adaptation to sanitary guidelines and new taxes (Figure 3).

In the next question, the respondents were asked to indicate the most visible changes resulting from the epidemiological situation.

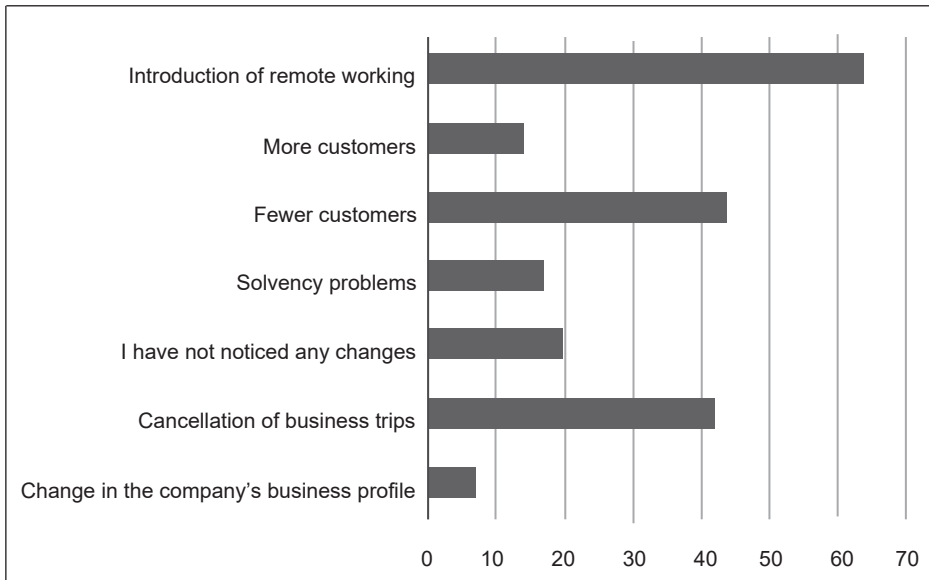


Figure 4. Changes in the company caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

Most people, more than half of those surveyed, cited the introduction of remote working as a change in the company caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the balance between personal and professional life has been significantly disturbed. It should also be noted that as a result of this change, the productivity of employees, may be reduced, influenced by isolation, the lack of a suitable place dedicated exclusively to work and sometimes non-standard working hours. Despite the initial disadvantages of remote working, it is highly likely that some companies will continue to use this method of service provision after the pandemic. Farther down the chart was the answer “fewer clients”, with a similarly popular response indicating the cancellation of business trips. 14 respondents indicated an increase in the number of customers. The respondents’ answers show that one in six companies has solvency problems and less than 6% indicated a change in business profile. Additionally, this question allowed for an open answer, which was used by two respondents, who indicated the following changes: the reduction of the number of full-time employees and less or no loads to the European Union. The survey showed that the changes caused by the coronavirus in Poland are of a diverse nature.

In the next question, the survey participants were asked to indicate the impact of the pandemic on the company they work for.

Figure 5 shows the impact of the pandemic on businesses in 2020, according to those who are employed. The largest number of respondents indicated a reduction in activity, largely related to the nationwide restrictions on running a business. A large group of respondents (36.67%) marked the answer “I have not noticed any impact”. Suspension of business and expansion of business represent the same result. Only one person indicated business closure as an impact of the pandemic.

As it turns out, despite the lack of adequate support from the government, companies largely intend to continue operations, with as many as 95% of the respondents giving this answer. The remaining 5% chose “I don’t know”, while none of the respondents marked an answer that the enterprise does not plan to continue its activity.

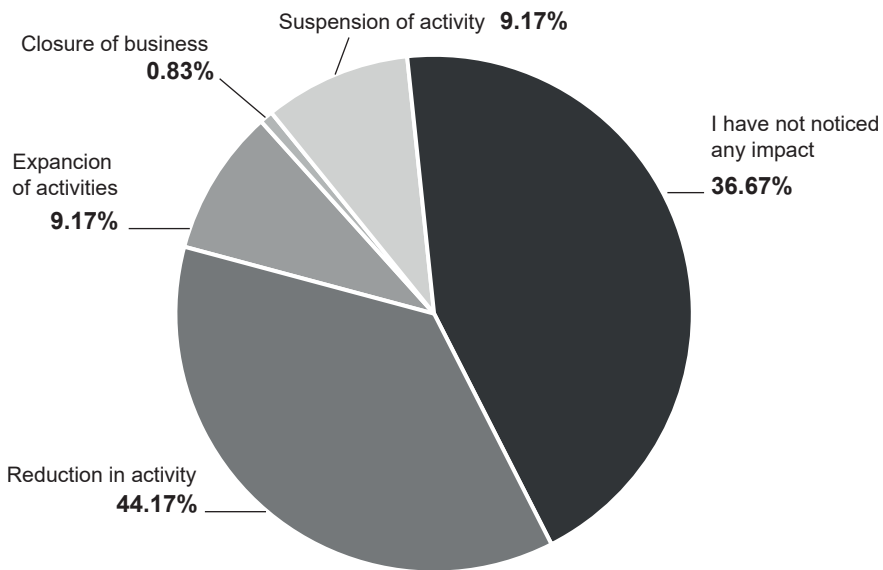


Figure 5. Impact of the pandemic on businesses in 2020

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

The survey found that 56.67% of working people see an increase in the cost of doing business. 35% of the respondents answered “hard to say” and the remaining 8.33% indicated no change in costs due to the pandemic. It is worth noting that the government restrictions have made it more difficult to run business, therefore, among the companies there were some whose revenues decreased and fixed costs remained unchanged, such a situation is a big challenge for those running their business. The rising costs are passed on to consumers, resulting in ever higher prices for products and services.

Nearly half of those surveyed said that the pandemic did not affect their business profits in 2020. A large proportion of the respondents, as many as 1/3, did

not respond to the above question, choosing the answer “difficult to say”. 20% of the respondents indicated that the pandemic had a positive impact on company profits. The increase in profits during the pandemic is facilitated by the possibility of moving sales to the Internet, and thus reaching a larger group of customers, better organization of work and the sector which is particularly popular at the moment, including the pharmaceutical industry, production of disinfectants and hygiene products.

In the next question, respondents were asked about their financial situation during the pandemic. The majority of respondents – 54.17% – are people whose financial situation did not change during the pandemic. Those who declared a change constitute 38.3% of the surveyed sample, among them 67.4% reported an increase in earnings, while the rest stated that their income from work decreased. Additionally, 7.5% of the respondents marked the answer “difficult to say”. The worst scenario from the point of view of a working person is the loss of employment, however, a situation may arise in which an employee performing the same duties receives a lower salary. The survey shows that 63% of the respondents answered that the employment in the company has not changed, however, among these people almost 20% noticed a change in the financial situation in the form of a lower salary.

The question asked respondents to mark the industries they felt were most affected by the coronavirus. They were able to select several answers and had the opportunity to add their own.

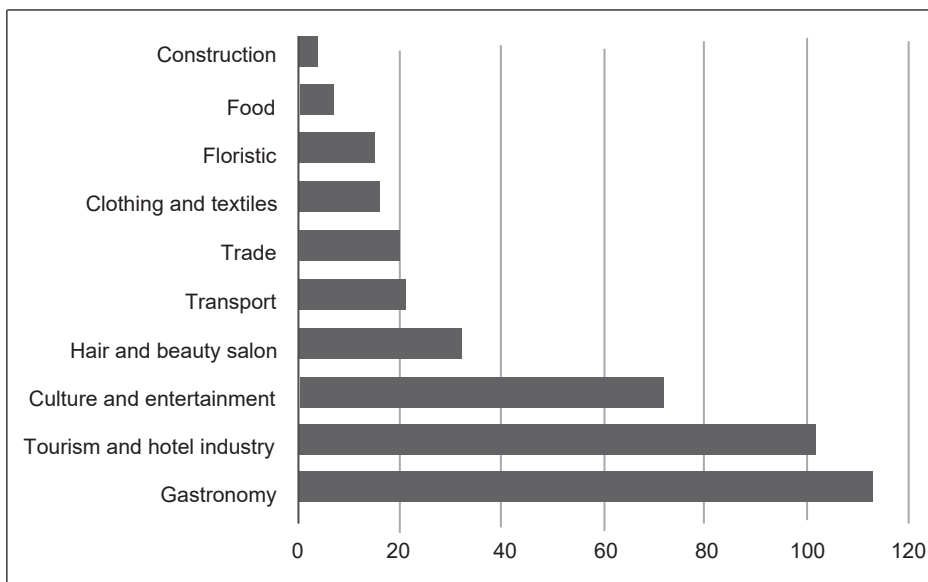


Figure 6. Industries most affected by the pandemic

Source: own compilation on the basis of surveys.

The results of the survey proved that many industries are affected by the coronavirus. The most popular answer was the catering industry, which was cited by as many as 94% of respondents. This is due to the fact that catering establishments have been subject to restrictions for the longest period of time and when the incidence increases, their operations are the first to be curtailed. Then the respondents chose the tourism and hotel industry, followed by culture and entertainment. The least respondents indicated the construction, food, and florist industries. In response to this question, there was an opportunity to enter a separate answer, which was used by three persons indicating the wedding, bridal and event industry.

In the next question, respondents were asked to choose which areas they thought were most affected by the pandemic. In this case, they could choose several answers.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on people's lives, with as many as 85 respondents answering that leisure and hobbies was the area most affected, followed by 69 respondents ticking health and 58 ticking friends. The lowest percentages of respondents indicated faith and spirituality and knowledge and skills. Special attention was given to entertainment and hobbies this is due to the limited functioning in these areas. Safety and health play an extremely important role in people's lives, their threats cause anxiety and stress, therefore this area was ranked second in terms of frequency.

The next question asked respondents whether they were worried about their professional future. This question was used in order to be able to link the issue of material situation with the concern about their professional future. Among the respondents, 50% answered that they were worried about their livelihood in their current situation and 34.17% were not worried. The answer "difficult to say" was indicated by 15.83% of the respondents. The survey shows a strong correlation between changes in financial situation and future prospects. Among those whose earnings have decreased as a result of the pandemic, as many as 70% are worried about their professional future. 43% of respondents with a stable financial situation are worried about how the future will look, while the same percentage is not worried about the future. Those whose earnings have increased are the least worried about their professional future.

The last question asks about the assessment of the quality of life during a pandemic. The majority of respondents about 42.5% believe that their quality of life during a pandemic is average, and 31.67% that it is quite good. 16.67% of the respondents rate their life as not very successful and 5% as unsuccessful. Only 4.17% of working people marked the answer "successful". Before the pandemic, people were able to develop their skills, gain new experiences, and meet with family and friends, such activities significantly improve the well-being and quality of life. The coronavirus has caused social isolation, which has a negative impact on people's mental and physical well-being. It is also reasonable to assume that the quality of life would have been rated much higher before the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic has left its mark on the economy at the macro level. It is predicted that the COVID-19 outbreak will have major ramifications for global GDP growth (May, 2020). Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19, the global GDP is likely to be affected between 2.3% to 4.8% (ADB, 2020). Additionally, it has also been predicted that the pandemic may cause global foreign direct investment to shrink by 5%–15% (UNCTAD, 2020b). The emergence of a new threat caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has forced a number of restrictions in many areas of social and economic activity.

Entrepreneurs and workers noted the negative impact of the coronavirus on the country's current economic situation, but the exact impact depends on the duration of the pandemic.

The majority of respondents indicated that employment in the company where they work has not changed. As can be seen, cost-cutting in the form of layoffs was a last resort for employers. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), almost 25 million people around the globe could lose their jobs (a loss in workers' income of up to USD 3.4 trillion) (ILO, 2020c). A more recent ILO report shows that lockdown (full or partial) measures are influencing 81% (around 2.7 billion workers) of the total global workers (ILO, 2020b).

One in three companies has moved all or part of its operations to the internet as a result of the current situation. Among those surveyed were economic sectors whose operations cannot be moved to the online world. In the face of events related to the coronavirus, many industries experience its negative effects, but it is worth noting that the e-commerce industry has gained significantly, and its development has accelerated.

Changes resulting from the emergence of the coronavirus in Poland are of a diverse nature, this has to do with the changes introduced by companies. The most frequently noticed change is the introduction of remote working, which, depending on the situation in which the employees find themselves, can be positive or negative. According to a study conducted by W. Sadecki, the overwhelming majority, nearly three-quarters (72%) of the entrepreneurs surveyed, did not have the habit of working remotely before the pandemic. 56% of respondents had remote work incidentally before the pandemic, and for 16% it was a complete novelty. After the pandemic restrictions – especially during the peak of the disease, when the restrictions were most stringent – remote work became a necessity to keep the business alive (Sadecki 2022). Lack of preparation, inadequate workplace, the disturbed barrier between private and professional life are the main disadvantages, but the flexibility resulting from this form of employment and the time saving will allow people who cannot devote all their time to work to develop. After the pandemic, this form of employment will continue to be popular and many companies will use it. Employees of small and medium-sized enterprises quickly adapted to the

new conditions and quite efficiently adopted the remote working model to their needs (Sliż, 2020).

Among the negative changes in companies, respondents noted a decrease in the number of clients, cancellation of business trips and problems with solvency. Employers and employees most frequently cited a reduction in business as the impact of COVID-19 on businesses, which is largely related to the restrictions introduced by the government.

Almost all of the businesses where respondents are employed intend to continue their operations. This is a very positive development, indicating that entrepreneurs are coping with the difficult situation, sometimes with the help of government packages.

The majority of respondents indicated that the pandemic did not affect the increase in business profits. It is worth noting that every 5th person declared that company profits increased. The time of the pandemic is a great challenge for entrepreneurs, the possibility of moving sales to the Internet, and thus increasing the number of potential customers, translates into financial achievements of the company.

Every 5th person, who declared that employment remained unchanged, had a decrease in salary. People indicating that employment decreased are more often worried about their professional future than respondents indicating no changes in personnel. A stable financial situation is important for productivity and commitment to work.

According to the respondents, the industries most affected by the coronavirus are catering, tourism and hospitality, and culture and entertainment, due to the greatest restrictions imposed on these industries. It is worth paying more attention to the risks posed by the outbreak of the virus.

A significant proportion of respondents indicated an average quality of life during the pandemic. Less social activity meant that all areas of people's lives suffered, including leisure and hobbies, health and friends. Restrictions and isolation are the main reasons for poorer well-being during the pandemic.

Government support for businesses is rated very low, benefiting selected companies that meet several criteria. Among respondents who confirmed benefiting from government support, the largest group are those working in private micro-enterprises. The reaction of the Polish government to the appearance of the virus in Poland was immediate, the closure of the economy was supposed to protect against the disease, but entrepreneurs were not prepared for such drastic changes. The aid packages are inadequate, and entrepreneurs have had to cope with the problems they encountered largely on their own.

The pandemic has not only had an economic impact, but has also affected many areas of people's lives that have a major impact on proper functioning. The majority of respondents rated their quality of life during the pandemic as average,

and half of those surveyed worried about their professional future. The emergence of the virus has worsened the quality of life.

In summary, the impact of the coronavirus on the Polish economy is significant. The situation is very dynamic and the duration and restrictions significantly determine the extent of negative changes. The invention of a vaccine and appropriate public education on this issue may limit the adverse effects. The pandemic has posed a threat to the functioning of many enterprises, but has also provided an opportunity for new solutions and innovations.

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