

RURAL-URBAN COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS AMIDST COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The realm of communication, influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, showcases contrasting dynamics between rural and urban settings. This study delves into these nuances, drawing on ancient principles of ethos, pathos, and logos as a foundation for analysis. The Introduction establishes the philosophical groundwork, elucidating the essence of communication across these environments pre-pandemic. Methodologically, employing dual surveys involving 834 individuals and 86 economic entities, the study unravels intricate communication patterns during the pandemic. The findings in "Methodology and Study" unravel communication intricacies: rural resilience amid physical distancing, contrasting urban reliance on technology. Conclusions underscore rural openness to socialization versus urban complexity, highlighting rural adaptability in the 'hybrid' work paradigm. The study sheds light on rural-urban disparities, revealing rural potential in fostering open communication. Despite economic gaps, rural communities exhibit higher sociability, a critical asset underexplored in the business realm. The Abstract encapsulates the divergence in communication strategies between rural and urban domains amid the pandemic, emphasizing untapped rural potential despite economic limitations.

KEYWORDS: *efficient communication, impact of communication, sociable communities.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

A great Greek philosopher initiated a dialogue with his disciples stating that, for efficient communication, three elements are necessary: ethos, pathos, and logos (Aiftincă, 2016). Ethos is the credibility of the speaker, pathos is the emotional connection, while logos represents the individual's vocabulary. In periods devoid of incidents, such as the period before the Covid-19 pandemic, everyone could communicate in one way or another. While introverts communicated more through non-verbal language, extroverts enjoyed a certain popularity among people, simply because they could emanate ethos and create the pathos discussed in Ancient Greece (Dodu-Gugea & Ghilechi, 2020).

In addition to the three essential elements of efficient communication, there are numerous variables such as: the level of knowledge that allows a person to engage in reasoned discussion, the framework of the discussion, which can decisively influence communication between individuals, the environment they belong to, which may have favored their level of openness to communication, etc. (Popescu & State, 2017). Thus, very sociable individuals can be found in rural areas, as there is a greater openness to people, favoring communication, and extremely withdrawn people in urban areas.

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The rural environment can often be conceived as being conducive to communication due to a compact, sociable community in which each member knows the others (Mihailescu, 2022). On the other hand, the urban environment offers more opportunities for individual development, understanding the communication process in perspective, and using it in different situations in an efficient manner (Konijnendijk, 2010). Moreover, individuals from urban environments have more access to technology and, implicitly, more access to the techniques used in communication processes, such as social networks (Furno et al., 2016).

Easier access to the technology necessary for communication or efficient and easy access to interpersonal communication can facilitate an individual's entry into the business world, whether in a family business, a local business, or even a multinational corporation. Depending on their capabilities, the individual can either assist or hinder the company, but a level of efficient communication within a business, among its employees, can lead to the achievement of goals in an efficient manner and contribute to the personal development of the individual and the entity itself (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Crossman, 2011).

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic marked a significant turning point in the development of communication. The pandemic prevented people from doing what they know best – communicating – in the way they know best. In addition to the negative psychological effects of the pandemic (Akat & Karatas, 2020), it forced individuals to find new ways to communicate remotely, while maintaining a false or, depending on the case, real closeness (Preti et al., 2020). The inability to communicate as directly as before hindered individuals' ability to satisfy a basic need of every human being – the need for communication. This restriction caused the level of communication in the real world to decrease, human interactions to diminish, and the world to become more chaotic. Even though technology was available to facilitate communication, the absence of a handshake, a smile, or a nod made communication almost impossible and people increasingly irritable (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Covid-19 pandemic has exerted a profound impact on communication across both urban and rural settings, presenting numerous challenges as well as opportunities. Romania, predominantly a rural country, is in a phase of rapid development. More often than not, development is not executed with well-defined strategies, a fact that became evident during the pandemic when individuals in rural areas faced limited access to technology, further complicating communication amidst lockdown conditions. To comprehend the situation better, a map of Romania will be presented, highlighting the distribution of the population:

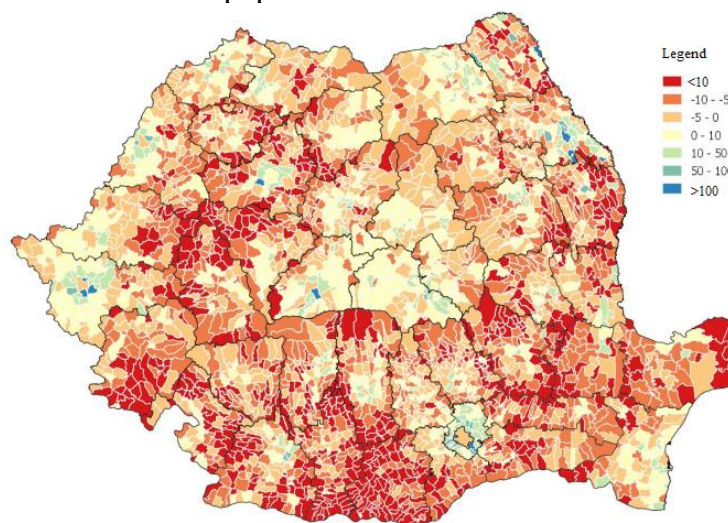


Figure 1. Population Dynamics by Residence, in the year 2020

Source: Author's processing, based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (2022).

As can be readily observed in figure no.1, the highest population concentration is found in major urban areas, which are significant academic hubs. People migrate towards these centers attracted by the abundance of opportunities. This analysis needs to be corroborated with the general situation of individuals, in relation to the two environments. This analysis is illustrated in Figure 2:

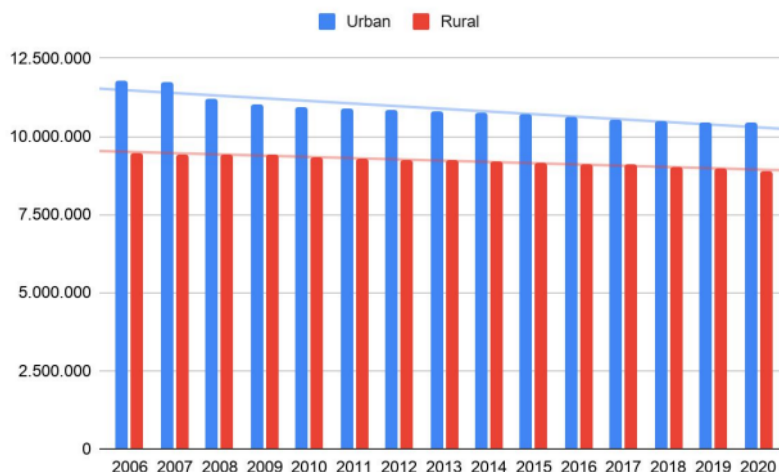


Figure 2. Resident Population in the year 2020

Source: Authored by the researcher, based on reports from the National Institute of Statistics.

By consolidating the number of citizens from rural and urban areas for the period 2006-2020, utilizing data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, as can be seen in figure no.2, it was possible to identify a negative trend – a decline in population across both settings. This reduction can be attributed to emigration.

With a significant population decline, leaving many areas nearly depopulated, individuals remaining in the less populated rural regions of Romania face an additional challenge beyond the economic and social issues – the lack of partners for communication. The pandemic has dealt another blow to these communities.

When the analysis shifts to slightly more populated rural communities, other pandemic-induced challenges come to light. Rural schools had to swiftly transition to online or hybrid learning, a difficult task for students and families lacking proper technology access. Furthermore, rural communities faced challenges related to the distribution of educational materials and supporting distance education, all while grappling with the state of local businesses. In rural areas, businesses, significantly impacted, had to adapt through online commerce or delivery services. Effective communication with customers became vital to keeping businesses afloat. Given that rural areas are characterized by family-run businesses with relatively low local influence, and compounded by a severe lack of technology, many businesses went bankrupt.

For safety reasons, traditional communication channels in many rural communities, such as public gatherings and face-to-face meetings, were restricted. This necessitated communities to find alternative communication methods, like using social networks or messaging apps to stay connected, including many individuals who had never before used a device. Supporting this claim, a map was created based on information from the National Institute of Statistics, displaying the proportion of families with internet access at home (figure 3).

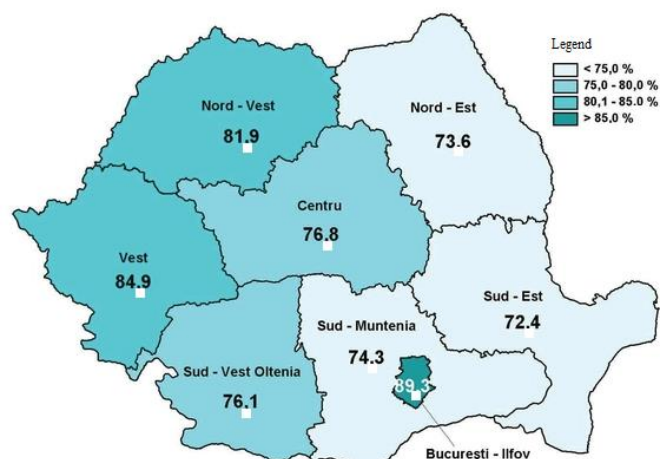


Figure 3. Proportion of Families with Internet Access at Home, in the year 2020
 Source: Author's processing, based on data from the National Institute of Statistics.

Conversely, as it can be seen in figure no.3, in urban settings, while the pandemic had a substantial impact, the challenges were more manageable compared to the rural areas. With lockdown and quarantine measures in place, many companies had to embrace remote work, leading to a surge in virtual communication via video conferencing and messaging apps. Urban schools and universities transitioned to online learning, significantly altering teacher-student interactions. Online communication and the use of teaching platforms became crucial. The pandemic severely limited face-to-face social interactions, prompting people to rely on virtual communication means, like video calls or social networks, to maintain contact.

Many urban residents turned to online shopping and delivery services to avoid crowded physical stores, necessitating the use of communication platforms to place orders and coordinate deliveries.

Perhaps the most significant impact, even surpassing the social aspect, is the economic one. Both rural and urban environments were severely affected by the pandemic. Remote work and the inability of potential customers to visit physical business locations led to local, regional, and national economic shocks. Many entrepreneurs were forced to shut down their businesses. According to a study by a renowned Romanian publication, cited in a researcher's study (Comanescu, 2021), over 20,000 businesses closed from the beginning of the pandemic until 2022, with rural family businesses, the HoReCa sector in both environments, and urban commercial chains suffering the most. An analysis for the period 2012-2022, using data from the Trade Register, further illustrates the data in figure 4.

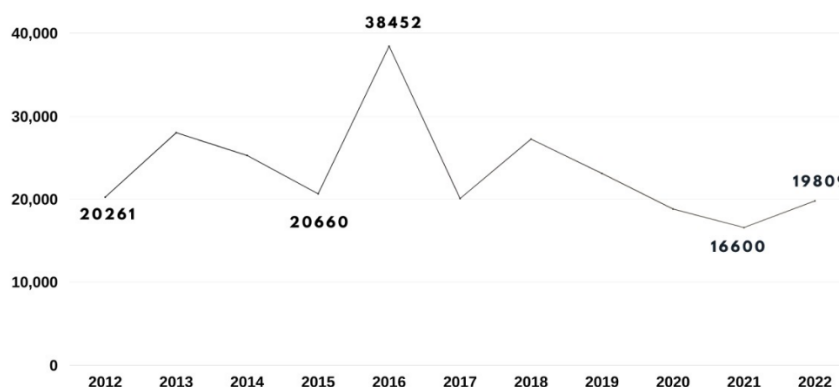


Figure 4. Total Businesses in Distress between 2012-2022
 Source: Authors processing, based on information from the Trade Register.

According to figure no. 4, while the number of companies in distress may seem relatively low looking at 2016-2017, the issue of so many businesses facing difficulties in 2018-2022 is attributed to the pandemic-induced customer shortage. Furthermore, companies, especially in rural areas, that couldn't adapt to an online business model were doomed to fail. It must also be noted that economic entities, regardless of their size and whether they survived the pandemic, faced serious human resource issues due to disrupted employee communication. The lack of effective communication, entirely conducted online through various platforms, caused numerous issues among employees, including work synchronization problems, time management issues, and ineffective communication.

On a personal level, the pandemic also impacted employees' lives, as evidenced by an increase in divorces according to Romanian Courts. In 2017, there was one divorce for every 5.2 marriages, while during the pandemic, there was one divorce for every 3.7 marriages. While divorces increased, the number of weddings decreased, according to the same report. This suggests that the excess time spent at home, forcibly induced by the pandemic, harmed couples' communication, diminished their wellbeing, and further decreased work productivity.

3. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY

The practical part of the study encompasses two sections. The first section aims to assess the outcomes of the pandemic in terms of communication across the two environments, while the second section focuses on the communication situation within companies operating in these two environments. To achieve this, a dual survey was conducted, administered to a total of 834 individuals, half from the rural environment and half from the urban environment, (available at <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>) and another survey applied to 86 economic entities, predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), equally divided between the two environments (available at <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>).

The structure of both questionnaires is identical, each comprising 10 closed-ended questions. The questions are phrased in such a way that respondents, regardless of their level of education, can select an answer they deem appropriate. The individuals who responded to the study were unknown and were randomly selected, distributing the first questionnaire to various groups on social networks. The second questionnaire was distributed to various economic entities, unrelated to the authors of the study, who were willing to participate in this analysis. It is important to mention that all individuals and companies fully responded to the questions. For the efficiency of the study, the first four background knowledge questions were not presented. However, the data revealed that, for the first study, the subjects were individuals older than 25 years (with an average age of 28.5), holding a higher education degree and employed, accounting for 98% of the sample.

The first question the sample had to answer was related to the difficulty of communication during the Pandemic. As can be seen (figure 5), for the urban environment, it was extremely difficult (238/417 individuals chose this option), compared to the rural environment (148/417). Aggregating the responses indicating a difficulty in communication during the pandemic, in the urban environment we obtain a value of 402 /417, compared to the rural environment where a result of 413/417 was obtained.



Figure 5. The Difficulty of Communication during the Pandemic, Rural (left) – Urban (right)
 Source: Processed by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>

The following query, easily observed in figure no. 6, the study had to address was related to the ways people managed to communicate with their relatives and close friends. It is noticeable that in the rural environment, people were able to meet at small gatherings (220/417), while in the urban environment, this was almost impossible (15/417). Furthermore, it is observable that in the rural environment, phones were predominantly used for conversations (140/417 compared to 45/417 in the urban environment), whereas in the urban environment, social networks were used (325/417 compared to 22/417 in the rural environment).

The ensuing question addressed the extent to which subjects were affected by the impossibility of physical proximity, can be seen in figure no. 7. Here too, significant differences are observed. While those in the urban environment were seriously affected (325/417), those in the rural environment were less impacted (150/417). This is due to the fact that people in the rural environment were still able to see each other and communicated more in person, whereas in the urban environment this was impossible.

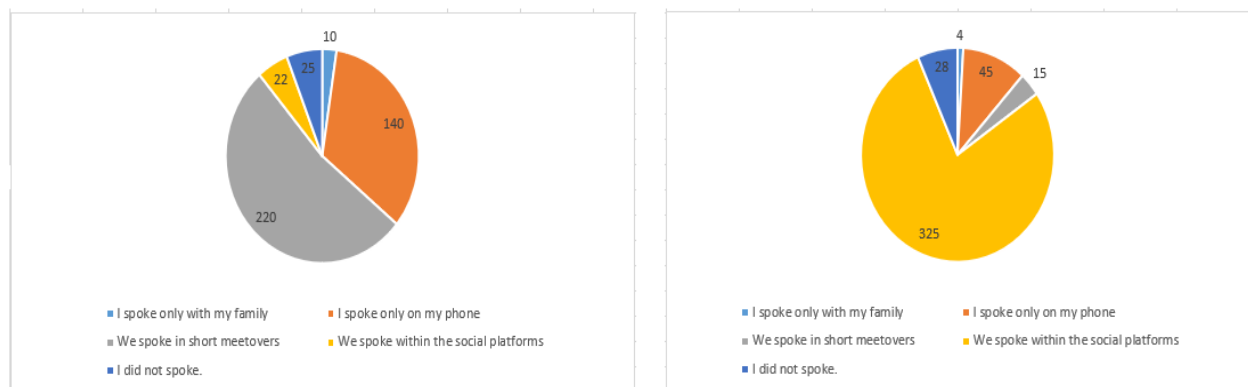


Figure 6. How Did You Manage to Communicate with Relatives and Close Friends, Rural (left) – Urban (right)
 Source: Processed by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>

The succeeding concern pertained to the social problems discovered in interpersonal relationships as a result of the pandemic and its restrictions, as can be seen in figure no. 7. Certain differences are also evident at this level. While individuals from the rural environment are much more open to communicating as before (167/417), in the urban environment, this is not as easily achieved (78/417). The biggest issue in the urban environment is characterized by the internal transformation of individuals, with 213/417 declaring that they have become introverted (figure 8).



Figure 7. The Impact of Physical Distancing, Rural (left) – Urban (right)

Source: Processed by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>



Figure 8. Post-Pandemic Interpersonal Relationship Issues, Rural (left) – Urban (right)

Source: Processed by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>

The upcoming query related to how the respondents coped at work from a communication perspective, as can be seen in figure no. 9. Similarities are observed in this regard. Regardless of the environment, individuals perceived certain issues initially, but were able to quickly adapt (rural – 256/417, urban – 200/217). It is also observed that those in the rural environment had a more difficult time at work compared to their urban counterparts. Thus, 102/417 individuals from the rural environment stated that communication at work was extremely difficult and not efficient. On the opposite end, 52/417 individuals from the urban environment declared the same.

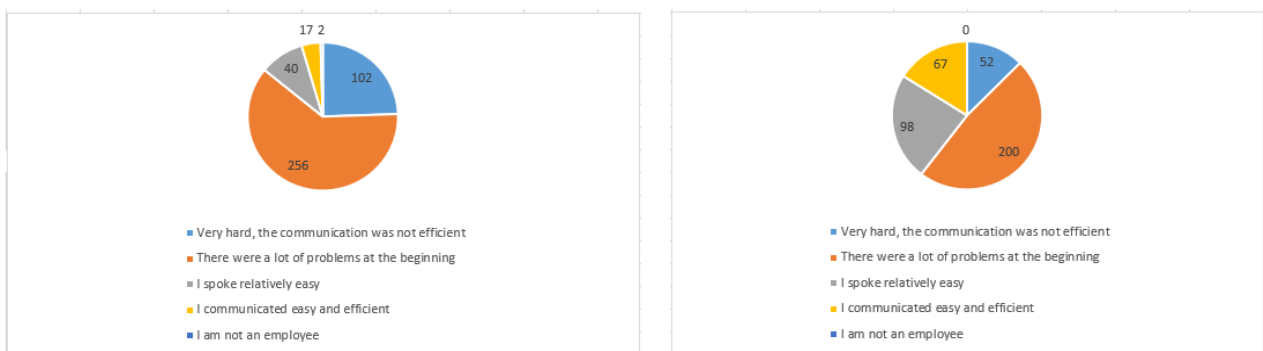


Figure 9. Coping at Work from a Communication Perspective, Rural (left) – Urban (right)

Source: Processed by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>

The final question of this survey was related to the reprimands received from superiors at work for the inability to communicate effectively and the responses can be seen in figure no. 10. Certain rural-urban differences can be observed. While in the rural environment there were reprimands only

occasionally (150/417), in the urban environment it is observed that there were a substantial number of reprimands for the inability to communicate effectively from a distance (167/417).



Figure 10. Have you been reprimanded by superiors at work for the inability to communicate effectively?, rural (left) – urban (right)

Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/658865442/>

The last part of the study shifts to the plans of entities. Thus, 86 entities were surveyed, half from the urban environment, half from the rural, to see how the communication situation was perceived from their perspective and to characterize the remote communication environment at the entity level. It is very important to note that as far as the entities from the rural environment are concerned, they are predominantly from the commerce and public food service sectors, while those from the urban environment are represented by those in HoReCa, production, and commerce.

The first question to which the sample had to respond was related to the way in which employees adapted to the communication situation during the pandemic and can be easily seen in figure no. 11. While the urban environment has a higher level of technologization and is a more developed environment, allowing thus the use of technology (43/86 companies), in the rural environment this is difficult (2/86). Also, it is observed that in the rural environment, due to this, employees had to come to work, even being obliged to do so (65/86 in the rural environment compared to 8/86 in the urban environment).



Figure 11. How did employees adapt to the pandemic situation – rural (left) – urban (right)

Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

Another question to which the sample had to respond was related to possible layoffs in companies as a result of employees' inability to adapt, as can be seen in figure no. 12. We notice that the urban environment is much harsher (20/86 companies that have recorded dismissals in urban, compared to 9/86 in the rural environment).



Figure 12. Were there employees who were fired as a result of their inability to adapt? rural (left) – urban (right)
 Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

The next question captures whether or not there were more divergences between colleagues as a result of remote communication and the responses can be seen in figure no. 13. It can be observed that in the rural environment there were no such differences (50/86 cases in firms from the rural environment, compared to 20/86 in the urban environment). This shows that the urban environment is much harsher and there are much more communication problems within it.



Figure 13. Were there more divergences between colleagues as a result of remote communication? rural (left) – urban (right)
 Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

Furthermore, as can be seen in figure no. 14, another important aspect is related to the level of achieving objectives. It can be seen that companies were able to achieve their objectives during the pandemic, even though there were major communication issues. Thus, it can be observed that the majority of companies achieved their objectives to the extent of 36-50% (45/86 in the rural environment and 55/86 in the urban environment).



Figure 14. What is the level of achieving objectives during the 3 years of the pandemic – rural (left) – urban (right)
 Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

Another point of interest is related to the place from which employees work most efficiently, according to figure no. 15. Thus, it can be observed that in the rural environment they work better from the office given the specificity of the entities (45/86), while in the urban environment they are more efficient from home (37/86) as a result of the fact that they are not subject to various factors that can distract them.

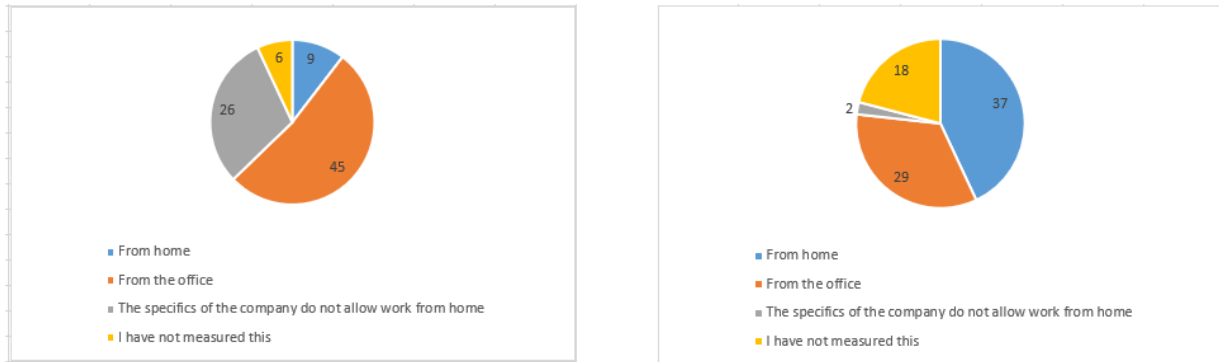


Figure 15. Are employees more efficient when working from home or when working from the office? – rural (left) – urban (right)

Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

The last question of the study captures the desire of employees to return to the office full-time. Thus, a huge discrepancy between rural and urban can be observed. While people in the rural environment want to return to the office full-time (67/86), those in the urban environment do not want to hear about returning (54/86) (figure 16).

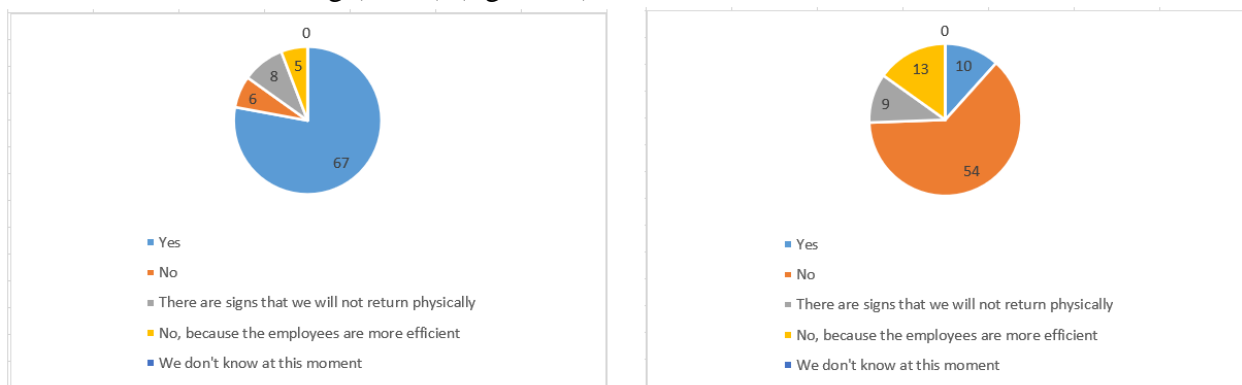


Figure 16. Do employees want to return full-time to work? – rural (left) – urban (right)

Source: Processing by the author, based on the survey <https://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/452162442/>

4. CONCLUSIONS

The situation of communication during the pandemic has indeed been challenging, yet it has facilitated the identification of characteristics pertaining to the work environment and society in both rural and urban settings. Following the analysis, it is observable that the rural environment is significantly more open to socialization in comparison to the urban milieu. This is derived from the fact that the positioning of residences differs between rural and urban inhabitants, and the size of the communities varies. In rural areas, we are dealing with smaller communities where individuals are familiar with each other and tend to engage in conversations whenever possible, facilitating this even in prohibited circumstances. In the urban environment, being more developed and expansive than its rural counterpart, there is a higher population, resulting in fewer interactions.

The openness of individuals in rural areas is also evident in the case of economic entities. While urban residents are more challenging to mobilize for work and have adapted slightly more arduously than those in rural areas, the latter have quickly adjusted and have been able to operate within this 'hybrid' system. This can also be attributed to the fact that businesses in rural areas could only function offline.

Regarding companies, there are substantial differences between rural and urban settings, especially in terms of communication. While the level of divergence is significantly higher in urban areas, rural areas did not record as many issues. Even if they were not reported to superiors, there still aren't as many communication problems in rural areas during the pandemic. It is also noteworthy that in urban areas, a larger number of employees were dismissed due to their inability to adapt to the new reality – remote work and the use of technology – in comparison to rural areas.

In conclusion, although economically disadvantaged in comparison to urban areas, rural environments have a higher likelihood of providing the business world with individuals more open to communication. The major issue, aside from the economic situation, is the fact that there is not sufficient investment in human resources. This latter has an incredibly high and untapped potential.

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