

**TRANSFORMATION OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE PERCEPTION IN
CEE COUNTRIES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA****Stachová K., Stacho Z., Stasiak-Betlejewska R.***

Abstract: Work-life balance is a crucial concept in today's world, as the tension between work and personal life is increasing due to remote work and long working hours. The article aimed to identify the degree of implementation of work-life balance elements in the work systems of organizations. The authors note a gap in the research regarding work-life balance, particularly in terms of the specificity of perspectives and differences in approaches among companies from various sectors. Additionally, there is a lack of analysis comparing the perceptions of local entrepreneurs and companies with foreign majority ownership. The survey distribution and data collection were conducted using the Google Forms platform from January to December 2020 in the CEE region. To test the hypotheses, the authors used a series of pairwise, non-parametric Wilcoxon tests, Mann-Whitney U test, and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA to compare the expected and current state. In cases of significant effects, the analyses were supplemented with effect size indices. The study suggests that work-life balance is given more attention in larger companies in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. This study also shows that companies with foreign majority ownership pay marginally more attention to work-life balance. The sphere of business also significantly affected the work-life balance rating, with the service sector showing higher ratings than the industrial production sector. The positive aspect of the study is that entrepreneurs have relatively significant expectations for the development of work-life balance. However, the study is limited to only CEE countries, and future studies plan to expand the respondent database to include Western European countries for comparison.

Key words: Work-life balance, post-pandemic era; CEE countries

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Introduction

Currently, there is increasing tension between work and personal life due to the growing trend of remote work and long working hours (Ha, 2022). This tension can have negative effects on individual's physical and mental health (Selvaskandan et

* **Katarína Stachová**, Assoc. prof. MSc. PhD., University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Institute of Management Trnava, Slovakia ✉ email: katarina.stachova@ucm.sk, ORCID: 0000-0003-4761-2509

Zdenko Stacho, Assoc. prof. MSc. PhD.; University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Institute of Management Trnava, Slovakia
✉ corresponding author: zdenko.stacho@ucm.sk,
ORCID: 0000-0001-5588-8340

Renata Stasiak-Betlejewska, Ing. PhD.; Czestochowa University of Technology Faculty of Management, Poland; ✉ email: renatastasiak@wp.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-8713-237X

al., 2022) as well as on the quality of family and personal life (Demirbağ and Demirbağ 2022).

The perception of work-life balance in 2023 will deepen and gain importance. In the context of global challenges and changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war conflict in Ukraine and the crisis accompanying it, or climate change, work-life balance will play a key role in ensuring good physical and mental health, as well as in achieving overall life satisfaction and happiness.

The objective of this study was to determine the extent to which work-life balance components are incorporated into the work systems of companies in CEE countries. The authors perceive a gap in the research conducted thus far, particularly in terms of the specificity of the perspectives on this issue. There is a lack of insight into differences in the approaches of companies from various sectors. While the issue of work-life balance is not limited to specific business sectors, the authors of this article are convinced that its perception varies significantly across sectors.

Based on the differences between individual sectors, it will be possible to offer more targeted recommendations. Another aspect is the absence of an analysis of the perception of local entrepreneurs versus the perception of companies with foreign majority ownership. The authors consider this significant primarily because the vast majority of highly current developmental topics in the field of people management are coming to the CEE countries from the West, where their positive effects have already been demonstrated, and only subsequently are they being implemented through companies with foreign majority ownership in the local conditions.

Literature Review

Examples of some factors that influence the quality of life in CEE countries include economic and political instability (Morina et al., 2020; Mikle et al., 2022), higher unemployment rates (Bosna, 2022), lower income compared to developed Europe (Luczaj, 2022), and inadequate support for families and social care. The average expenditure of the EU-28 on social protection represents 19.5% of GDP. Apart from Slovakia (20%), countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania spend only 11.4% (Romania) and 13.4% (Bulgaria). Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia spend slightly more (15.6-18%), but still below the European average (Chelcea, 2015). These factors may hurt health, job satisfaction, and the quality of family and private life and therefore it is necessary to examine how companies approach this issue.

In European statistics, there is clear evidence that before the pandemic, employees in CEE countries worked longer than other Europeans. This is reflected in the number of people who worked more than 40 hours per week on weekends and more than 48 hours per week, where 12 out of 16 countries where people worked more than the EU average were from CEE countries (Chelcea, 2015). However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees and employers in this area began to face new challenges. They had to learn to adapt quickly to changing conditions while maintaining the necessary balance between work and privacy (Lonska et al., 2021).

The new approach to working from home means that employees had to learn to manage their time and plan their duties to be productive while also ensuring enough time for their personal needs and obligations. As work and private environments are interconnected, it is necessary to find a balance between these two areas (Como et al., 2021). This means that employees must learn to manage their work time so that they are not exhausted and burned out, but still devote themselves to their interests and obligations.

The transformation of the perception of work-life balance has also been manifested in the increasing importance of flexible working hours (Lott, 2020; Lizbetinova et al., 2020). In the past, working hours were limited and inflexible (Cooklin, 2015). Currently, however, employers are trying to offer their employees flexible work plans and remote work (Grebski and Mazur, 2022; Vetráková et al., 2021), which increases their satisfaction (Černá et al., 2022) and improves their productivity. This means that if a worker has the opportunity to change their working hours, they can better adapt their work life to their personal life and achieve a more balanced ratio. However, CEE countries still lag behind Western European and North American countries. According to the International Labour Organization study (2022), which processed data from just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 62% of workers in CEE countries cannot change their working hours at all, while in Western European countries, it is only 44.8%, and in North America, it is 50.2% of workers. This means that workers in CEE countries are less likely to have flexible working hours and therefore have greater difficulty achieving a balanced work-life balance. This lack of flexibility in working hours can hurt the health and well-being of workers and their families, as well as work productivity and efficiency. These facts likely stem from the fact that the employment rate of CEE countries' populations is on average 36% in manufacturing, while in Western Europe it is only about 27% since manufacturing is a specific industry with limited flexibility in working hours. The transformation of the perception of work-life balance in CEE countries in the post-pandemic era brings with it many challenges and opportunities. The change in priorities in favor of a balanced work and personal life is evident in many areas, such as working conditions (Lorincová et al., 2019; Smerek et al., 2020; Fajčíková and Urbancová, 2019; Bieńkowska et al., 2022), improved communication (Jankelová et al., 2021; Ližbetinová, 2014), flexible work plans (Grebski and Mazur, 2022, Kucharcikova et al., 2019), and benefits packages (Hitka et al., 2021). These changes are very significant for all employees and employers in CEE countries and are demonstrably beneficial for employee efficiency, satisfaction, and health.

Although digital technologies had already been widely adopted in organizations before the outbreak of the pandemic (Murdoch and Fichter, 2017), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an extreme acceleration in the implementation of many elements of digitalization in the work environment (Vargo et al., 2021; Shpak et al., 2022). However, it has also brought such significant disruptions to work stereotypes that there are increasingly frequent demands from employees for improved working conditions (Rosak-Szyrocka et al., 2022; Grebski and Mazur, 2022; Matiringe and

Płaza 2022). The pandemic has become an unexpected catalyst for remote work and forced a reevaluation of work in terms of designated workplace locations and workplace practices (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2020). Flexible working conditions have challenged traditional employee-employer relationships, work time and hours, work-life balance (WLB), and individual relationship with work (Vyas, 2022).

Therefore, work-life balance is not an entirely new topic, and several studies have already shown that its implementation leads to higher work performance (Mendoza-Ocasal et al., 2022), increased job satisfaction (Alabduljader, 2022), and stronger organizational engagement (Allen et al., 2000). Positive impacts such as health satisfaction and overall life satisfaction have also been demonstrated (Keyes, 2002). Based on the above, the authors of the article aimed to identify the degree of implementation of work-life balance elements in the work systems of organizations operating in CEE countries. To achieve the research objectives, the authors established the following research questions:

- Do the respondents perceive the issue of implementing work-life balance elements in the work environment of organizations as more important for the future than their current real implementation?
- Are there dependencies between the actual application of these elements and the size, economic sector, or ownership of the company?
- Are there dependencies between the perceived level of importance and the size, sector, and/or ownership of the company?

Research Methodology

The data necessary for processing this contribution was obtained through a research tool used to assess the current level of implementation of work-life balance elements and expectations for implementation shortly. A comprehensive survey was focused on mapping trends in human resource management due to the digital transformation of companies. The survey distribution and data collection were conducted using the Google Forms platform from January to December 2020 in the CEE region. Respondents/companies evaluated the degree of actual application/presence of work-life balance in corporate practice, as well as the importance for the future of the company. This level was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the lowest achieved level or the lowest level of the future relevance of the phenomenon studied and 5 representing the highest. The survey questions were thematically focused on modern tools and concepts in the human resource management system in companies related to the emergence of Industry 4.0. To test the hypotheses, the authors used a series of pairwise, non-parametric Wilcoxon tests, Mann-Whitney U test, and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA to compare the expected and current state. In cases of significant effects, the analyses were supplemented with effect size indices.

The results and conclusions presented in this contribution are based on the analysis of a research sample consisting of responses from 1112 representatives of companies operating in Central and Eastern Europe. The selection of respondents considered

the regional aspect as well as the criterion of company size according to the number of employees. Within the research conducted by the authors of this contribution, surveys were carried out with a total of more than 1550 managers from private sector companies. Out of the total number of 1552 companies contacted, 1112 questionnaires were completed comprehensively, which represents a return rate of 72%. The specific structure of respondents according to the number of employees, business area, and majority ownership is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of respondents to the 2020 survey

Number of companies by number of employees	
1-9	324
10-49	242
50-249	243
250-more	303
Number of companies by business area	
Production	363
Services	493
Other	256
Number of companies by majority ownership	
Foreign majority ownership	434
Domestic majority ownership	678

Source: own research

Hypotheses

Based on the identified research questions, the authors have formulated the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Companies in the manufacturing sector exhibit lower ratings for the current state of the observed tools than companies in the service sector and other sectors.
- Hypothesis 2: Companies with foreign majority ownership have higher ratings for the current state of work-life balance than companies with domestic majority ownership.
- Hypothesis 3: Companies with a higher number of employees exhibit higher ratings for the current implementation of work-life balance than companies with a lower number of employees.
- Hypothesis 4: The expected need for a focus on work-life balance in organizations is higher than the current implementation in practice.

Research Results

Within the research questions focused on work-life balance elements in the work environment, respondents were able to express their opinions on a five-point scale,

where a value of 1 represented disagreement with the statement and a value of 5 represented complete agreement with the statement.

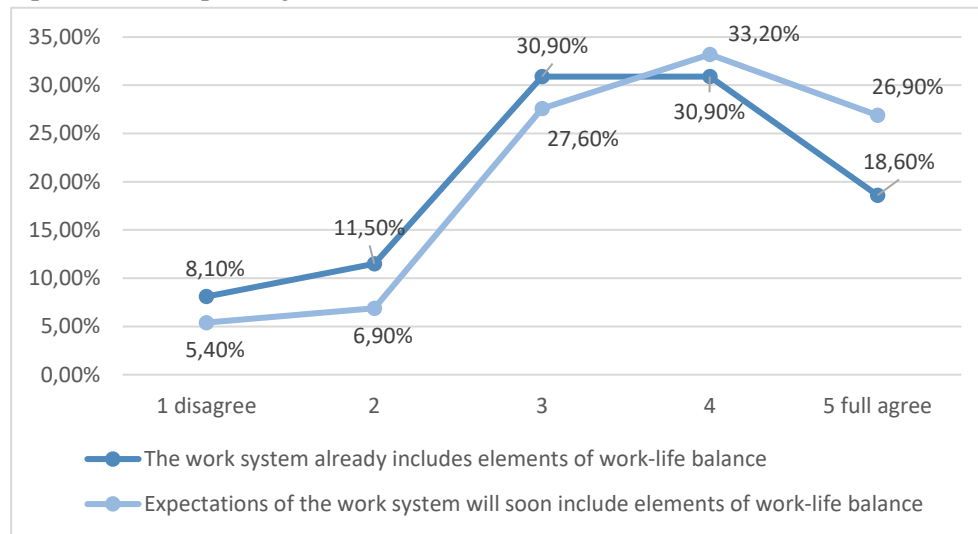


Figure 1: Displays the respondents' ratings of work-life balance elements in the organization's work system

Source: Own research

As shown in the figure, only 49.5% of respondents perceive the existence of work-life balance elements in their organization's work system, but 60.1% of respondents expect the work system to soon include work-life balance elements. Since the research respondents were representatives of organizations, these results indicate a positive trend for the future.

To test the hypotheses, the authors used a series of pairwise, non-parametric Wilcoxon tests to compare the expected and current state of work-life balance. The effect of majority ownership on the current and expected state of a work-life balance was tested using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test. In cases of significant effects, the analyses were supplemented with effect size indices (r , ηH^2).

To test the relationship between the current and expected state of work-life balance and the size of the company (based on the number of employees) and the sphere of business, the authors used non-parametric one-way Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA. In cases of significant effects, the ANOVA was supplemented with multiple comparisons using Holm's correction for levels of statistical significance.

The business sector had a significant effect on the evaluation of work-life balance, $H(2) = 9.164$, $p = .01$, $\eta H^2 = .009$. The production sector showed slightly lower ratings than other business sectors ($p_{Holm} = .024$) and the service sector ($p_{Holm} = .021$) (Figure 2).

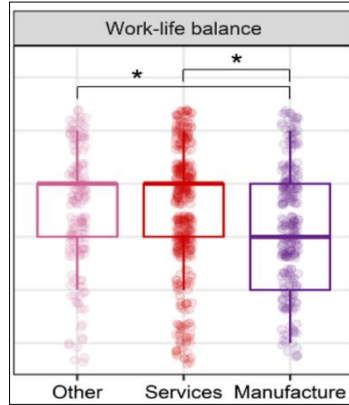


Figure 2: The business sector and current state evaluation of work-life balance. * $p < .05$

Based on the results, we can confirm Hypothesis 1: Companies in the manufacturing sector exhibit lower ratings of current work-life balance compared to companies in the service sector and other sectors.

In the evaluation of work-life balance, companies with foreign majority ownership achieved significantly but marginally higher ratings, $U = 72209.0$, $p = .051$, $r = -.079$ (Figure 3).

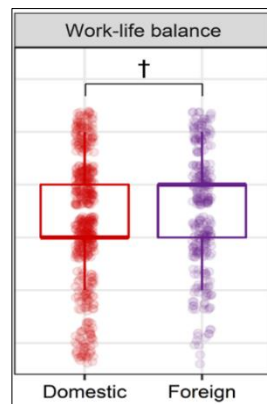


Figure 3: Majority ownership and the rating of current work-life balance † $p < .06$.

Based on the results, we can confirm Hypothesis 2: Companies with a foreign majority owner have a higher rating of current work-life balance compared to companies with a domestic majority owner.

The nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA did not indicate a significant effect of the number of employees on the rating of current work-life balance, but the effect was marginal, $H(3) = 9.516$, $p = .023$, $\eta H^2 = .008$ (Figure 4).

Multiple comparisons showed that in companies with over 250 employees, the rating was significantly higher compared to companies with 50-249 employees ($p_{Holm} = .048$) and 10-49 employees ($p_{Holm} = .048$).

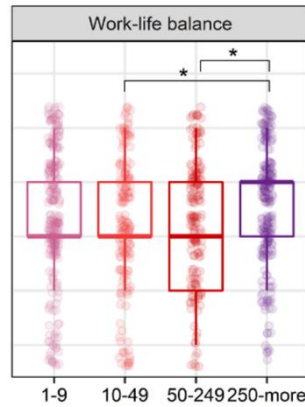


Figure 4. Size of the company and rating of current work-life balance * $p < .05$

According to the results, we can confirm Hypothesis 3: Companies with a higher number of employees exhibit higher ratings of the current implementation of work-life balance than companies with a lower number of employees.

Non-parametric pairwise comparison of ratings of work-life balance showed that respondents rated the expected state significantly more positively than the current state [$W = 7586.5$, $p < .001$, $r = .609$].

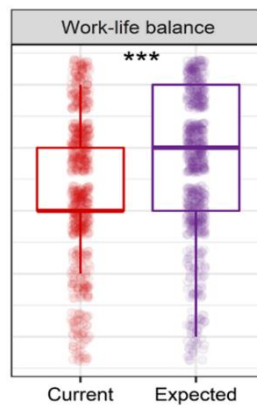


Figure 5. Ratings of expected and current state of work-life balance *** $p < .001$.

Based on the results, we can confirm Hypothesis 4: The expected need to focus on work-life balance in organizations is higher than the current state of implementation in practice.

Discussion

In the context of work-life balance issues, one of the most discussed topics is related to working hours (citations), as work takes up most of an individual's day and week and can have a significant impact on the quality of life of the individual and their family. According to the Working Time and Work-Life Balance Around the World study by the International Labour Organization (2022), CEE countries fare significantly worse than North America and Western Europe in terms of working hours. Although Western Europe and North America achieve slightly higher values in the long work criterion, i.e., more than 48 hours per week, they also have much higher percentages in the proportion of short working hours of up to 35 or 20 hours per week.

Table 2. Percentage share of employees working in non-standard lengths of working time

	North America	Western and Northern Europe	Central and Eastern Europe
Workers working more than 48 hours per week	14.0%	10.1%	4.8%
Workers working less than 35 hours per week	7.3%	9.6%	1.2%
Workers working less than 20 hours per week	23.7%	29.9%	7.9%

Source: Processed from data (International Labour Organization 2022)

The average workweek of 40 hours means that there are fewer diverse work schedules in the CEE countries. Therefore, there is still room for improvement in regulating working hours in CEE countries to achieve a better work-life balance for employees.

However, some studies focus on positive trends and improving work-life balance in Central and Eastern Europe (Zaiga et al., 2020). Our research also shows that there are relatively significant expectations for the development of this issue among entrepreneurs.

Legal regulations in labor law are also positively changing, improving the working environment and support for work-life balance. In Slovakia, the 2021 amendment to the Labor Code introduced the possibility of agreeing with an employer to work from home and telecommuting (Podnikajte.sk, 2021). In the Czech Republic, the 2020 amendment to the Labor Code included the possibility of reducing working hours for employees caring for children under 10 years of age or persons with disabilities and increased benefits for parents (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2020). In Romania, the 2019 amendment to the Labor Law included the

right of employees to 2 days of leave during the calendar year to take care of a child up to 7 years of age (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 2019).

The findings of the research presented in this paper show that the evaluation of work-life balance elements in companies with over 250 employees was significantly higher than in companies with 50-249 ($p_{Holm} = .048$) and 10-49 ($p_{Holm} = .048$) employees. These findings correlate with studies showing that small and medium-sized enterprises are more likely to create radical innovations (Yang 2019), while large companies tend to bring incremental innovations (Salike et al., 2022), including improving working conditions and the work environment.

Research results show that greater attention to work-life balance is only marginally paid in companies with foreign majority ownership, which is in line with the results of the study by Gołębiowski and Lewandowska (2015) according to which most highly innovative themes in people management also come to the CEE countries from the West, where their positive effects have already been demonstrated, and only subsequently are they implemented through companies with foreign majority ownership in local conditions. However, it can be said that Central and Eastern Europe is still on the path of improving and refining work-life balance.

Conclusion

The results of our study suggest that in the conditions of CEE countries, more large companies are dedicated to the issue of work-life balance, as multiple comparisons within our research showed that companies with over 250 employees had significantly higher ratings than those with 50-249 ($p_{Holm} = .048$) and 10-49 ($p_{Holm} = .048$) employees. Similarly, although only marginally, more attention to work-life balance is paid in companies with foreign majority ownership, where, according to research results, companies achieved significantly but marginally higher ratings for work-life balance, $U = 72209.0$, $p = .051$, $r = -.079$. Therefore, management should focus on understanding the practices and policies of these companies and incorporate any effective measures into their work-life balance initiatives. The sphere of business significantly affected the work-life balance rating, $H(2) = 9.164$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .009$. The industrial production sector showed slightly lower ratings than other business spheres ($p_{Holm} = .024$), while the service sphere showed higher ratings ($p_{Holm} = .021$). Although ensuring work-life balance for employees in the industrial manufacturing sector is considerably more challenging due to the nature of the work compared to the service sector, it remains a crucial factor for competitiveness. Industrial management should view the innovations accompanying Industry 4.0 as an opportunity for development in this area as well.

The positive aspect is that the expectations for the development of this issue are relatively significant among entrepreneurs, as a non-parametric paired comparison of work-life balance ratings showed that respondents rated the expected state significantly more positively than the current state [$W = 7586.5$, $p < .001$, $r = .609$]. Management should take advantage of this expectation and actively promote work-life balance initiatives to meet the needs and expectations of employees. Overall, the

management should prioritize implementing work-life balance initiatives in the organization to promote employee well-being, increase employee satisfaction and productivity, and reduce employee turnover. The management should regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and make necessary changes based on feedback from the employees.

The limitation of the study is the specific focus only on CEE countries. In future studies, the authors expect to expand the respondent database to include Western European countries and subsequently compare the results and draw conclusions. We also acknowledge the limitation of a one-time data collection, which is why we are currently conducting a second round of data collection, including respondents from Western European countries.

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TRANSFORMACJA POSTRZEGANIA RÓWNOWAGI MIĘDZY ŻYCIEM ZAWODOWYM A PRYWATNYM W KRAJACH EUROPY ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ W ERZE OSTPANDEMICZNEJ

Streszczenie: Równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym jest kluczowym pojęciem w dzisiejszym świecie, ponieważ napięcie między pracą a życiem osobistym rośnie z powodu pracy zdalnej i długich godzin pracy. Celem artykułu była identyfikacja stopnia wdrożenia elementów równowagi praca-życie w systemach pracy organizacji. Autorzy zauważają lukę w badaniach dotyczących work-life balance, szczególnie w zakresie specyfiki perspektyw i różnic w podejściu firm z różnych sektorów. Dodatkowo, brakuje analizy porównującej postrzeganie lokalnych przedsiębiorców i firm z większością udziałem zagranicznym. Dystrybucja ankiet i zbieranie danych zostały przeprowadzone za pomocą platformy Google Forms od stycznia do grudnia 2020 r. w regionie Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. W celu przetestowania hipotez autorzy wykorzystali serię nieparametrycznych testów Wilcoxon, test U Manna-Whitneya i ANOVA Kruskala-Wallisa w celu porównania stanu oczekiwanego i obecnego. W przypadku znaczących efektów, analizy zostały uzupełnione o wskaźniki wielkości efektu. Badanie sugeruje, że równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym jest przedmiotem większej uwagi w większych firmach w krajach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Badanie to wykazało również, że firmy z większością udziałem kapitału zagranicznego przywiązują marginalnie większą wagę do równowagi między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym. Sfera działalności również znacząco wpłynęła na ocenę równowagi między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, przy czym sektor usług wykazał wyższe oceny niż sektor produkcji przemysłowej. Pozytywnym aspektem badania jest to, że przedsiębiorcy mają stosunkowo duże oczekiwania co do rozwoju równowagi między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym. Badanie jest jednak ograniczone tylko do krajów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, a przyszłe badania planują rozszerzyć bazę danych respondentów o kraje Europy Zachodniej w celu porównania.

Słowa kluczowe: Równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, era po pandemii; kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej

大流行后时代中东欧国家工作与生活平衡观念的转变

摘要：工作与生活平衡是当今世界的一个重要概念，由于远程工作和长时间工作，工作与个人生活之间的紧张关系正在增加。本文旨在确定组织工作系统中工作与生活平衡要素的实施程度。作者指出，关于工作与生活平衡的研究存在差距，特别是在观点的特殊性和不同行业公司之间方法的差异方面。此外，也缺乏对本地企业家和外资控股公司的看法进行比较的分析。调查分发和数据收集是使用 Google Forms 平台于 2020 年 1 月至 2020 年 12 月在中东欧地区进行的。为了检验假设，作者使用了一系列成对的非参数 Wilcoxon 检验、Mann-Whitney U 检验和 Kruskal-Wallis 方差分析来比较预期状态和当前状态。在显著影响的情况下，分析补充了影响大小指数。该研究表明，中欧和东欧 (CEE) 国家的大型公司更加关注工作与生活平衡。这项研究还表明，外资控股的公司稍微更注重工作与生活平衡。商业领域也显著影响了工作与生活平衡评级，服务业的评级高于工业生产部门。该研究的积极方面是企业家对工作与生活平衡的发展有相对显著的期望。然而，该研究仅限于中东欧国家，未来的研究计划扩大受访者数据库以包括西欧国家以进行比较。

关键词：工作生活平衡，后疫情时代；中东欧国家