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# THE USE OF EMPLOYEE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT METHODS IN SLOVAKIA BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lukáš SMEREK

Department of Corporate Economics and Management, Faculty of Economics,  
Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world and in a relatively short time has grown global and has changed the behaviour of individuals and companies for more than three years now. We can observe its consequences in every sphere of life, including HRM and its components. The aim of the paper is to find out whether there were changes in the methods of training and development of employees in Slovak companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention was to find out whether the number of employee training and development methods used changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and if so, which ones were used less often during the pandemic than before the pandemic, and which ones, on the contrary, were used more often. The research was carried out using a questionnaire survey on a sample of 308 employees of Slovak companies. Statistical methods such as mean, median or mode, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and McNemar Test were used to analyse the answers. One of the main findings is the fact that among the interviewed employees there was a decrease in the used methods of training and development, especially in the use of workshops, coaching, mentoring and instructing. The only method that began to be used more often during the COVID-19 pandemic was e-learning.

*Keywords: human resource management; training and development; COVID-19; Slovak employees*

**JEL Classification: 3 codes M12, M53, O15**

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been indelibly written in the history of mankind. Its greatest tragedy is that it claimed a large number of human lives. At the same time, however, it paralyzed cities, businesses and cut people off from their loved ones for many months. In order to protect the life and health of the most endangered population, the governments of many countries have taken various, often unpopular, measures. The most common concerns were caused by restrictions on the movement

of people, the closure of public spaces and increased demands on personal hygiene. Each country dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic in a different way, and companies had to react accordingly. The measures affected the daily functioning of not only families and individuals, but also had an impact on business processes, including human resource management. Among the most common measures that did not require the complete cancellation or stopping of established processes was the transfer of activities to the online space. Although working in the online space is widespread and very popular today, there are activities that require personal interference from employees. In the field of training and employee development, theoretically, all the most frequently used methods could be implemented online. But the question is whether companies perceive their added value even in the conditions of the online world, or whether they approach online training and development cautiously. The immediate readiness and technical equipment of companies or employees in their home environment is also an important factor in the transfer of training and development activities to the online space. We can therefore assume that companies are rather inclined to dampen training and development activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**RQ1:** Were there any changes in the number of methods of training and development of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**H1:** The overall number of used training and development methods in Slovakia decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Theoretical background

Human resource management is not static. On the contrary, over time, due to the changing needs of the dominant generations on the labour market and as a result of more and more opportunities for companies, HRM is changing, expanding and becoming more complex. HRM includes work with employees in the company, which carries the elements of both operational and strategic activities. Therefore, we can consider the main goal of HRM to be the use of everything that employees know and can do to achieve the company's short-term and long-term goals. Individual-level HRM processes are focused on individuals and are often highly personalized. Most often, these are processes such as employee adaptation, evaluation of their performance and potential, training and development, or career planning (Rahn, 2012).

Employee training and development are human resource management activities used to fill gaps between current and expected performance. They represent organized activities aimed at disseminating information or instructions to improve the recipient's performance or to assist in achieving a desired level of knowledge or skill. They are part of knowledge management and knowledge transfer and play a crucial role in human resources management (Poór et al., 2018). The training and development of employees are strategic tools to increase the knowledge, abilities and skills of employees for current and future work requirements. This increases the competitiveness of the company in the global market because the knowledge, abilities and skills of employees acquired through training and development are unique and inimitable (Murtiningsih, 2020). Generally, companies are aware that the training and development of their employees is important for business success (Kucharčíková et al., 2018). Misiak-Kwit (2020) consider inaccessibility to the training and development of employees as one of the barriers preventing companies from growing. Moreover, compared to employees without further training, those who have engaged in professional development have considerably lower risks of premature termination of

their employment relationship (Becker, 2019). Employee engagement should not be a one-time implementation, but should be part of the corporate culture and visible in the daily work of all employees (Chanana, Sangeeta, 2021). Engaged employees are always optimistic, keep good interpersonal rapport with each other, and also show a high level of performance in the company (Jena et al., 2018). Providing appropriate training and development opportunities and clear performance evaluation criteria will also enable the workforce to work hard to achieve competitiveness in an ever-changing business environment (Al-Kassem, 2021). Training and development are significantly and positively associated with the construct of employee job satisfaction and that these relationships are highly significant in businesses (Ohene Afriyie et al., 2022). Employees could feel motivated to participate continuously in further training in order to guarantee their prospects of receiving benefits by improving their ability to react to the consequences of technological change (e.g. automation or rationalization) (Becker, Schömann 2015). It is a process of imparting basic skills, programmed behaviour, so that individuals become aware of rules and procedures to help them manage their own behaviour in the effective performance of their work. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, there are certain differences between them, especially in the goals they pursue. Training is aimed at improving the skills needed to achieve company goals, as it increases the effectiveness of individuals, groups and the entire company. We understand corporate training as investing in employees with the aim of achieving better performance. Its results are applied to the job where the employee is currently working. So it mainly helps in performing current tasks. The specific goals of training mainly include aligning the knowledge, abilities and skills of employees with job requirements, developing employee skills and improving their performance, eliminating undesirable employee behaviour and adjusting the value orientation of employees to be in line with corporate values (Rodriguez, Walters, 2017).

Although the concept of employee development can also be considered as further training, it focuses on acquiring new abilities and skills for personal growth, increasing qualifications, acquiring knowledge, developing abilities and skills needed in a different, usually more demanding and important job. Improving qualifications includes learning and acquiring new knowledge, skills, and abilities that an employee needs to be able, or qualified to perform a different job (Šikýř, 2016). In the case of retraining, there is the acquisition and mastering of completely new skills, knowledge and abilities, which are not necessary for the performance of current work tasks, but for the employees to increase their qualifications in the given company, or also outside it, or to be able to apply them in another job as well (PeopleHum, 2021). We understand employee development as a preparation for performing higher qualified work or work with higher responsibilities. It can also be seen as a broader concept. It can be considered as the overall long-term growth of individuals for the purpose of fulfilling future tasks and responsibilities, for the needs of their promotion and management of their career in the company (Elnaga, Imran, 2013). It helps with professional orientation for the future, shapes work skills, personal qualities and potential. Development activities should signal to employees that the company is interested in employing them in the long run (Hitka et al., 2021). Development goals primarily include helping employees to grow and develop their potential in the company, promoting employees and planning their careers, meeting the future demand for human resources, mainly from internal sources, and reducing the time required for the training and adaptation of employees starting to work in a newly created workplace or transferred to another job or employees promoted in the company (Nassazi, 2013). Thus, training involves planning for preparing different

learning techniques for the staff in order to increase their ability to reach the targeted goal. While development is interested in understanding the mechanisms of things, and future issues not only current process as a general, it seeks future demands and it occurs over a longer period of time than training which is happening at the present time and deals with every single staff responsibility (Anwar, Ghafoor, 2017).

Both training and development consist of prepared plans and ways to assist the employee in terms of their current skills, behaviours and their way of acting in the working environment (Nechirwan et al., 2021). However, systematic training and the development of employees according to their individual needs began to appear in management from the 1950s to 1970s (Stachová et al., 2020). The implementation of training or development is the most important phase of the whole process. It is important to realize that the quality of the entire training process directly affects other personnel activities, and therefore it is very important that the company chooses the most appropriate training method. The success of training programs depends on the methods of training used by the company. When selecting from training methods, the following factors must be considered as they highly contribute to the effectiveness of training programs. Such factors include: objectives of training, cost of training, time of training, location of training, frequency of training, suitability of training methods, content of training, delivery style, capability of application, trainer's capabilities and employees willingness to learn and apply (Abdulraheem Sal, 2016). By applying appropriate methods, inputs are transformed into outputs, which take the form of increased performance, productivity and efficiency of work, new roles in the company, higher responsibility at work. Part of the implementation phase of employee training and development programs is the key choice of an adequate form and method. The first of them is the form of training at the workplace, the so-called On-the-job (formal, informal, interpersonal education), and the other one outside the workplace - off-the-job (institutionalized, lifelong education). Nowadays, the corporate sector is increasingly using mobile technologies to train employees and develop their skills and competences. This learning methodology is known as mobile learning (mlearning) (Butler, A. et al., 2021). Currently, however, such methods are applied only in the most advanced companies with strong material security or with a strong connection to the IT sector. The most common methods used in Slovakia are usually the more traditional ones. They are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 Methods of training and development of employees*

<b>On-the-job methods</b>	<b>Off-the-job methods</b>
Instructing	Lecture
Coaching	Seminar
Mentoring	Case studies
Counselling	Workshop
Assisting	Brainstorming
Task assignment	Simulations
Cross-training program	Role playing
Work meetings	Diagnostic-training program
Demonstrating	E-learning

<b>Shadowing</b>	Self-Study
<b>Consulting</b>	Development centre
<b>Job rotation</b>	

Source: Koubek (2015)

On-the-job training is the basic means of providing effective and concentrated training in most areas related to finance, administration practical management etc. This type of training allows employees to learn and apply the lessons and respond to situations in a good manner while performing their daily tasks (Anwar, Abdullah, 2021). On the other hand, off-the-job training is away from the working environment. Employees get appropriate training similar to that provided at work, but in a different environment. A special environment is arranged to facilitate maximum interaction between trainers and trainees (Anwar, 2017). Employees are usually expected to prefer general training, as opposed to on-the-job training, since the latter ones often focus on firm-specific human capital. This type of training cannot be fully utilised in other companies, and is rarely certified, and as such, is rarely acknowledged by other employers (Becker, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic means a great challenge for business managers operating in various fields to consider the implementation of new management methods and tools in this unstable and changing world. Dvouletý (2021) claims that after the end of 2020 there may not have been a significant drop in business activities. On the contrary, his research indicates that activity has increased and even increased to a level higher than in 2019. However, procedures and practices in human resources management, including the management itself, are affected by COVID-19 just like other activities in businesses (Tomčíková et al., 2021). Remote working, creating virtual teams and knowledge management are some of the many practices that most companies are adopting as a concept to keep companies running smoothly (Carnevale, Hatak, 2020). The big change is the popularization of e-learning as a training and development method and the growing supply of ready-made lectures, courses and modules. Demand for e-learning is reported even by companies that have never used it before (Mikołajczyk, 2021). Similarly, Ribbers and Waringa (2015) claim that in a rapidly moving world, internet connection is an inevitable development for every coach, mentor or instructor. Moreover, Rahmadi et al. (2021) claim that the transfer of the mentioned methods to the online space is one of the solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. All other missing training and development methods can be replaced by self-study, since employees do not receive enough support from companies. Intrinsic motivation plays a key role in this.

**RQ2:** Which methods were used less frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic?

**H2a:** Workshops were used less frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

**H2b:** Model situations were used less frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

**H2c:** Role plays were used less frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

**RQ3:** Which methods were used more often during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic?

**H3a:** E-learning was used more often during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

**H3b:** Self-education was used more Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

**RQ4:** Were there any methods whose frequency of use has not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**H4a:** The frequency of use of coaching has not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**H4b:** The frequency of use of mentoring has not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic

**H4c:** The frequency of use of instructing has not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Material and methods

The aim of the paper is to find out whether there were any changes in the methods of training and development of employees in Slovak companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected data using a questionnaire.

In the questionnaire survey, we asked the respondents whether they were trained or developed before and during the pandemic and, if so, what methods were used. The respondents who took part in the survey were Slovak employees. In order to be able to assess and compare the situation before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with the situation during the pandemic, we worked with respondents who had worked for their company for at least two years. Employees with a shorter employment relationship could not evaluate the changes in professional training and development. The survey was attended by 308 compliant respondents who were approached through social networks or by direct selection. The questionnaire survey was carried out in the first half of 2022. We evaluated the summarized numerical results of the responses from the questionnaire survey using statistical methods such as mean, median or mode, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and McNemar Test.

## Results

In search of an answer to the first research question, we focused on the number of methods by which employees were trained or developed. Due to anti-pandemic measures and several lockdowns, we assumed that the number of used methods had decreased. To verify this assumption, we present the descriptive statistics of the number of methods in Table 2.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the number of used methods

	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Valid N	308	308
Missing N	0	0
Mean	2.86	1.42
Median	3	1
Mode	0	0
Std. Deviation	2.08	1.49
Minimum	0	0
Maximum	7	5

Before COVID-19		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
No. of methods	0	86	27.92	27.92
	1	4	1.30	29.22
	2	26	8.44	37.66
	3	47	15.26	52.92
	4	66	21.43	74.35
	5	55	17.86	92.21
	6	22	7.14	99.35
	7	2	0.65	100.00
	Total	308	100.00	
During COVID-19		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
No. of methods	0	133	43.18	43.18
	1	35	11.36	54.55
	2	61	19.81	74.35
	3	46	14.94	89.29
	4	24	7.79	97.08
	5	9	2.92	100.00
	Total	308	100.00	

Source: own elaboration

As it can be seen at first glance, our assumption has been confirmed. While before the COVID-19 pandemic each employee encountered an average of 2.89 methods, during the pandemic the average value dropped to 1.42. It is also worth mentioning the fact that before the pandemic, 27.92% of the surveyed employees had no training or development at all, while during the pandemic it was up to 43.18% of the surveyed ones. Moreover, while before the pandemic employees could encounter a combination of 6 or 7 training methods (7.79% of respondents), during the pandemic it was maximum 4 – 5 methods (10.71% of respondents). Subsequently, we tested the number of used training and development methods with the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, which tests the null hypothesis that the medians of the methods before and during the pandemics are equal against the alternative hypothesis that they are different. We performed the testing at the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
During/ Before COVID-19	Negative Ranks	175a (56.82%)	115.40	20194.50
	Positive Ranks	35b (11.36%)	56.01	1960.50
	Ties	98c (31.82%)		
	Total	308		

	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
	- 10.404	0.000

Source: own elaboration

a. N During COVID-19 < N Before COVID-19

b. N During COVID-19 > N Before COVID-19

c. N During COVID-19 = N Before COVID-19

As we can see from the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test ( $Z = -10.404$ ; Asymp. Sig < 0.05), during the COVID-19 pandemic there were changes in the methods of training and development of employees. However, it is interesting to note that the decrease in the number of used methods was witnessed by 56.82% of respondents, while 31.82% of respondents did not change the number of implemented methods. In 11.36% of cases, the number of training and development methods used even increased. This points to the fact that some companies have taken advantage of their reduced production capacity during the pandemic to invest in the training and development of their employees. However, we confirm hypothesis H1 and claim that the overall number of used training and development methods in Slovakia decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For an even deeper understanding of the changes, we were interested in what changes occurred during the implementation of individual training and development methods. For our analysis, we selected the 8 most frequently mentioned methods, shown in Table 4. We determined the difference in their use by using the McNemar Test, which tests the null hypothesis that the use of individual methods before and during the pandemic was the same against the alternative hypothesis, that the use of methods was different. We performed the testing at a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Results of McNemar Test

Before / During	N	Chi-Squarea	Asymp. Sig.
Coaching	308	60.016	0.000
Mentoring	308	68.014	0.000
Instructing	308	80.012	0.000
Workshop	308	149.007	0.000
E-learning	308	8.108	0.004
Model situations	308	37.026	0.000
Role playing	308	25.037	0.000
Self-Study	308	16.598	0.000
None	308	24.322	0.000

Source: own elaboration

a. Continuity Corrected

Looking at the results (Asymp. Sig < 0.05 in all cases), we reject all null hypotheses and conclude that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a statistically significant change in the frequency of use of all training and development methods. There was also a statistically significant change in the number of respondents who were not provided with any education. We can therefore unequivocally answer RQ1 that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a change in the use of all training and development methods in Slovakia.



Table 5 Difference in the use of most frequently used methods

	Before (%)	Std. Dev.	During (%)	Std. Dev.	Difference (% points)
Coaching	36.04	0.48089	15.91	0.36636	- 20.13
Mentoring	35.71	0.47994	12.99	0.33671	- 22.72
Instructing	37.01	0.48363	10.39	0.30562	- 26.62
Workshop	64.29	0.47994	15.26	0.36018	- 49.03
E-learning	27.60	0.44773	37.66	0.48533	+ 10.06
Model situations	16.56	0.37231	3.90	0.19382	- 12.66
Role playing	10.39	0.30562	1.62	0.12658	- 8.77
Self-Study	58.77	0.49306	43.83	0.49699	- 14.94
None	27.92	0.44935	43.18	0.49614	+ 15.26

Source: own elaboration

By comparing the use of individual methods before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 5), we can answer the second and third research question. We recorded the largest decrease in the use of workshops (49.03% points), since before the pandemic 64.29% of the surveyed employees took part in the workshops, compared to only 15.26% during the pandemic. The fact that the workshops took place online did not help either. Therefore, we can accept the hypothesis H2a. We also recorded a significant decline in the use of model situations (12.66% points), since they were used by 16.56% of employees before the pandemic. During the pandemic, this proportion decreased to 3.90%. Thus, we can also accept hypothesis H2b. To complete the testing of hypotheses related to the second research question, we investigated whether there was a decrease in the use of role plays. Based on the results, we accept hypothesis H2c, as the use of role plays decreased by 8.77% points from 10.39% before the pandemic to 1.62% in its course of development. During the pandemic, role plays were used the least of all the methods taken. We do not consider these results surprising, because these 3 methods probably require the most personal contact between the educator and the educated employee.

On the contrary, the only method that began to be used more often during the pandemic was e-learning (increase by 10.06% points). This was also to be expected as the whole world has become forced to function online to a much larger extent. However, it came as a slight surprise that there had not been an increase in employees who had encountered self-study in the workplace, because, as we mentioned when analysing the number of methods used, some companies used their own reduced production capabilities during the pandemic to invest in the training and development of their employees. On the contrary, we observed a decrease (of 14.94% points). Therefore, we accept hypothesis H3a, but we have to reject hypothesis H3b.

With the last - fourth research question, we were interested in whether there are training and development methods that remained statistically unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to their current popularity and long-term character, we assumed that coaching, mentoring and instructing could be the ones. However, the results of the study show that the use of coaching decreased by 20.13% points, mentoring by 22.72% points and instruction by 26.62% points, respectively. Therefore, we reject hypotheses H4a, H4b and H4c and claim that there is no educational or development method that was unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion and discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world in all its spheres. The COVID-19 lockdowns have led a transformation in the way we run our schools, interact with loved ones, teach and learn, do our work, do our shopping, travel, get medical care, spend leisure time, engage in commerce, and conduct many of the routine transactions of life (Sneader and Sternfels 2020). The working environment has changed significantly in almost all companies, and employees were often forced to stay at home in order to protect their own health. Every area of management was facing new challenges. It was the same in the case of HRM and its individual components. In the recent years of the continuous development of individuals, the economy and society, corporate training and development have become a common and necessary part of the working life of employees. But the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything. The goal of the paper was to find out whether there were changes in the methods of training and development of employees of Slovak companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. We fulfilled this goal by searching for answers to the questions whether the number of employee training and development methods used changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and if so, which of them were used less often during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic, and which, on the contrary, were used more often. We were also interested in whether there are any methods that have not been affected by the pandemic at all. Based on our findings on a sample of Slovak employees, we can claim that there has clearly been a change in the number of training and development methods used. Specifically, we observed a decrease in their number. All the most common methods were used less often, except for e-learning. This one was the only one that recorded a boom. This contradicts the findings of Mikołajczyk (2021), who claims that "all forms connected to development have been transferred to the Internet". Based on our findings, we claim that methods such as coaching, mentoring or instructing in the Internet environment either lose their quality or are not useful at all. So we will correct Mikołajczyk's statement to: "The MAJORITY of forms connected to development have been transferred to the Internet". We recognize that e-learning and internet connection have served many companies as a substitute for the mentioned training and development activities, because ICT training and development during COVID-19 has taken centre stage due to the demand (Seberini et al., 2022). As claimed by Bondar et al. (2020), contemporary training and development requires the development of new forms of learning based on the SMART approach, which allows the development of the relevant skills, abilities, and competencies. We agree with Hite and Mc Donald (2020), who think that a critical part of creating and sustaining a learning culture is recognizing how differently employees have experienced this crisis, and what they might need to return to work and be successful. Treating each employee on an individual basis will be important because for some, this pandemic has not been a career shock, but rather a minor distraction or an opportunity to spend more time with their families. We consider this to be one of the main reasons why we observe a decline in self-study among employees, although in many cases the space was created for it. Another reason was identified by Mura et al. (2021), who found that learning and professional development as a means of reward were mentioned only by 6.5% of the leaders. This suggests that in the event of a pandemic, they were primarily concerned with other aspects of HRM. We therefore agree with Yawson (2020), who claims that the uncertainty that is associated with post-COVID-19 future requires strategic flexibility, the ability to change strategies, and become more adaptable.

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**Correspondence address:**

doc. Mgr. Ing. Lukáš Smerek, PhD., Department of Corporate Economics and Management, Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Tajovského 10, 975 90 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. email: [lukas.smerek@umb.sk](mailto:lukas.smerek@umb.sk)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0008-282X>