

# THE IMPACT OF COVID - 19 PANDEMIC ON THE QUALITY OF WORK WITHIN A MANUFACTURING COMPANY BASED ON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

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**Abstract:** *The study was conducted in a manufacturing company with foreign subscribed capital, that has implemented several principles on continuous improvement, and aims to reveal the impact of COVID – 19 pandemic on the quality of work. In recent years, in order to streamline and improve the company`s activity, several measures related to the production processes have been implemented, which obviously also involved the quality of the work performed. Since the company adopted the principles of continuous improvement, the outcomes were obvious, both in terms of economic-financial indicators and in terms of the skills and competencies of the workforce. The role of the workforce in continuous improvement is a vital one, therefore the company has successfully implemented working procedures that had led to the standardization of the way of working. With the COVID–19 pandemic, there have been certain changes at the company level, with different impacts on employees and their work. Based on the company`s internal data, this paper analyzes the results of the evaluation of employees' work performance, over a period of four years (2019 - 2022).*

**Keywords:** *quality of work; employees; continuous improvement; manufacturing company; COVID-19 pandemic.*

**JEL Classification:** *M12; M53.*

## 1. Introduction and theoretical framework

The COVID-19 pandemic was a phenomenon with a rapid and significant impact on the world's public health, the world's economies, financial markets, and society in general generating major changes in the way economic activities are carried out, the way of working, and the way of socializing among individuals. But at the same time, “COVID-19 has demonstrated that necessity is in fact the driver of change” leading

to developing innovations, some of them with potential long-term societal impact (Zimmerling and Chen, 2021).

Manufacturing companies have faced numerous challenges (decrease in demand, supply chain disruptions, illness or quarantine requirements for employees, etc.), and, due to the specificity of the activity, the continuity of operations and the way of working was necessary. This could be achieved by complying with all the rules and recommendations in the field of health. In other sectors of activity, work could be carried out remotely, from home, which was almost impossible in the case of the manufacturing industry. However, some researchers (Vahedi-Nouri et al., 2022) have developed different models for workforce planning and production scheduling in order to face the Covid-19 crisis and the possibility to be adapted in other similar crises. In their study, Kosieradzka, Smagowicz and Szwed (2022) presented the solutions implemented in Polish manufacturing companies in order to have continuous activity during the COVID-19 pandemic and they pointed out that some of the work and production organization solutions that they identified are innovative. Studies that revealed the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the manufacturing sectors of different countries were published. In this sense, we can mention the study of Dweck et al. (2022) which revealed the negative impact of the pandemic on the Brazilian manufacturing sector, or the study of Li and Bai (2023) which showed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's manufacturing is much smaller than that of the US and the EU.

Considering manufacturing firms in Norway, Hermundsdottir, Haneberg and Aspelund (2022) showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected the adoption of environmental innovations and the most affected were the companies that were oriented the most toward implementing environmental innovations before the pandemic. On the other hand, an analysis at an individual level (Huang, Lin and Lee, 2023), based on a sample of 262 employees from 40 manufacturing SMEs in Taiwan, revealed the employees' increased proactive innovative behavior in response to environmental turbulences and crises.

In searching for solutions to the problems that arise in turbulent periods (such as it was the Covid-19 pandemic period), Bianco et al. (2023) showed that by implementing Industry 4.0 technologies, manufacturing companies can develop their resilience through flexibility, reliability, robustness, and responsiveness. By conducting an analysis at the level of Italian regions, Lepore, Micozzi and Spigarelli (2021) also highlighted that industry 4.0 technologies can be a fundamental tool for economic recovery by favoring the shift towards sustainable manufacturing. The research of Cugno et al. (2022) is along the same line, revealing that Industry 4.0, corroborated with the digital reorganization of production activity, can accelerate

production recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels. Also, Mohapatra et al. (2022) revealed the significance of digital technology in manufacturing sectors, by examining twelve key factors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ambrogio et al. (2022) also wrote about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the workforce and supply chain, which can turn into an opportunity for fostering digital and technological innovation, which further leads to more resilient manufacturing systems. Gamal, Abdel-Basset and Chakraborty (2022) have identified barriers that directly impact manufacturing sectors, and highlighted that establishing flexible supply chains and identifying barriers to the operation of industries can contribute to recovering from crises. Mezgebe et al. (2023) emphasized the role of Intelligent Manufacturing Systems for post-COVID-19 recovery and growth of the manufacturing industry.

Other studies concentrated on analyzing and revealing the effect of long Covid on general health status and working ability (Jain et al., 2023; Kisiel et al., 2023; Magnavita et al., 2023), on the workers' productivity and efficiency (Sakpere et al., 2023; Prathamesh, Mubashir and Rajashree, 2023), on the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers (Laskaris et al., 2022), on identifying and determining human resource risk control to support employee productivity in manufacturing companies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ambarwati, Yuliasri and Sulistiyowati, 2022), or on investigating human resource management practices on employee productivity during the pandemic (Aggarwal, Khurana and Shefali, 2023).

Through this research we aim to investigate the impact of COVID – 19 pandemic on the quality of work within a manufacturing company, reflected by the results of the performance evaluation system applied. The analysis is based on the company's internal data, over a period of four years (2019 - 2022).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section 2 presents the company profile and the employee evaluation system that the company uses, section 3 presents the results of the evaluations of the quality of work of the employees during the pandemics and the discussions related, and section 4 presents the conclusions of the study.

## **2. The company profile and the employee evaluation system**

The company subject to this study is a manufacturing company with Belgian subscribed capital. The analysis focused on the factory owned by this company, in the North-West region of Romania, where there are about 350 employees. This factory produces sofas to the highest quality standards and the entire production is intended for export. Production at high-quality standards obviously implies, in

addition to the use of quality production factors, the efficiency and continuous improvement of production processes. And because, a few years ago, the company was facing a series of problems related to the production process, its management decided to focus on implementing measures that would lead to improvements within their factory, by adopting Kaizen principles and tools.

Since the company adopted the principles of continuous improvement, the outcomes were obvious, both in terms of economic-financial indicators and in terms of the skills and competencies of the workforce. The first results of the changes at the company level were detailed in a previous study (Sehleanu and Flore, 2019). The role of the workforce in continuous improvement is a vital one, therefore the company has successfully implemented working procedures that had led to the standardization of the way of working.

During the year 2019, the company implemented new employee evaluation forms, which were applied to production and administrative employee. The study focuses on the production evaluations, due to the fact that represent the real workforce within the company. The year 2019 was a decisive one for the company, with regard to improvements, and clearly, the first results were visible within evaluations.

Employees are evaluated based on:

1. Professional competencies (knowledge and experience).
2. Complexity, creativity, and diversity of the activities.
3. Social dialogue and communication.
4. Working conditions.

The evaluation form is presented in Annex 1. It can be seen that each of the four categories is structured into several evaluation categories, which leads to a more complex, objective, and accurate evaluation.

### **3. Employees' performance evaluation during Covid-19 - results and discussion**

Every year, evaluations are conducted within fifteen departments such as:

- *Wood processing Department* - the department that transforms the wood into pieces that will form the sofa casing.
- *Foam processing Department* - the department that has the purpose of turning the foam blocks into elements necessary for gluing on the casing of the sofa.
- *Tailoring department* - the department that transforms fabrics, leather, lining and wadding into pieces that will form the covers of the sofa.
- *Stitching Department* - the department that sews the cut sections, resulting in the sofa cover.

- *Pillows filling Department* - the department that uses the process of filling the white lining, in order to form the elements of a sofa (seats, backrests), but also of decorative pillows.
- *Mounting Department* - the department that assembles the pieces from the wooden table into the sofa casing.
- *Gluing Department* - the department that forms the final case through the process of gluing the foam parts to the mounted wooden case.
- *Mechanisms Department* - the department that performs the mechanisms (manual and electric) for assembling them into the finished product.
- *Upholstery Department* - the department that carries out the final assembly of the sofa, through the process of upholstering the cover on the case glued with a sponge and adding the mechanisms from case to case, depending on the model
- *Packing Department* - the department that manually packs each module of the final product
- *Loading Department* - the department whose function is to load shipments with finished products
- *Warehousing Department* - the department that is responsible for the activity of the warehouse (the building, in which large quantities of goods or materials are kept, import and export of raw materials)
- *Maintenance Department* – the department that is responsible for repairs within the company (machines, tools).
- *Learning Department* – the department that is responsible for workforce learning, helping with upholstery processes.
- *Sofa Feet Department* – the department responsible for preparing the feet that will be attached to the finished products.

As we can observe from Figure 1, in 2019, a total number of 285 employees were evaluated, in 2020 a total number of 273 employees, and the same number in 2021, which express clearly the fact that the company provided stability to its employees. At the end of 2022, were evaluated 276 employees. All the employees were evaluated based on the Evaluation form included in Annex 1. For each evaluation criterion, a grade between 1 and 5 was given (1 - the lowest, and 5 - the highest). The final grade of the evaluation is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the marks awarded for each evaluation criterion. Therefore, with a score between 1.00 and 2.00, the evaluation result was Unsatisfactory (N), between 2.01 and 3.50, the result was Satisfactory (S), between 3.51 and 4.50 the result was Good (G), and between 4.51 and 5.00 the result was Very Good (VG).

In the following, we will analyze the results in more detail, offering related explanations.

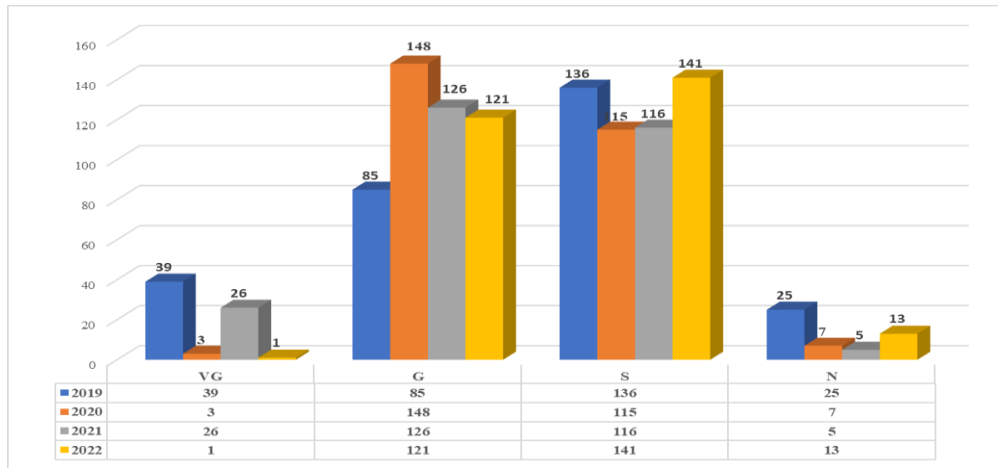


Figure 1: Employees' performance evaluation ratings from 2019 to 2022

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on company internal data

At the end of 2019, the evaluations had the following results (from a total of 285 production employees):

- 39 employees with a rating of VG (Very Good) – representing 13,68%
- 85 employees with a rating of G (Good) – representing 29,82%
- 136 employees with a rating of S (Satisfactory) – representing 47,72%
- 25 employees with a rating of N (Unsatisfactory) – representing 8,77%

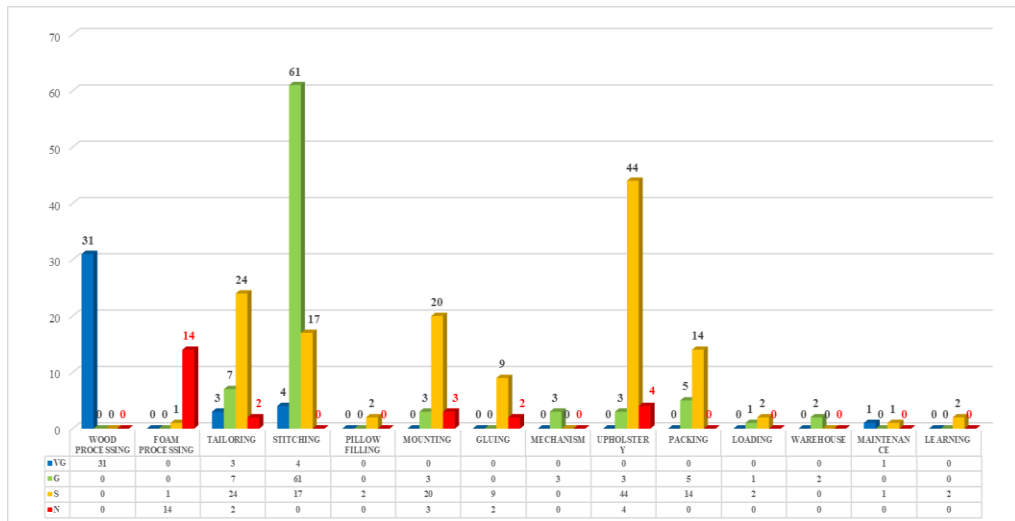


Figure 2: Employees evaluation results in 2019 per department

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on company internal data

The evaluation results obtained in 2019, made the company become focused on understanding the general trend of the employees and to aim for improving the quality of work, on operational direction by:

- Implementing operational standardization, including work instructions for each department/ model – in close collaboration with R&D department.
- Higher involvement of the learning team that performs professional training, which builds a worker's skills.

Training materials include work relations, work improvement (Kaizen), and work instructions. In addition to the implementation of training materials, the company has invested in work tools to help and protect the workers during the activities. A good example is represented by the pneumatic tables in the upholstery department, tables that are placed in front of the operator and are raised and lowered, avoiding excessive physical effort. Handling the wooden frames, glued with foam parts, becomes easier, as they are no longer lifted manually (there are models where the case glued with sponge exceeds several tens of kilograms).

Work instructions (W.I) were designed on the principle of Visual Management, using photos from the process (per element, per model). These suggestively presented WHAT, HOW, WHERE, and WHEN must be done, the procedure becoming easier to understand in training/retraining/checking (in Upholstery, Gluing departments). For departments where pictures are not needed, and the activity is technical, 3D sketches were created, through which the process is presented from several angles, and the ability to understand is higher (in Mounting, Foam departments).

Above mentioned implementations were carried out for a whole year, a fact that brought benefits to the employees, the ability to understand the activity in the processes became increasingly high, as other studies have already shown (Rodrigues et al.,2020; Sundararajan and Terkar, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the global economy and workforce worldwide. The public health measures, restrictions, and disruptions caused by the pandemic have generated significant changes in the way people work and the structure of the labor market. On a global level, there have been changes in work models, the pandemic bringing remote work, and flexible work schedules, but also unemployment. The pandemic brought with it adaptation to changes and new requirements at the workplace. In the labor market, in many cases, professional reorientation was necessary to accelerate the adoption of technology and automation at workplaces, with effects on the requirements and retraining of employees.

The company subject to our study made every effort to maintain stability, did not carry out layoffs, and provided all health safety measures. These actions offered the

employees psychological safety, and every employee was supported in every aspect. All these efforts were rewarded, the employees offering in return seriousness, a higher degree of involvement in the activities at the workplace, this fact being visible in the results of the evaluations during the pandemic period.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been certain changes at the company level, with different impacts on employees and their work. At the end of 2020, as Figure 1 shows, employees in the VG (Very Good) category were affected (discouraged) - if in 2019 there were 39 employees with this rating, in 2020 their number dropped to only 3 employees who excelled during the year. The rating category G (Good) included 148 employees in 2020 compared to 85 in 2019. Those in category G (Good), are on one hand, the employees who were discouraged and affected by the pandemic conditions (from rating category VG - Very Good), and on the other hand, the employees who evolved (from rating category S - Satisfactory), they improved, they encouraged themselves, improving at the same time their results at the workplace.

A positive evolution was also experienced by those in category N (Unsatisfactory), which, in 2019, included 25 employees, while, in 2020, their number decreased to 7 employees. Employees in this category have demonstrated that the desire for evolution at work, the desire for improvement, and social conditions directly affect results, efficiency, and effectiveness at work. Of course, the fear of losing their job represented a stimulus for them.

The results of the evaluations at the end of 2021 demonstrated the fact that the company's employees evolved in the years affected by the pandemic, even in adverse conditions. If in 2020, the VG (Very Good) category had decreased to only 3 employees, in 2021 this category increased to 26 employees, these being those who in 2020 were affected by the pandemic conditions. Category G (Good) suffered a decrease in the number of employees, from 148 in 2020 to 126 in 2021. Category N (Unsatisfactory) included only 5 employees, who failed to evolve in the years of analysis.

In 2022, as we can observe by analyzing Figure 1, the results showed a decrease in the number of employees with Very Good (VG) work evaluation results to only 1 employee, and an increase in the number of employees with Good (G), Satisfactory (S) and Unsatisfactory (N) work evaluation results. This happened for several reasons:

- First, the employees became more relaxed, they felt that the danger had passed, and they were no longer afraid of losing their jobs.
- Second, the total number of employees increased, and there was a change in the structure of human resources, a "movement of employees": some employees went



abroad, and others were hired. The new employees need, of course, a training period to be able to reach the work performance standards required within the company.

- Third, among the newly arrived employees in the second half of 2022, over 20 were from Pakistan. At the time of their evaluation, they were still in the period of learning, overcoming language barriers, and adapting working methods.

All this affected the overall result of the evaluations.

#### **4. In conclusion**

The study focused on revealing the impact and the evolution of the quality of the employees' work during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflected by the results of the performance evaluation system applied, and also on revealing the company's efforts to standardize the activity using continuous improvement principles. During the pandemic, the company did not have problems with the orders, with the decrease in demand, but rather certain logistical problems, related to the difficulty of carrying out the transportation of products in certain periods, due to the restrictions. As a result of the continuous improvement process implemented within the factory, which ensured proper procurement planning, and of the relatively constant maintenance of demand, there were no malfunctions in the production process. The company subject to this study made every effort to maintain stability, did not carry out layoffs, and provided all health safety measures. These actions offered the employees psychological safety, each employee was supported in every aspect. All these efforts were rewarded, the employees offering in return seriousness, a higher degree of involvement in the activities at the workplace. This fact was visible in the results of the evaluations during the pandemic period.

The results of the annual evaluations were analyzed under normal conditions, but also under abnormal conditions, and it was revealed that when improvement results appear, they come from the company, on one hand, due to the degree of involvement in providing good working conditions, and, on the other hand, from the employees that increase their performances and contribute to creating an internal culture (with benefits to both sides). We can see that, by implementing improvements regarding production processes and working procedures, before the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on the company was significantly mitigated.

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## Annex 1

### EVALUATION SHEET PRODUCTION STAFF

Name/ Surname evaluated person \_\_\_\_\_  
Function \_\_\_\_\_

Name/ Surname hierarchical boss \_\_\_\_\_  
Name/ Surname evaluator \_\_\_\_\_

Period evaluated: from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_  
Qualifications obtained in the last 3 years: 1<sup>st</sup> year \_\_\_\_\_ 2<sup>nd</sup> year \_\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>rd</sup> year \_\_\_\_\_

EVALUATION CRITERIAS	Proposed score by hierarchic boss	Evaluator score
<b>1.PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE (knowledge and experience) - the professional capacity is evaluated in terms of the professional knowledge and skills necessary to optimally fulfil the tasks and duties assigned to the job</b>		
a) Know and respect the applicable working instructions		
b) Demonstrates <b>the responsibility of quality</b> in the activity carried out		
c) Learning ability		
d) The capacity of assimilation and appreciation regarding the instructions regarding the activity		
e) Ability to apply knowledge in practice		
f) Meticulousness - skill, precision in the execution of the operations		
g) Need for help		
<b>2.COMPLEXITY, CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE ACTIVITIES - the ability to assume responsibilities on their own initiative in the performance of the individual activity objectives, tasks and tasks of the service, as well as the management of active behaviour and involvement in their performance is evaluated.</b>		
a) The receptivity to the flexible working program (extra hours, help if needed)		
a) Availability at extra effort when requested		
b) Willingness to work effort under adverse conditions		
c) Orientation towards improvement		
<b>3.SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND COMMUNICATION - it is evaluated</b>		
a) The ability to integrate into a team, to collaborate with the team members and to make their own contribution, when necessary, through effective participation in achieving the objectives		
b) The ability to communicate clearly, coherently, and efficiently with hierarchical bosses, colleagues and third parties		
c) If it announces the absence motivated in time and correctly		
d) Avoidance of negative behaviour		
e) Absenteeism		
f) Nervousness and aggression		
<b>4. WORKING CONDITIONS - is evaluated</b>		
a) The skills in the efficient use of the material resources provided		
b) Respect the working hours		
c) Own activity organization		
d) Conscientiousness, precision in respect of breaks and other facilities granted to staff		
e) Respecting the internal general order rules		
f) Stress resistance		
g) Effort resistance		

Grades from 1 to 5 will be given for each criterion

The evaluation grade represents the arithmetic mean of the marks awarded for each criterion (between 1.00-2.00 - unsatisfactory, between 2.01-3.50 - satisfactory, between 3.51-4.50 - good, 4.51-5, 00 - very good)

EVALUATION GRADE \_\_\_\_\_  
RATING \_\_\_\_\_

Name/ Surname hierarchical boss \_\_\_\_\_  
Function \_\_\_\_\_  
Hierarchical boss signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name/ Surname evaluator \_\_\_\_\_  
Function \_\_\_\_\_  
Evaluator signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name/ Surname of evaluated person \_\_\_\_\_  
Function \_\_\_\_\_  
Evaluated person signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_