

# Covid-19 Crisis Impact on Leadership: Innovation, Digitalization and CSR Dimensions

Corina Georgiana ȘERBAN (PATRINTAS)<sup>1</sup>

Andreea-Nicoleta BICHEL<sup>2</sup>

Denisa ȚĂRANU<sup>3</sup>

Dragoș BUJOR<sup>4</sup>

## **Abstract**

*While the World strives to adapt to the changes called forward by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, leaders everywhere had to re-arrange their objectives, priorities, and style in order to create a new working environment reality capable to answer to post-pandemic requirements.*

*The current paper analyses the impact of the crisis on leadership through a tridimensionality of aspects that have most soundly shifted in the last years: innovation, digitalization, and CSR dimensions. The qualitative study was performed through the in-depth interview technique on a sample of 14 executives of big enterprises from Romania. It has been concluded that the crisis has promoted an opportunity for leadership transformation by creating a new digital collaboration system with their teams with a continuing focus on innovation and sustainability, by also keeping in mind the wellbeing of future generations.*

**Keywords:** *innovation, leadership, SARS-CoV-2, CSR, impact*

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## **1. Introduction**

At the date of writing this article, it is already the fourth year since the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole globe while shifting priorities, the realities, and without a doubt, the future. For more than a year the pandemic has disrupted supply chains, closed businesses, and accentuated the geopolitical division (Lee and Trimi, 2021) having a clear impact on the Worlds' economy and

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<sup>1</sup> Corina Georgiana Serban (Patrintas), The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, corinasrn@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Andreea-Nicoleta Bichel, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, andreea\_bichel@yahoo.com

<sup>3</sup> Denisa Taranu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, denisa.taranu@yahoo.com

<sup>4</sup> Dragoș Bujor, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, dragos.bujor@hotmail.com

globalization, but also, at a more personal level, on the psychic of the people that had to adapt to new ways of working, of interacting and living their lives, having in the background the constant fear for their wellbeing and those around them.

Furthermore, as He and Harris (2020) argued, in such events people react through critical reverse prediction, meaning that once the shock has passed, the impacted people will, almost immediately, consider that they could have, somehow predicted, and probably avoided the event. Therefore, they tend to analyze and convince themselves that in the future they will be able to follow certain models in order to avoid similar occurrences.

While the current recommendations in the business area are to find the best possible solutions through existing technologies and human resources, focusing on value adding activities and temporarily cutting non-essential processes (Caballero-Morales, 2021), there are also positive aspects, as any crisis also brings the opportunities of development and innovation needed to solve the impending issues (Ebersberger and Kuckertz, 2021).

As existing evidence proves that in unstable and crisis times, senior leadership has a key role within the organization, the current situation is considered favorable to study the context and implication of leadership on three highly impacted areas, that represent trends that are here to stay, such as: digitalization, innovation, and social responsibility. To achieve this objective, this paper begins by analyzing the theoretical framework for each of the mentioned above dimensions (i.e., leadership impact on digitalization, innovation, and social responsibility) within the context of COVID-19 pandemic. In order to perform a qualitative study, a series of 14 interviews were performed with senior leader positions from different industries to assess the impact of the pandemic within their approach, as well as future trends that arise from the existing context.

## **2. Literature review**

In order to develop the current study a literature review analysis was performed regarding the research focused on leadership and Covid-19 crisis. The 32 articles reviewed showed that the focus of research went during this period on digitalization, due to the need of shifting the working style to remote, to innovation as a sustainability tool and to social responsibility as a way to better answer the stakeholders needs and to anticipate possible crises in the future.

### **2.1 Leadership approach on Innovation within COVID-19 context**

Highly connected to creativity, innovation refers to the implementation of new ideas, processes and products (Farr and West, 1990, as cited in Oluwafemi, Mitchelmore and Nikolopoulos, 2020) through the exploration of the new, as well as the exploitation of the existing. Managing successfully both aspects, also known under the term of ambidexterity, should be a priority in the business strategy and that

flexibility and situational adaptability of the leader are two of the most important characteristics that impact the innovation in an organization.

Connected mostly to the transformational and transactional leadership styles, innovation gained, in recent publications, its own leadership style, Makri and Scandura (2010, as cited in Lukoschek et al, 2018), having introduced the term of creative leadership, that “focuses on the development of social and human capital, and investment in internal knowledge development”. At the same time Lukoschek et al (2018) argue that in order to obtain organizational success, leadership that has as core value the innovation should focus also on efficiency. Xie et al. (2018) pointed also that the innovation within a company is directly impacted by trust and individual identification, both promoted by leaders, that are, through the generally accepted definition, the ones that can and will convince people to follow their direction.

However, under Pandemic conditions, when the entire Globe has been under huge pressure, the innovation process has been highly impacted. In a study from 2017, Montani et al. have concluded that the instability and pressures that might appear at the job could hinder the innovation process, as it requires willingness to invest resources such as time, attention, energy. They stated the important role that the leader has in such conditions to appease the pressures and to reinforce resources. Be that as it may, the current study argues that in the current COVID-19 situation, the leaders’ power to sooth the pressures are limited to creating a work environment that is as safe as possible, while the employees face their personal dramas of family distancing, loosing dear ones or reducing budgets.

Furthermore, specifically during pandemic conditions, in many organizations, due to processes being disrupted or affected, the focus had completely shifted from other activities that were either not possible or modified to finding new solutions, with even more resources engaged than under normal conditions. Confirming that this tactic is correct, a study performed by Caballero-Morales in 2021 stated that a key factor of business recovery post-Covid, that will allow companies to reinvent themselves or maintain their market position, will be innovation. It warned that a reason for small and medium enterprises failing during the pandemic could be the lack of investment in improvements, among other existing reasons as lack of financing, or knowledge. In fact, another study performed by Ebersberger and Kuckertz in 2021, argued that in crisis, response time for innovation is crucial, cutting down on innovation budget should be avoided and the future success of the organization depends on how quickly it reacts to a changing environment. The same idea is confirmed by Lee and Trimi (2021) that state that being dynamic and considering agility, flexibility, resilience and speed as core values should be the way out for any type of organization and defines sustainable innovation as a future concept to follow. In this context, leaders have the role of helping people to shape and provide a space to unite and aim for their goals (Slimane et al, 2015).

*H1: Innovation was a major tool that made possible processes otherwise hindered by the pandemic and considered it as a mainstream post-COVID, that allowed the organization to live and flourish in future.*

*H2: Post-Covid leaders will focus more on innovation as a continuation of the crisis tendencies.*

## **2.2 Leaders and digitalization**

Digitalization is the extensive process in which “a firm employs digital technologies, to develop a new digital business model that helps to create and appropriate more value for the firm” (Verhoef et al., 2019, p. 1). According to Li, Su, Zhang, and Mao (2018) this process affects operational routines, business decisions and organizational capabilities.

While extant literature has explored its implementation in large corporations, digital transformation has been defined as an innovative implementation that will improve business processes within organizations and will support costs saving and operational efficiency by process optimization (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019).

Prior to 2020, digitalization was a worldwide force of its own until the global pandemic transformed it. Nowadays, digitalization is no longer a source of innovation, but a requirement for enabling teams to work anywhere and for business continuity to adjust when faced with a crisis (Kodama, 2020).

According to Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2020), leaders are trying to find new ways to build solutions and to serve customers for the changing socioeconomic environment. The current times are very interesting and challenging, and when it comes to digitalization and leadership, organizations tend to focus on the tools they need, the resources and the solutions that will be able to insure a productive and secure work environment. In order to facilitate work from any location, there are some specific devices required for managing identity and network for employees and that is the reason why the leaders need to define their priorities across their workforce. Some of the IT leaders have developed and implemented communities for enabling remote work and multi-factor authentication (MFA) tools as a foundation for this digital transformation (Kodama, 2020).

With the increased usage and load from so many teams working remotely, digitalization distorted our culture and change management by replacing face to face contact with modern social and engagement platforms that can assure messages are heard, best practices are being shared and leadership is visible (Watson G. 2020).

Designing specific roles is one of the main concerns since 2014 for leaders that succeed and those leaders who fail at leading, especially during a pandemic and age of digitalization: “the advances of brilliant machines will astound us, but they will transform the lives of senior executives only if managerial advances enable them to” (Dewhurst and Willmott, 2014). Other work advocates the e-leadership needs of processing leadership largely through collaboration systems (Larson and DeChurch, 2020).

The central premise of the current study is that the digitalization of leadership and work highlights the team effectiveness before and after the Pandemic, and it should be treated as an opportunity to transform leaders that have a high level

of interaction with their teams and organizations by creating a new collaboration system. Technically, collaboration systems should be used as a strategic tool that is able to enhance the creativity of virtual teams across organizations. Virtual teams are usually defined as “groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task” (Townsend, DeMarie and Hendrickson, 1998, as cited in Larson and DeChurch, 2020). The vision of leaders is the main support of their teams towards each goal and that is the reason why the vision must be emotionally grounded and easily recognized by the employees, especially in remote invisibility.

*H3: Digitalization of leadership will have a positive impact on the team effectiveness through new collaboration systems (i.e., leaders less hands on, more empowerment for the team).*

*H4: In the face of the corona virus pandemic, leader-team connection can be maintained despite the challenges encountered.*

This article aims to identify practical implications of the idea that leaders incorporate digital transformation into the core of their strategies, with heightened focus on a period when humanity had been faced with world-wide pandemic event.

### **2.3 Leadership impact on Corporate Social Responsibility within COVID-19 context**

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility, defined as "a discretionary allocation of corporate resources toward improving social welfare that serves as a means of enhancing relationships with key stakeholders" (Barnett, 2007, as cited in Akdogan et al, 2016), has been getting increased attention within specific literature. The reasons for engaging in CSR activities can be very different from company to company and are classified as it follows: the normative approach, based on the belief that the company is morally bound to its stakeholders, the instrumental approach, that implies expected financial benefits and the corporate approach that considers that organizations have political obligation to fill existing gaps (Silvestri and Veltri, 2021). Used for differentiation, for reputation, or for expected gains, CSR might become a strategy for companies (Lefter et al, 2011), but it is highly dependable on the leaders' attitude towards it as they are the ones that provide the vision and the direction within the organization. This becomes especially true as CSR refers to voluntary actions - not legally bound, and a commitment is possible only when a leader understands its value (Mishra and Schmidt, 2018).

It is, however, true that not all leaders have, or had until recently a good opinion of CSR, a very famous example being the opinion of Peter Drucker, a very important figure in management, that stated that “If you find an executive who wants to take on social responsibilities, fire him fast” (Banerjee, 2007, as cited in Mishra and Schmidt, 2018). The mindset change has mainly come due to stakeholders' pressure, but as well due to the understanding of leaders of their “role-model”

position that the digitalization and marketing era provided them, even outside of their organization.

Nowadays, even if it was stated that the further detract companies' focus from CSR activities, due to lack of financing, high stress conditions and increased economic and social risks, a recent study performed by He and Harris (2020) argued that in fact the general response was quite the opposite, with companies maintaining their ethics and struggling to help in the battle against the disease through supplementary measures for employees and stakeholders safety, donations, and even repurposing of the business in order to address health issues. In another study Severo et al (2021) recognized the increased, and somehow surprising, concern for the environmental issues, as studies related to the air quality and COVID-19 occurrence confirmed a negative impact. As the people were also all witnesses of the positive aspects that the social confinement had towards pollution, even when such results were temporary, they will serve as models for future positive change.

In this context, executive symbolism – that refers to the fact that a leaders' action has much more impact as role model through the symbol of the deed than through the action itself (Hambrick and Lovelace, 2018, as cited in Mishra and Schmidt, 2018) is growing even more in importance. Employees, clients and people globally have suddenly become more sensitive to the right thing, the ethical thing is being done. Social and economic issues are no longer separated (Zahra, 2021), and leaders should and will follow this trend. In a study from 2008 about leadership advocacy, Manuel London had argued that leaders tend to become more involved in advocacy efforts the more the need is when the need is local and personal; it can be argued that it cannot get more personal than it has following the events of the pandemic, and that this can be a catalysis for future leadership CSR involvement.

*H5: The COVID-19 crisis has had a positive impact on the CSR view and the trend will be pursued once the pandemic ends.*

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

To complement the literature review, a series of 14 in-depth interviews were performed. The database included executives of medium and big enterprises from Romania representing a group of representatives of the business environment having both professional and leadership experience. Although the sectors varied from banking, food sector, insurance or real estate, the common ground was the large number of people that the leaders had to manage while striving to overcome the challenges of the pandemic.

Participants were identified and selected based on three collective criteria. The first one was holding a high leadership position, that could be defined as managing a business or being in an executive, decision making position of authority. The second collective criteria were to have a large number of people under their

authority. The third criterion was to be able to provide a perspective of the business environment within the COVID-19 crisis.

The written acceptance of the interviewed people was requested by email, explaining the purpose and method of the interviews. Meetings were then booked at the interviewed peoples' headquarters in order to offer them the comfort of their own space.

### **3.2 Interview design**

The phenomenological study method was used in order to draw on observations from the actual and perceived experience of those interviewed, and by using inductive theorizing, conclude and broaden the conclusions.

The interviews are qualitative, semi-structured, held face to face, designed in order to provide freedom of expression while ensuring a consistent interpretation. The purpose is to obtain the individual view, as the personal and professional opinions of people in high level positions will influence the behavior of the people they manage, the choices their companies make and therefore, the business environment.

The present qualitative study aims to answer to the following research questions:

*RQ1: Was innovation a major tool that helped companies strive through COVID crisis, or did they prefer to focus on more vital processes?*

*RQ2: Will post-Covid leaders focus more on innovation than before?*

*RQ3: How did digitalization make its impact on the leader-team relationship?*

*RQ4: Will the digitalization of leadership have a positive impact on the team effectiveness through a less hands on management style?*

*RQ5: Has the COVID19 crisis had a positive impact on the business CSR view and will did trend continue post crisis?*

## **4. Results and Discussions**

In order to perform the analysis, the interviews were recorded, and transcripts were prepared. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes to an hour. Notes were taken regarding the nonverbal cues in order to ensure data triangulation. Sorting and sifting were performed for each question in order to identify themes, key phrases, patterns of thinking. All respondents showed genuine interest in the proposed theme (i.e., innovation, digitalization, CSR) and willingness to answer and explain their vision.

This research study draws on collective knowledge, experience, and insights from leaders of different business perimeters. The field of activity, gender and age range are described in the table below:

Nr. Crt.	Field of activity	Gender	Age range	No. of persons
1	Management Consultancy	M	40-50	2
2	FMCG	M	30-40	1
3	Legal	M	40-50	2
4	Producers	M	40-50	3
5	Finance	M	40-50	4
6	Producers	M	40-50	2

#### 4.1 Innovation during and post crisis

The interviews began with questions about innovation, the dominant theme being the link between innovation and the reaction to the COVID 19 crisis. To answer the first question regarding the hypotheses that innovation was a major tool that helped them to strive within the crisis time, or if they preferred to focus on more crucial activities, 3 major categories of answers were differentiated:

a. The first and most represented category (8 out of 14 answers) differentiate two types of reaction regarding innovation within the COVID-19 crisis. Such examples of expressions are “it was split into two periods”/ “after a freezing while we have been able to innovate”/ “our reactions were different depending on the evolution of the crisis”. A first reaction refers to an immediate answer of ignoring innovation and focusing on vital processes and keeping people safe. The respondents argue that neither their employees nor their clients showed any appetite for new experiences/processes/ products, being already bombarded by change and fear of the unknown. Their aim was initially to keep their business going, minimize losses, while ensuring a level of safety for all stakeholders. This first reaction was tightly connected to the belief that the crisis will be short lived, a fact that proved to be wrong. It then developed into a second level of reaction, that encompasses the idea that the crisis is a catalysis of change and in order to succeed, innovation should be an ongoing process that offers the opportunity to create a new normal. It was in this timeframe that most of the processes changed, new products launched, and the mentality started to shift from fear to the intent to transform it into an opportunity being able to overpass and gain from this experience.

b. The second category (5 out of 14) considered innovation as a necessary driver for successful business continuity, that helped with the implementation of the new work from home discipline. Also, for many businesses, it required different or new products, or new ways to reach their clients or interact with their stakeholders. Expressions as “I strongly believe it to be true [innovation as opportunity creator]”/” I had to introduce new subjects [through innovation]” /” innovation was also a key driver for our success during pandemic period” showcase this scenario.

c. The third and least represented category (1 out of 14) considered innovation not a priority within this timeframe as the aim was to strive, to minimize losses and the new work models didn’t bring results similar to those prior crises: “I have to admit that innovation has not been a top priority”.



Therefore H1 „*Innovation was a major tool that made possible processes otherwise hindered by the pandemic and consider it as a mainstream post-COVID, that allowed the organization to live and flourish in future*” has been confirmed.

Related to the second question regarding the innovation approach post COVID-19 crisis, the direction was linear: innovation is seen as necessary, of utmost importance in the future strategy of all business environments. It should be underscored that all respondents are representatives of private companies, mostly corporations, and no public sector company was interviewed for this study, although their opinions could be of utmost difference. For the interviewed companies, innovation got accelerated by the pandemic and the sudden switch to an on-line world. Post-crisis, innovation will have to be on “full focus”, as it “acted as an accelerator, and helped democratize innovation a little further, for organizations to adapt to the new situation”. As pointed and underlined by one of the respondents “we enter a period where people will be very open to new things again and especially with a continuation of working from home, new products and services need to be adapted to that new reality”, innovation being the necessary condition for their activity continuation”.

Therefore H2 „*Post-Covid leaders will focus more on innovation as a continuation of the crisis tendencies*” has been confirmed as the tendency in crisis was to consider innovation as a sustainability tool and the trend will see it also as a crisis management tool.

#### **4.2 Digitalization and the impact on the team-leader binary**

Considering the impact of digitalization on the leader-team relationship, the respondents have identified both negative and positive aspects. In terms of negative, most often it was remarked that the communication was affected: “there are no serendipitous interactions anymore”, “the human-touch was lost”, “the social element has suffered” were remarks that were underlined as of great importance. A differentiation was made between strong teams, experienced leaders that didn’t feel the difficulties of remote working as hard as others, and the idea was promoted (in 4 out of 14 cases) that “not all teams can function 100% virtually and that some actual facetime is required” and “a combination of physical interaction strengthened by powerful digital tools will be the future”. Each of the leaders developed their own answer in front of this new challenge with divergent solutions like “over-communicate” in order to maintain relations, create “on-line social events” or “ad-hoc discussions”, or, at the other pole “simplify the communication”, “don’t over-meet”, respect the breaks and personal time needed by the employee. Therefore, the authors conclude that there is no single recipe of success and that for the leaders, managing remote organizations and teams has created the perceived impression of loss of the human touch of work tasks, that could be a mirror of the thoughts of the employees. As underlined by a respondent, the challenge has passed from “managing the activity into managing the results”.

Regarding the impact of the efficiency of the team, opinions are split. Most of the respondents see it as an opportunity to delegate less and empower more, resulting in more self-empowered teams. A special attention should be given to communication (due to the loss of the authenticity of face-to-face communication) and organization (as agendas transform into one perpetual meeting aiming to transfer information in one part or another). Attention should be given otherwise the risk is to transform work into “just transactional information exchanges”. One respondent has marked the fact that the empowerment leadership style transformation is not derived only from the crisis, but a direct result of new generations requirements and expectations, and that businesses will have to adapt and go with the flow of changes rather than risk it and remain behind.

Therefore *H3 “Digitalization of leadership will have a positive impact on the team effectiveness through new collaboration systems”* has been confirmed through the creation of trust-based relations and more empowered employees.

However, for *H4 “In the face of the corona virus pandemic, leader-team connection can be maintained despite the challenges encountered “*, although methods were and can be found, and the positive aspects should be maintained, the need of having also face to face interaction continues to be seen of utmost importance.

### **4.3. The crisis and business impact on CSR view**

The crisis has sensitized their view on social responsibility, and they became involved even more than before into social cases: “we helped even more than before”. An explanation was the prior support and belief in CSR initiatives underlined by an even greater need from the world around due to the crisis. It was also differentiated by the fact that CSR is used as PR and authenticity is required in order to meet its purpose through a less publicity-more acting approach. The general understanding that the community appreciates businesses active from a CSR point of view proved to be stronger than ever while the people were sensitized by fear and the tragedies happening all around them. Their employees’ safety and financial predictability are considered the main drivers of responsibility related to the CSR policy.

The crisis has helped “further re-emphasized the need to keep everyone in mind when making important decisions with far-reaching implications”, the leaders are well aware that “a great deal of empathy and placing ourselves in each other’s shoes is what will drive us forward during challenging times, especially like the ones we experienced throughout the first year and even now”. Only two out of 14 answers mentioned that due to the crisis that did not envision the time or budget for CSR related activities.

As for a post-crisis perspective the main conclusion is that “society will pressure everyone to contribute a little more to the world we all live in” and “we, as an organization, are now judged not just by the total amount of revenue and net profit generated but also by the impact on society and the environment as a whole”. The

idea of helping shape society by educational partnerships with the business environment appeared in 4 out of 14 cases. The authors also need to highlight that all the interviewed leaders envision a more active involvement in future CSR activities.

Therefore H5 “The COVID-19 crisis has had positive impact on the CSR view and the trend will be pursued once the pandemic will end” was confirmed by the majority of answers as corporate fields appears to understand and invest in the importance of helping and sustaining others and the importance in insuring a better future.

## 5. Conclusions

Senior leadership has a key role within the organizational environment, having in mind that the current situation is considered favorable to study the context of leadership and its three highly impacted areas: digitalization, innovation, and social responsibility. To achieve this objective, while the series of series of 14 interviews were performed through the senior leader positions from different industries, it was noticed the impact of the pandemic within their approach, as well as future trends that arise from the existing context.

In the organizational environment, the crisis changed the focus, the strategies, and tactics and that affected the processes, caused disruptions, and demanded a new view when talking about finding solutions, with even more resources engaged than in normal conditions. Basically, as per the study performed by Caballero-Morales in 2021, the key factor of business recovery post-Covid, that will allow organizations to reinvent themselves or at least to maintain their market position, will be innovation.

The central premise of this study - the digitalization of leadership and work highlights the team effectiveness before and after Covid, and it should be treated as an opportunity for transformation of leaders that have a high level of interaction with their teams and organizations by creating a new collaboration system – has been tested through the 14 interviews. The participants were identified and selected based on three collective criteria: high leadership position, people management position and the ability to provide a knowledgeable and updated perspective of the business environment within the current crisis.

Another fact explained in this article is the actual warning to small and medium enterprises that are failing already and will be continuing to fail in the near future because of the crisis. This points to a requirement for a long commitment when it comes to investments; the challenge for small and medium enterprises remains the lack of financing, or even knowledge and understanding of the market.

In conclusion, the results of this study can be used in the Romanian business environment as a tool of understanding best practices in time of crisis. However, it can be an asset for the next generations that can understand what helped leaders strive in a limited environment, such as a crises time and the way that an event can change our reality. Having in mind the innovation perspective, Romania has proved

to have a deep level of acceptance of the new trends, promoting the existing qualified informatic work market and openness into investing in digitalization.

There are normal reactions when it comes to the vital processes, people tend to ignore innovation while their focus will be on keeping their employee safe. When the need for safety comes first, the respondents firmly claim that the parties involved in their business (customers and employees) showed less to no appetite for any new products or processes, as they were already pressured by the changes and fear of the unknown. The duration of the crisis determined the respondents to develop a second level of reaction. There are almost three years of the crisis, the only solution for succeeding was to focus on innovation, by starting with the ongoing process that offer the opportunity to create a new normal. This is how the mentality started to shift from fear to the intent to transform it into an opportunity to be able to exceed expectations and creating new solutions for the new challenges that will eventually come.

The authors concluded that the greatest challenge for the leadership parties is to create a sense of belonging and community with their employees, arguing that innovation could be the appropriate answer to the leadership trends post Covid crisis.

Finally, the results of the qualitative research done for Romanian leaders do seem to back up the general existing studies investigated and provide new evidence on novel ideas on how innovation can increase also during a crisis; nevertheless, given that the pandemic is not over yet in parts of the world and has only recently been declared over in others and that the timeframe for these studies on mass remote working are less than a few years, there is and will be a lot of room for further research on the Covid-19 crisis impact on leadership when longer periods will be used as reference.

This study has practical implications for the business environment in Romania as well as for the next generations that can understand what helped leaders strive in crises time as well as how such an event can shape our reality and way of working. Such a qualitative study is justified based on such arguments as:

- Romania is a European Union country that proved to be a fruitful market for development that attracts international companies, as well as having successful and competing local businesses.
- The interviewed executives manage companies with more than 500 employees and therefore the level of comprehension and experience of both crisis and innovation is increased and there is a low risk of bias in this regard.

From innovation point of view, Romania has proved to have a high level of attraction and acceptance of the new, promoting the existing qualified informatic work market and investing in digitalization.

The study has the following limitation (a) limited generalization as it is limited to a small number of respondents, part of an association (b) the possibility that the author's own opinions influence the results interpretation.

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