

## IMPACT OF COVID -19 PANDEMIC ON THE HIERARCHY OF MOTIVATING FACTORS AMONG SALES DEPARTMENT EMPLOYEES

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to identify, assess and compare the hierarchy of motivating factors among sales department employees of Polish companies before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific and unprecedented crisis we had not encountered on such a scale before. The study used a survey questionnaire, the results of which were analysed using methods from multivariate statistical analysis. A decrease in respondents' preferences for motivating factors related to the work team, the atmosphere at work and employee benefits, and a substantial increase in the importance of employment security have been observed. Attractive remuneration has retained its high position in the hierarchy of motivating factors from the time before the COVID-19 pandemic. From the point of view of a company's surviving the crisis, sales department employees are its key assets. Understanding the changes in motivating factors caused by an unstable environment may be very useful to managers in creating effective and practical tools for motivating employees.

**Keywords:** motivation, hierarchy of motivating factors, COVID-19 Pandemic, economic crisis, sales department employees

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### Introduction

When the economy undergoes a downturn or other economic difficulties or crises arise, many entrepreneurs concentrate on cost reduction, particularly cutting labour costs. This reduces remuneration, "freezing" rises, and cancelling material bonuses to secure jobs. If that turns out to be impossible, the employers also lay off their staff, which may be necessary, e.g. if there are not enough orders [Kopertyńska 2010]. Many managers remain passive, claiming a lack of financial means to invest in motivation. In most cases, such omission leads to weakening the employees' activity and entrepreneurial attitudes, apathy, and even flight into disease, which, in turn, only exacerbates the company's difficulties.

Crises are inevitable in the business world (Hamouche, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous and unprecedented economic, business, and public

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health challenges (Esch et al., 2020). Since the Second World War, the world has not experienced such severe restrictions on individual freedoms as those imposed by most democratic governments, involving total lockdown, maintaining social distance and limiting the activities of businesses and services (Pantano et al., 2021). The global COVID-19 pandemic has widely disrupted necessary activities and economic growth and has had acute and long-term effects on individuals' lives and the motivation of employees (Asfahani, 2021). Most of the world's enterprises have lost planned revenues, and millions of jobs have been threatened (Cepel, 2020). Globally synchronized blockades and financial market panics reinforced each other into an unprecedented sudden economic halt. For these reasons, the global recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions was unique (Boissay and Rungcharoenkitkul, 2020).

There has been a great deal of research on the impact of the pandemic on business operations. Still, little research has examined the effects of the pandemic on the motivation of employees, especially sales staff, on whom a company's financial performance largely depends. That is why ensuring sales employees' commitment during economic downturns becomes more important than ever before.

This study aims to fill a research gap in the area of the impact of the economic crisis on the prioritisation of work motivation factors.

## Literature Review

### *The essence of motivation*

Undoubtedly, motivation is one of management's most important and challenging aspects (Robbins et al. 2018), affecting the productivity and innovativeness of the current employees, which in turn determines the company's competitiveness and market position (Lewicka 2010). The level of motivation of an individual or a work team may affect all other aspects of the organisation's functioning (Wan Fauziah et al., 2013). There is compelling empirical evidence that motivated employees to translate into improved organisation efficiency (Lee, Raschke 2016).

Motivation derives from the Latin word '*movere*', which means '*to move*'. Motivation is defined as a process that initiates, directs and maintains the behaviour of individuals pursuing specific goals (Goyal 2015). According to Almansour, motivation is the force that leads people to act. This initiative encourages and drives the individual to do something or perform better jobs (Almansour, 2012). Motivation is a person's intention to undertake an action to satisfy a need, which, in this context, means a physiological or psychological lack of something which makes specific goals attractive (Robbins 2004; Belas et al., 2014). "Simplistically, it can be said that motivation is an activity through which it influences the behaviour of people in the way we want them to behave and act" (Tršková, 2016).

"Motivating is a set of forces that make people behave in a certain way" (Griffin 2021). According to Griffin, the employees may either (i) work to their full potential or (ii) work with sufficient intensity to avoid being reprimanded or (iii) limit their efforts to the minimum. Managers' essential goal is to maximise the frequency of the

first and minimising the third types of behaviour. Therefore, the ability to motivate employees to work is one of the core components of general managerial skills (Kozioł et al., 2000).

The motivation process includes exerting conscious and intentional influence on the employees' behaviour at work by creating conditions that allow them to satisfy their needs as they contribute to achieving specific goals of their organisation (Pocztowski 2007). Through their motivation, the employees satisfy their housing, material or consumer needs and their needs related to self-realisation, esteem, etc. (Kopertyńska 2008). Motivating employees requires understanding and, as far as possible, satisfying their motivational needs so that the tasks they contribute to the organisation's development (Kozłowski 2017).

Various types of motivation can be distinguished, depending on the reasons or goals determining the actions taken. The most basic distinction is made between internal motivation, which refers to the desire to do things that are interesting or pleasant, and external motivation, which refers to the desire to do things that bring certain outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The employees' internal motivation, an involuntary stimulus to aspire to certain goals and to behave in a certain way, includes, among other things, responsibility, freedom of action and opportunities to use skills. Extrinsic motivation occurs when actions are performed for employees that include rewards, such as increased pay or other incentives and punishments, such as disciplinary action or criticism (Armstrong, 2010). External factors may immediately affect the employee's behaviour, but their effects are short-term, contrary to internal factors that have a deeper and long-term influence on the employee's motivation (Sajkiewicz 2000). Research has also demonstrated that external factors, such as expected rewards depending on commitment and task completion, greatly weaken internal motivation (Deci et al. 1999).

A set of influence stimuli, applied to encourage the employees to take actions that are beneficial to the company and avoid activities that are detrimental to it, comprises a motivational system. Every organisation has its unique motivational system whose elements affect the level of motivation and the employees' identification with their organisation (Kozłowski 2017). The efficiency of any motivational system may be measured by the extent to which the company's goals are achieved or, from the employees' point of view, by the level of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

### ***Theories of motivation***

According to the relevant literature, a certain number of motivational theories and models enable one to assess the motivational process and quantify the relevant factors to improve the company's existing motivational system (Kozłowski 2017). Motivational models can be roughly divided into two groups: needs-oriented models and process-oriented models.

In the middle of the 20th century, Abraham Maslow, who developed the first needs-oriented model, found that human behaviour is controlled by internal and external factors in a 5-level hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety and security, social belonging, esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow 1943). He also proposed that a

person couldn't identify or satisfy a higher need in the hierarchy until that person's currently identified need is essentially or fully satisfied (Gawel 1996). Maslow's theory of needs has been criticised and questioned many times, including the hierarchy of needs (Berl 1984), setting the priorities determined by the hierarchy of needs (Ryan 2017) and some theses of his theory (Fallatah 2018).

Another recognised needs-oriented model is the two-factor motivation theory, also known as Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. Frederick Herzberg distinguished two groups of motivating factors. The first includes all demotivating factors, such as displeasure, while the other group comprises hygiene factors related to the work environment. According to this theory, a lack of hygiene factors may reduce job satisfaction. Still, they alone do not motivate or generate satisfaction (Gawel 1996), e.g. remuneration policy, atmosphere and interpersonal relations at work, working conditions, occupational health and safety, supervisor's leadership style, etc. The other group of factors are internal motivating factors related to the content of work, which affects job satisfaction, e.g. interest in work, opportunity for self-fulfilment, esteem, growth and achievements, autonomy at work, etc. (Kozłowski 2017). Herzberg's motivating factors may be used as a kind of reward for appropriate behaviour (Begiri 2019). Herzberg's two-factor motivation theory is closely related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but it introduced more factors for measuring work motivation (Wan Fuaziah et al. 2013).

Unlike Maslow's theory, McClelland's trichotomy of needs theory assumes that a person feels all needs simultaneously but with varying intensity (Nieżurawska-Zajac, 2022). McClelland identified three categories of needs — for achievements, belonging and power. The intensity of each is determined by a number of different variables such as organisational climate, employee's personality features, job position or the current job market situation (Kozłowski 2022).

Other motivation theories that expanded and built on Maslow's and Herzberg's findings, e.g. Victor Vroom's expectancy theory or Edwin Locke's goal-setting theory, emphasise that individuals are motivated by various factors at different times (Goyal 2015). These theories share a common process-oriented approach to motivation. Instead of trying to identify or enumerate motivational stimuli, they concentrate on explaining why people choose certain behaviours to satisfy their needs and how they assess their level of satisfaction to achieve their goals (Griffin 2017). Process-oriented models are more complex, and needs are only one of several elements under examination in this approach. The main premise of process-oriented models is that behaviour is determined simultaneously by both internal and external factors (Kozłowski 2022). According to Armstrong, all the motivation theories referred to above contribute to understanding the processes that affect motivation. In fact, people are far more complex and varied than these theories suggest (Armstrong, 2010)

The instruments for consolidating the employees' motivation can also be divided into three groups: (i) remuneration (e.g. bonuses, rewards, rises, profit-sharing), (ii) benefits (e.g. additional medical services, insurance coverage, company cars), and

(iii) non-material motivating factors (e.g. work content, career management system, assessment system, leadership style, internal communication system, praise and criticism) (Sajkiewicz 2000). An efficient motivational system should also include a combination of stimuli for various groups of employees. Remuneration is a significant factor that increases the employees' motivation — it satisfies their basic human needs, serves as an indicator of professional prestige and position within the company, and a background for other motivational tools (Mokhniuk 2018). The employees are more open to other stimulation methods such as esteem, flexible working hours or autonomy if they are satisfied with their remuneration. Non-material motivating factors strengthen the effect of material stimuli and serve as a distinction for the employees. They are significant to those employees whose social and self-fulfilment needs (respect and esteem, bonding, creative activity, advancement) are highly developed. The role of such non-material motivating factors in the company's development increases, particularly during a crisis when firms struggle with economic problems and are forced to reduce spending. As many studies have confirmed, money is significant in the motivational process, but there are many other motivating factors valued by the employees that can be utilised in case of financial difficulties. It is up to the employers and managers to identify optimal stimuli for motivating the staff (Kopertyńska 2010). Whether the economy is growing or shrinking, finding ways to motivate employees is always a significant management challenge (Riak and Dut Bol Ayuel Bill, 2022).

***Financial crisis due to COVID-19 and its impact on employees' motivation***

In March 2020, the World Health Organization announced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, spread by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. In order to limit the number of infections and to prevent the breakdown of the healthcare system, national governments all over the world were forced to implement social distancing and free movement restrictions for the general public. Hotels, restaurants, cultural, sports and educational venues, and many services and commercial establishments were closed. The spread of the COVID-19 virus had a tremendous impact on the economic activity and functioning of companies and other employers worldwide. In 2020, a sharp fall in international trade volume was recorded, which jeopardised many supply chains, froze investments and, in consequence, caused the global economic crisis (ECB Report 2020). The economy's slowdown during the pandemic was also visible in the job market; according to the Annual Report of the European Central Bank, in 2020, employment in the eurozone fell by 1.9%, and the rate of unemployment increased to 8.4%. The sectors that saw the greatest increase in unemployment during the crisis were those that are hedonistic and require the physical presence of the customer (e.g. tourism, hospitality and entertainment), as demand for these services ceased to exist (Donthuand Gustafsson, 2020).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing restrictions changed the working conditions of most employees, who had to move their meetings to online platforms and work from home (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).

The studies initiated by the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS) were conducted in many European countries, including Poland, in June 2020 on a representative sample of respondents (N = 1,904). It follows that approximately three out of ten respondents experienced fear of getting infected, fear of infecting others or fear of their family and friends contracting the coronavirus. The largest share of the respondents (35%) worried they might infect their family and friends (ESTSS Report).

According to the study conducted in October 2020 for the website 'ciekaweliczby.pl', only 21% of adult Poles were not afraid about contracting the coronavirus, 48% were a little scared, and 38% were terrified of it. The fear of infection was undoubtedly related to individual opinions about the existence of the coronavirus pandemic and the risks it posed to humans. The same study revealed that every fifth respondent (17%) did not believe in the coronavirus epidemic and thought it was a hoax spun by the media and pharmaceutical companies, while 76% believed it was dangerous to human health and life.

Feeling safe and secure at work is a significant dimension of the employee's functioning within the organisation (Wołpiuk–Ochocińska 2016). Safety and security needs can be shelter from environmental risks and disasters, personal safety from physical harm, and financial security from poverty or emotional instability (Taormina 2013).

According to the 14th edition of the Job Market Barometer study (Barometr Rynku Pracy), performed in July 2020, 15.9% of working Poles were worried about losing their job, and 14% of employees were planning to change their job. By contrast, in the 15th edition of the same study, performed at the end of 2020 / beginning of 2021, the share of respondents experiencing job insecurity had grown to 35%, and 34% were planning to change their job. Another study, conducted by the portal Pracuj.pl in April 2020, i.e. one month after the outbreak of the pandemic, shows that no less than 44% of employees were worried about losing their job, while they would be willing to change their employment if they were offered the following: higher wages (76%), stable and secure employment (57%) and stable position of the company on the market (41%). In the same study, performed half a year later (15th edition of Barometer Rynku Pracy), fewer employees worried about losing their job (32%). Among the incentives for a job change, the importance of a stable position in the company on the market had grown (to 51%), just like the importance of regular and secure employment (58%). In comparison, that of higher remuneration had fallen (69%).

In the context of the pandemic crisis, the employees' motivation and willingness to pursue the company's goals in difficult and uncertain conditions are particularly vital for the company's survival and development. The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on various aspects of people's lives worldwide. It paralysed the public healthcare sector and the economy and created a global panic, impacting employees' commitment and intention to change employment (Mojo 2020). Studies conducted by the Slovak company EKOLTECH shortly before the economic crisis of 2008 and

after it had already started in 2009 revealed the impact of the global crisis on the factors motivating employees to work. In times of crisis or uncertainty, employees are willing to work in worse conditions to keep their jobs (Hitka et al., 2011). Other studies performed from 2017 to 2020 in micro and small businesses in the Slovak Republic led to the conclusion that in the first year of the pandemic, there was a change in the hierarchy of individual motivating factors, the role of factors referring to interpersonal relations, such as atmosphere at work, friendly team and communication had shrunk, while the role of pay-related factors, job security and support from the supervisor had grown (Hitka et al. 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also changed how sales department employees interacted with customers. The 4th edition of the State of Sales report (Salesforce Research 2020) included the results of studies carried out in June 2020 among 6 thousand sales specialists in North America, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Africa and the Middle East investigating new strategies and tactics applied by sales leaders during the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis turned all sales department employees into virtual salespersons almost from day to day. Daily direct interactions were reduced and replaced by phone or internet communication — 70% of organisations retrained their external sales representatives to sell from home. 77% of respondents confirmed accelerated digitalisation. The growth of e-commerce and teleworking forced the sales department employees to develop their technological competencies, learn to adapt, more than ever, to the changing environment, and deliver on the sales plans under the pressure of imposed self-isolation. A clear majority (79%) stated that the pandemic had forced them to react quickly and change their sales plans. In addition, 67% declared that their organisation had become more rigorous in recording activities in its system compared to the year before. The customers were also challenged by the uncertainty about the following months and years, so the sales department employees will have to adapt their approach to the unique situation of individual customers.

Crises alter the patterns of employers' thinking and behaviour, challenging them to search for new organisational and management solutions (Mazurkiewicz, 2010). During a crisis, motivating the employees becomes particularly significant. Successful company navigation through a crisis largely depends on the employees' commitment.

The question of the employees' motivation and satisfaction has been widely discussed by many researchers since Maslow first published his theory of the hierarchy of needs. However, only a few analysed this phenomenon during the recession and economic crisis (Chatzopoulou 2015). An attempt to diagnose the motivation and other factors increasing the commitment of salespersons during the greatest global crisis of COVID-19 seems a valuable study focus as it might fill the missing gaps in this particular area of research.

The main aim of this study is to determine the hierarchy of motivating factors among sales department employees of Polish companies before and during the COVID-19

pandemic. In addition, the following research questions were examined in relation to the group of respondents:

- Does the pandemic discourage workers from considering other job offers and a workplace change?
- Do the employees need more support from their supervisors during the pandemic than before to maintain a high level of commitment?

The study also included individual opinions on the existence of the coronavirus and its threats and a comparison of the total results to the results from the sub-group of so-called 'coronaseptics' who consider the coronavirus to be a hoax spun by the media and pharmaceutical companies.

The following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions affected the hierarchy of the factors motivating the employees to work.

H2: The importance of the factor "job security" has increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

H3: The motivating factor 'attractive remuneration' has retained its high position in the hierarchy since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

H4: The COVID-19 pandemic does not discourage employees from considering other job offers and job change planning.

H5: The employees need more support from their supervisors during the pandemic than before to maintain a high level of commitment.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted from May to June 2021 according to the CAWI method (*Computer Assisted Web Interview*), i.e. using a professional internet survey prepared on the Survio platform and sent to sales managers and sales professionals of Polish commercial, manufacturing and service companies. The client base of the consultancy company Simply HR was used as the frame of reference, and the study used the Survio platform. Ten selected financial and non-financial motivational factors were used in the prioritisation study. A 3-level interval scale was applied in the study to limit the central tendency error, taking into account the respondents' high level of competence (specialists and managers). In addition, a 10-level interval scale was applied to assess individual results. The research was carried out using an Excel spreadsheet and Statistica 13.1 software.

Seventy-eight persons participated in the study. The study participants were specialists (63%) and managers and/or supervisors (37%). The two largest age groups were from 41 to 50 years of age (44%) and 31 to 40 years of age (41%), while 29% of the respondents had a job tenure from 1 to 4 years.



**Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents**

Gender	female	39	50,00%	Job position	specialist	49	62,80%
	male	39	50,00%		manager	29	37,20%
Age	under 30	10	12,80%	Tenure	less than 1 year	14	17,90%
	31 – 40	32	41,00%		1 – 4 years	23	29,50%
	41 – 50	34	43,60%		4 – 7 years	19	24,40%
	over 50	2	2,60%		7 – 10 years	10	12,80%
					more than 10 years	12	15,40%

In the following analyses, the basic measures of descriptive statistics and selected statistical tests were applied. A test for one and two means was used. The statistical significance of 0.05 was assumed for all calculations.

### Research Results

In the first part of the study, the respondents were asked to put in order of significance ten selected factors motivating them to greater commitment just before the COVID-19 pandemic and then to do the same for the current situation (during the pandemic). Table 2 includes, in addition to the results of the ranking of ratings of motivating factors before and during the pandemic, the results of a test of the significance of differences between them (Szajt, 2014).

**Table 2. Ranking of motivating factors before and after the pandemic**

Motivating Factor	Ranking		Difference		
	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	Ranking Change	t	p
Attractive remuneration	1st	1st	0	-0.438	0.663
Work content – doing an interesting job	2nd	3rd	-1	-2.823	0.006
Supportive supervisor	4th	4th	0	0.484	0.630
Smooth team cooperation	3rd	5th	-2	-1.341	0.184
Job security	6th	2nd	4	6.520	0.000
Healthy balance between work and private life	7th	6th	1	1.628	0.108
Friendly atmosphere at work	5th	7th	-2	-3.117	0.003
Employee benefits	9th	9th	0	-1.070	0.288
Availability of training and improving qualifications	8th	8th	0	-0.255	0.800
Availability of promotion within the company	10th	10th	0	-1.383	0.171

Attractive remuneration was the most important factor motivating the respondents before and during the pandemic. No difference was observed between the perception of this factor's significance before and after the pandemic outbreak. However, there was a statistically significant change in the ranking of the factor of job security ( $t = 6.520$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Before the pandemic, this factor ranked 6th in the hierarchy of sales department employees, but with the pandemic and the COVID-19 restrictions, its importance has grown, and it currently ranks 2nd. There was also a significant decrease in the importance of work content ( $t = 2.823$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ) and atmosphere at work ( $t = -3.117$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ), which ranked higher among salespersons before the pandemic. Similar results were obtained in both professional groups; among specialists ( $t = 5.258$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and managers ( $t = 3.794$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ), the factor of job security grew in importance. Among the 'coronasceptics' who agreed with the statement that the pandemic was a hoax spun by the media and pharmaceutical companies, the ranking of motivating factors was slightly different, with the factor "work content – doing an interesting job" 2nd after "attractive remuneration" and the factors "smooth team cooperation" and "friendly atmosphere at work" each ranked 1 point higher than before. Job security jumped two levels from 7th to 5th in the ranking.

**Table 3. Ranking of motivating factors before and during the pandemic by a professional group**

Motivating factor	Specialists			Managers			“Coronasceptics”		
	Ranking before the	Ranking during the	Difference	Ranking before the	Ranking during the	Difference	Ranking before the	Ranking during the	Difference
Attractive remuneration	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0
Work content – doing an interesting job	2	3	-1	2	3	-1	6	7	-1
Supportive supervisor	5	4	1	3	4	-1	4	2	2
Smooth team cooperation	4	6	-2	4	5	-1	3	4	-1
Job security	6	2	4	6	2	4	7	5	2
Healthy balance between work and private life	7	5	2	7	7	0	5	6	-1
Friendly atmosphere at work	3	7	-4	5	1	4	2	3	-1
Employee benefits	8	9	-1	9	10	-1	8	8	0
Availability of training and improving qualifications	9	8	1	8	9	-1	8	10	-1
Availability of promotion within the company	10	10	0	10	8	2	10	9	1

The respondents were also asked to assess the motivating factors on the following 4-level scale of the change in the weight/importance of each motivating factor resulting from the occurrence of COVID-19 and the imposed restrictions: (i) “this factor has considerably changed in importance for me”, (ii) “this factor has moderately changed in importance for me”, (iii) “this factor has marginally changed in importance for me”, (iv) “this factor has not changed in importance for me”.

**Table 4. How has the weight/importance of individual motivating factors changed?**

Motivating factor	This motivating factor has				Test result	
	considerably changed in importance	moderately changed in importance	marginally changed in importance	not changed in importance	t	p
Attractive remuneration	30.8%	23.1%	7.7%	38.5%	0.266	0.395
Work content – doing an interesting job	1.3%	11.5%	29.5%	57.7%	11.109	0.000
Supportive supervisor	14.1%	32.1%	11.5%	42.3%	2.506	0.006
Smooth team cooperation	9.0%	21.08%	23.1%	46.2%	4.899	0.000
Job security	52.6%	17.9%	7.7%	21.8%	-3.730	0.000
Healthy balance between work and private life	25.6%	29.5%	14.1%	30.8%	0.000	0.500
Friendly atmosphere at work	15.4%	16.7%	17.9%	50.0%	4.101	0.000
Employee benefits	9.0%	9.0%	28.2%	53.8%	7.103	0.000
Availability of training and improving qualifications	5.1%	9.0%	25.6%	60.3%	9.415	0.000
Availability of promotion within the company	7.7%	7.7%	21.8%	62.8%	8.572	0.000

Taking lack of change as a reference point (value: 2.5), the significance of indicated changes in individual factors was examined. More than half of the respondents indicated a strong change in the significance of the “job security” factor. The significance of the factors “attractive remuneration” and “healthy balance between work and private life” also changed significantly (2nd and 3rd largest change, respectively), which may result from the necessity of teleworking and combining work with parental obligations while staying at home with the children. However, in both cases, the share of answers indicating no change made up for the general

assessment, which means that no important decisions about the assessment of individual factors had been taken. As far as the other examined factors are concerned, no significant changes in their assessment were confirmed.

The motivating factors “availability of promotion within the company” and “availability of training and improving qualifications” ranked the lowest among the study participants before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the next part of the survey, sales department employees were asked about their level of commitment, their need for support from the supervisors, their anxiety about the stability of their employment and their willingness to change their job.

**Table 5. Respondents’ subjective assessment of their commitment and willingness to change their job**

Statements for assessment	Assessment of statements				Test result	
	I strongly agree	I agree	I disagree	I strongly disagree	t	p
The level of my commitment to work decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions.	9.0%	17.9%	37.2%	35.9%	4.661	0.000
I need more support from my supervisor during the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions than before in order to maintain a high level of commitment.	5.1%	28.2%	41.0%	25.6%	3.851	0.000
The current pandemic situation discourages me from considering other job offers and from changing my job.	10.3%	26.9%	43.6%	19.2%	2.163	0.015
I’m worried about losing my job due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions.	6.4%	28.2%	43.6%	21.8%	3.204	0.001
I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a serious threat to human health and life.	51.3%	33.3%	15.4%	0.0%	– 10.345	0.000

The survey results did not confirm the hypothesis that the employees need more support from their supervisors during the COVID-19 pandemic than before to maintain a high level of commitment ( $t = 3.851$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Meanwhile, 73.1% of respondents denied that their commitment during the pandemic had decreased.

Working from home, which requires new behaviour patterns and skills to acquire customers and meet sales targets, demands more self-discipline and commitment. The study revealed that 62.8% of respondents were not discouraged by the pandemic from considering other job offers and from changing their job. Frequent job change has been common among sales department employees for years, and despite the unstable job market, only 37% of respondents did not consider changing their job, while 65.4% were worried about the stability of their employment. A vast majority of respondents (84.4%) perceived the pandemic to threaten human health and life, including only 10.3% of the “coronasceptics”.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Motivating the employees is of utmost importance during a crisis because navigating the company largely depends on its employees (Kopertyńska 2010). Commitment and determination in striving to achieve certain goals, particularly in the case of sales employees, often tip the scales towards the company's survival. Understanding the stimuli that can be used to influence the staff in an unstable environment may help the managers choose the optimal methods of increasing the motivation of the employees.

COVID-19 was an unprecedented health crisis that vigorously shook the world and led to a significant slowdown in economic activity, triggering layoffs and increasing unemployment rates in many countries. (Hamouche 2021). The pandemic damaged economies worldwide as borders between countries were closed, negatively affecting foreign trade and the national product of countries and increasing unemployment rates in both developing and developed countries (Petrovskaya, 2022). This specific and stressful situation definitely impacted employee engagement, motivation and job satisfaction (Moyo, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many problems and new challenges in people management emerged. Many studies have shown the pandemic's impact on the work environment and the well-being of employees' behaviour at work (Mun et al., 2022). Organisations have tried various ways to promote positive psychological capital and retain and motivate employees to cope with this challenging situation.

It has been observed in practice that the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on national economies and drove many businesses into financial difficulties, particularly in the segment of small and medium-sized companies (Herasymenko, Makhaieva 2021). In the new social and economic reality that has emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an urgent need arose for designing and implementing an updated motivational mechanism for various companies and organisations that would be up to the challenges resulting from reduced social interaction and the necessity to work from home. There was a clear change in the employers' priorities related to ensuring job security and safe working conditions for the employees, as well as a difference in the employees' hierarchy of motivating factors related to work conditions.

The purpose of this study and its discussion is to contribute to the research into motivation at work. Firstly, it proved that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic impact the employees' motivation and the hierarchy of factors motivating them to work. The significance of so-called "relational" motivating factors such as team cooperation and work atmosphere fell during the pandemic. However, it is worth noticing that in the subgroup of the "coronasceptics", the importance of these factors went 1 level up in the hierarchy.

Secondly, the largest change in the ranking was observed for the factor "job security". Thus, the results of the studies by Hitka et al. in 2021 were confirmed. Statistically significant changes in the ranking of motivating factors, particularly for job security, were observed by Hitka et al. and Mayo in 2020. Both studies confirmed the correlation between the need for safety and security and the level of commitment. Satisfying the employees' health, safety and security needs during the COVID-19 pandemic may boost their dedication and loyalty, while failure to do so may result in increased staff rotation. Thirdly, the external motivating factor, 'attractive remuneration,' was first in the hierarchy before and during the pandemic. It confirms that remuneration, which belongs to the group of so-called hygiene factors according to Herzberg's model, is the most significant motivating factor among sales department employees. Similar conclusions were drawn from another study conducted on a group of state officials in 2014 in Greece during the country's economic recession, namely, that even during high unemployment and recession, doing an interesting job, equal treatment and attractive remuneration are the highest ranking motivating factors (Chatzopoulou 2015). The results of studies carried out in the largest telecommunications companies in 2009 in Lithuania also suggest that even in times of crisis, it is essential to make every effort to create a fair remuneration system, taking into account each employee's contribution and results (Bakanauskiene and Ubartas 2012). The restructuring activities performed by most Polish employers during the crisis, i.e. reducing work time and remuneration, may have substantially lowered the employees' commitment to work and efficiency. A severe limitation of the study was the lack of information about the sector of activity in which the surveyed participants were employed. Such data would allow us to formulate conclusions about specific lines of business, depending on how seriously it is affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. Significant differences in the overall economic indicators for individual sectors were observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rokicki 2021). The worst economic downturn was recorded in the service sector, retail sales, followed by industrial production, while the construction industry was the least affected. The downturn was also worse for manufacturing cars, clothing and furniture, i.e. products whose purchase requires the customer's presence and interaction. Companies operating in the transport, tourism, agricultural production, fashion and services industries were most affected. These very industries were particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of COVID-19 due to short delivery times, the limited number of

vendors, etc. (Capel et al., 2020). Many companies no longer exist, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Donthuand Gustafsson, 2020).

On the other hand, an economic upturn was observed in manufacturing chemicals and pharmaceuticals, primarily due to increased demand during the pandemic. The food and drinks industry suffered only slightly, which also applies to short life-cycle consumer goods for basic physiological needs. At the same time, entertainment and online shopping have seen unprecedented growth. Therefore, future research into and analysis of motivating factors among sales department employees should include other sectors with completely different economic and social characteristics.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the survey sample was insufficient to be representative. However, this study has laid the foundations for future research into factors motivating employees to be conducted on a considerably larger scale.

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### WPLYW PANDEMII COVID-19 NA HIERARCHIĘ CZYNNIKÓW MOTYWUJĄCYCH DO PRACY PRACOWNIKÓW DZIAŁÓW SPRZEDAŻY

**Streszczenie:** Celem badania jest identyfikacja i ocena porównawcza hierarchii ważności czynników motywujących do pracy pracowników działów sprzedaży polskich firm w odniesieniu do sytuacji przed i w trakcie pandemii COVID-19. Rozpatrujemy tu pandemię COVID-19 jako specyficzną i bezprecedensową sytuację kryzysową, z którą nie mieliśmy do czynienia na taką skalę. W badaniu wykorzystano kwestionariusz ankietowy, którego wyniki przeanalizowano z wykorzystaniem metod z obszaru wielowymiarowej analizy statystycznej. Stwierdzono spadek preferencji respondentów w czynnikach motywacyjnych dotyczących zespołu, atmosfery w pracy i dodatkowych świadczeń pozapłacowych (benefitów pracowniczych) oraz istotny wzrost znaczenia bezpieczeństwa i pewności zatrudnienia. Atrakcyjne wynagrodzenie utrzymuje swoją wysoką pozycję ważności zarówno przed, jak i w trakcie trwania pandemii COVID-19. Pracownicy działu sprzedaży z punktu widzenia przetrwania firmy w czasie kryzysu, stanowią kluczowy zasób firmy. Wiedza na temat zmienności czynników motywujących pod wpływem niestabilnego otoczenia może stanowić ogromną wartość dla menedżerów w tworzeniu skutecznych narzędzi motywowania pracowników.

**Słowa kluczowe:** motywacja, hierarchia czynników motywujących, pandemia COVID-19, kryzys gospodarczy, pracownicy działu sprzedaży.

## 19世纪中叶大流行病的影响 激励因素的层次结构 在销售部门员工中的影响

**摘要：**本研究的目的是识别、评估和比较COVID-19大流行之前和期间波兰公司销售部门员工的激励因素的层次。本研究将COVID-19大流行病作为我们以前没有遇到过的如此规模的特殊的、前所未有的危机来研究。该研究使用了调查问卷，使用来自多元统计分析的方法对其结果进行了分析。受访者对与工作团队、工作氛围和员工福利有关的激励因素的偏好有所下降，而对就业保障的重视程度则大幅提高。在COVID-19大流行之前，有吸引力的薪酬在激励因素的层次结构中一直保持着较高的地位。从一个公司在危机中生存的角度来看，销售部门的员工是其关键的资产。了解由不稳定环境引起的激励因素的变化可能对管理者创造有效和实用的激励员工的工具非常有用

**关键词：**激励，激励因素的层次结构，COVID-19大流行，经济危机，销售部门员工