

17 Work-life balance services in coworking spaces and the impact of COVID-19

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Introduction

Balancing work and personal life was already an issue of some importance to many freelancers, micro-entrepreneurs, and employees long before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Nevertheless, as the pandemic has progressed, problems with balancing work and private life have become even more pressing for a variety of professions across the globe. Increased working from home and pressures on essential workers due to the pandemic highlight the need to establish practices supporting a work-life balance in modern society. Studies into work-life balance already preceded the pandemic and garnered much interest in popular literature. For many workers, the pandemic brought a general change to the work-life balance and a shift in space where it is being pursued. Even before the pandemic, the second place (office) had shifted markedly to other places, including the first place (home) and different types of places combining the characteristics of a second and third place, a social gathering place, such as coworking spaces (Morisson, 2019). The pandemic forced increased concentrations of people and activities into the home. It highlighted that home is, in some instances, an insufficient environment for work activities, thus prompting yet more workers and employers to think about other places and encourage their spread.

In light of these changes in workplaces and the strain the pandemic has placed on the work-life balance, this chapter discusses work-life balance issues specifically within new workplaces, namely coworking spaces. Coworking spaces (CSs) present a blend of second and third places (Morisson, 2019), well equipped in both equipment and increased social contact compared to working at home. While there is abundant literature on both CSs and work-life balance, there is a gap when the topics are combined, which few authors have covered thus far (e.g. Orel, 2019; Robelski et al., 2019). This chapter therefore aims to broaden the understanding of how CSs may contribute to balancing work and private life, specifically describing which services these spaces offer to improve the work-life balance and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted these services.

The chapter is structured as follows. The second section introduces the research on work-life balance, CSs, and a combination thereof, while the third section describes the selection of respondents, data collection, and analysis methods. The fourth section presents and discusses the findings. The final section summarizes the findings and offers suggestions for further research.

Theoretical background

Like other topics, work-life balance is not clearly defined in the academic literature. An overview by Guest (2002) of the theory on the topic offers five perspectives of the interaction between work and non-work activities. These range from total non-influence to spill-over influences, compensation of dissatisfaction with one type of activity by the other type, facilitation of success across work and non-work activities, and, finally, a conflict model between these activities. More recently, Sirgy and Lee (2018) reduced the number of perspectives to role engagement and minimizing conflict between work and non-work activities. However, other views offered by Guest (2002) also appear in their work.

The non-work part of the definition is frequently understood to be family-related activities. Thus, 'work-family balance' is an often-used term that overshadows the individual. In this chapter, we understand work-life balance as resolving the conflict between the various social roles a person takes on in work and private life or resolving the conflict between work and non-work activities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). The discourse on work-life balance in the academic literature focuses on the specific roles people play, their conflict, overlap, overall life satisfaction, role of gender, age, education, profession, or mode and place of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has interfered with both work and non-work activities. The severe disruption of usual living, work, and study practices has mainly related to national lockdowns. For white-collar jobs, the pandemic often resulted in a shift from office work to working from home. Other professions such as teachers or healthcare professionals intensified their work either in the workplace or at home. In some sectors, workers were furloughed, or their workload changed, while other groups saw little disruption to work activities. With regard to work-life balance, various situations have had various outcomes. People shifting from office work to the home office reported both positive (Ipsen et al., 2021) and negative (Palumbo, 2020) influences on work-life balance. More intense work activities resulted in a negative impact (Kannampallil et al., 2020), and, regardless of mode or place of work, the overall disruption to everyday life weighed heavily on families with young children (Schieman et al., 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020), primarily due to school closures.

The pandemic will undoubtedly bring many changes to traditional work organization, since many workers have abandoned the office (second place)

and still work from home (first place) (Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021). Dissatisfaction with such arrangements combined with the desertion of traditional offices by employers presents an opportunity for an even wider spread of other places, namely CSs. The number of these new workspaces was increasing rapidly worldwide before the pandemic, including in the Central and Eastern European countries discussed in this chapter. CSs offer many services for coworkers. The various office, meeting, and recreational areas, frequently with non-stop access, are essential, with different layouts, number of rooms and desks, and Internet connection. Less common services include accessibility for disabled people, parking spaces, child- and animal-friendly facilities, or the provision of childcare services (Deskmag, 2019).

Some of these services may contribute to an improved work-life balance for users – coworkers – even if not initially introduced with that purpose. The work-life balance in coworking is generally well perceived due to the perception of flexibility, community, or sense of belonging (Ivaldi et al., 2018), more than in other types of workplaces, including home office (Robelski et al., 2019). Orel (2019) emphasizes the advantages of CSs in building a supportive community of like-minded people in similar life situations, limiting isolation, and decreasing interruptions for coworkers. In this research, we focus on business hours and location as indicators of flexibility, cooperation of the CS with other organizations as an indicator of community building, and equipment, rooms, and services offered as indicators of environment surpassing the home office.

Although the ranks of people working at CSs are swelling, few studies have examined how the CSs may influence essential aspects of the work-life balance. The purpose is to fill this research gap by framing it with the following questions without proposing specific hypotheses:

- 1 *Which elements of CSs support the work-life balance of the coworkers?*
- 2 *What influences the offer of these services?*
- 3 *How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the services offered for the work-life balance of coworkers?*

Methods

The data for this chapter were collected between March and May 2021 using online questionnaires and interviews. With prompts based on a literature search, other surveys conducted internationally and containing similar questions served as inspiration for the research and for future comparison across sectors and countries.

The interviews were designed to uncover an individual's private social world and gain insight into the subjects' stories and experience. They were semi-structured to enable flexibility and touch upon established topics leading to the set of questions. The questionnaires were completed by the managers,

owners, and employees of CSs via email or by the interviewers during the interview. The questionnaires mirrored the interviews with regard to the topics.

Both methods were conducted via purposive sampling. This means that only CSs in the capital cities Bratislava, Budapest, and Prague were included in the sample. Maximum variation within the sample was applied, while only independently operated CSs were asked to participate. The list of CSs in capital cities was derived from previous desk research for all three countries. A standard procedure for interviews with several steps was prepared while respecting the GDPR in the three countries and common scientific guidelines.

The interviews were conducted via communication platforms/applications, mostly MS Teams, Zoom, or Google meet. Respondents were asked to fill in questionnaires as well. Field notes were obtained from most of the interviews, although five interviews were recorded and transcribed using a selective protocol. Transcription was checked through repeated listening. The questionnaires formed part of the interviews or were prepared in MS Forms and sent via email to CSs that were inactive on social platforms. They were used as a text document for qualitative data analysis, not for quantitative evaluation.

The potential pool of respondents at the beginning of the pandemic from March to May 2020 consisted of 31 independently run CSs in Budapest (Hungary), 41 in Prague (Czech Republic), and 12 in Bratislava (Slovakia).

Twenty-seven CSs were ultimately involved: 11 from the Czech Republic, 10 from Hungary, and 6 from Slovakia. Except for nine CSs that completed only the questionnaire and four that took part only in the interview with transcript, the others participated in both the questionnaire and the interview. Therefore, in most cases, two documents are available for each CS. The oldest CS was established in 2009 and the three youngest CSs were established in 2020. The majority of CSs examined were business units. Participating CSs reported different sizes; at least two were very small (fewer than 10 coworkers), ten had between 10 and 49 coworkers, seven had 50 or more coworkers, and the rest were unknown.

With regard to the respondents, sixteen were women. Three were younger than 25, twelve were between 30 and 39, and the rest were 40 or older. Seventy-nine percent of participants reported having higher education. Nineteen percent of participants had worked at the CS for less than two years and 52% between two and five years. Sixty-three percent of participants owned the CS. To ensure participants' anonymity, they are referred to as RXY, where X and Y represent numbers based on country and number of interview/questionnaires.

This chapter is based on content analysis of chosen relevant data segments. The data obtained from both questionnaires and interviews were coded using a hybrid-coding approach while combining inductive and deductive approaches (Swain, 2018; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Deductive

coding was used in the initial identification of known topics and inductive coding with new codes was used when sifting through the data. Manual line-by-line coding and hierarchical framing were applied. To choose qualitative data, we used both structural coding in the case of research questions or topics and descriptive coding to summarize extracts with a single word or noun. Codes were grouped into categories relevant to research questions according to similarities in thematic contribution. Axial coding to find relationships and links between earlier rounds of coding was also applied. Afterwards, the codes and categories were re-examined, with some categories merging, others splitting, or new ones appearing. The authors used Atlas.ti software for coding and Microsoft Excel to summarize the participants' characteristics. Co-occurrence tools were used. The co-occurrence frequency counts co-occurrence of 'events', and the c -coefficient indicates the strength of the relation between two codes (similar to a correlation coefficient). The c -coefficient is calculated as follows:

$$c = n_{12}/(n_1+n_2)-n_{12}$$

where n_{12} = co-occurrence of two codes, c_1 and c_2 , for which n_1 and n_2 are their occurrence frequencies.

To present services offered by the CSs, a visual representation from Atlas.ti software was used to code services into thematically similar categories. The visual representation consists of code nodes that were automatically assigned a colour by Atlas.ti according to their groundedness (i.e. the number of associated quotations, first number in brackets) and density (i.e. the number of links to other codes, second number in brackets).

The techniques used to ensure the validity of the research were as follows. For data collection, the different size of coworking spaces, different positions of respondents with the CSs, and different age and gender were checked and combined in the sample. Interviews were conducted. Moreover, triangulation of the methods used – records of answers in the questionnaire and interviews – and triangulation of settings – CSs in three countries with similar historical and cultural backgrounds – were applied. To analyze and interpret the data, two researchers coded data separately and afterwards compared and discussed their results. The final categories of services offered by CSs for coworkers to improve their work-life balance were discussed and agreed upon by three researchers.

Results

Services for the work-life balance of coworkers offered by CSs

The first research question in this chapter addresses the elements that CSs offer to support the work-life balance of their coworkers. The findings show that services, business hours, CS location, and equipment may be instrumental in

balancing people's work and private lives. All four concepts were related to the perceived benefits of working at a CS and labelled as 'better work-life balance'. For the participants, better work-life balance means, among other things, increased freedom and flexibility, reduced stress because they can concentrate on work, and the ability to separate work and private life.

The services offered by CSs for coworkers, which are the main focus of this chapter, are often available either free of charge or at a reduced price. These services can be divided into five categories according to thematic similarities. The first category, 'social events', may be understood as different types of cultural events (e.g. film clubs, dinner dances, concerts, theatre performances), events for coworkers' children (e.g. Saint Nicholas Day, Children's Day), charity events, swap events, or informal meetings of coworkers (after-work drinks, hobby courses, wedding or birth celebrations). It also includes other informal interactions such as joint breakfasts or trips. These activities seem to be closely related to community building in the CS.

The second category, 'training and development activities', includes public events for coworkers and the surrounding community, CS-wide events, and individual events aimed at professional or personal development or both. Personalized events (e.g. mentoring, solving a specific problem) may require payment. Some CSs also carry out information campaigns related to training and development activities, such as keeping healthy, yoga classes, and discussions with a psychologist.

The third category, labelled 'making work duties easier', also seems important. In some cases, such services only make job tasks more convenient or save time (e.g. personal assistants). In other cases, they are vital so that coworkers can concentrate on their work, such as babysitting services. With regard to babysitting, R53 (Hungary) mentioned that they offer babysitting at all events, a service that is provided in cooperation with a particular provider. R04 (Czech Republic) added that babysitting can improve the work-life balance when coworkers have time to work without children and also have time for their private lives in the afternoon.

Some CSs highlighted the casual environment with no strict rules, where people feel more at home, as one of their essential traits. This is different from working from home because coworkers are not surrounded by household duties, can concentrate on work, and are in face-to-face contact with other people. Some services offered by CSs seem to be related to this attribute; for example, the often-mentioned possibility of bringing pets to the CS, or drinks for free or at a reduced price. R05 (Czech Republic) believed that their café, part of the CS, can help coworkers improve their work-life balance. Business partners or family members may visit working coworkers in such an environment.

The fifth category of services, which concerns the provision of information to coworkers, seems to be more operational. Interestingly, the information contains more than basic facts about the services offered by CSs, or when and

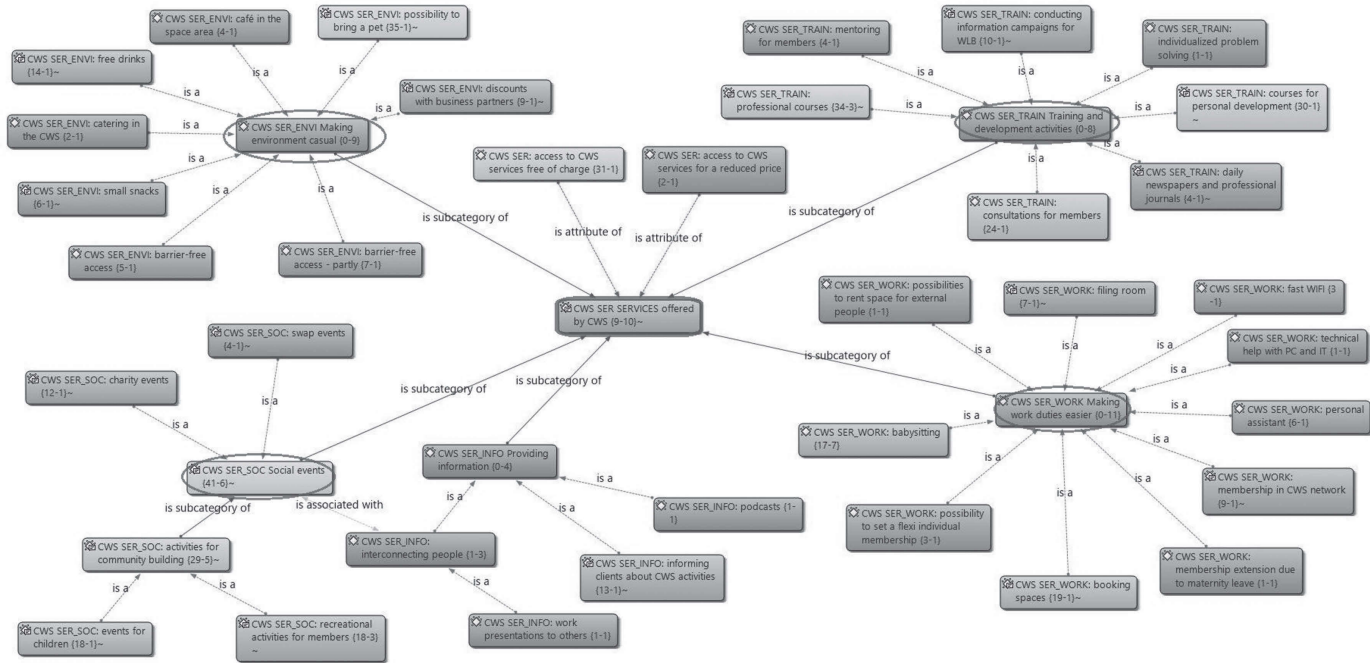


Figure 17.1 Services offered by CSs.

Source: Authors.

how much they cost. It also includes information about people or members of the community, such as who does what and why it might be helpful to cooperate with each other. For example, R01 (Czech Republic) mentioned that they conduct joint breakfasts or lunches where coworkers can present what they do. This way of providing information to coworkers overlaps with social events.

Factors influencing the services offered for coworkers' work-life balance

The second research question deals with the factors that influence the services discussed in the previous part. This section examines the differences among countries and CS sizes in this context. The findings offer a clue as to the differences in the focus of services among CSs in the capital cities of the various countries. It is probable that CSs in Hungary concentrate more on social events and creating a casual environment than CSs in the Czech Republic or Slovakia. In contrast, Hungarian CSs more frequently mentioned the possibility of bringing a pet, while CSs in Prague and Bratislava offer training and development activities more often than CSs in Budapest.

The size of the CS appears to matter in terms of the services offered. The services offered at small CSs seem to be limited. The reason could lie in the formation of small CSs, which may be based on friendship among several people who knew each other before establishing a CS and do not require enhanced comfort. They merely want to work together. The number of mentions of social events could support this, since these coworkers know each other and also want to spend their free time together. In line with this, the larger CSs add more professional services, e.g. training and development. Since there are more coworkers, they cannot rely merely on direct communication between people, and services related to providing information come to the fore. However, only independently run CSs were surveyed and interviewed; training,

Table 17.1 The frequency count of the category of services offered in the examined countries.

<i>Category of offered services</i>	<i>Country</i>			<i>Number of coworkers in the CSs</i>		
	<i>CZ</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>1–9</i>	<i>10–49</i>	<i>50 or more</i>
<i>Number of documents</i> ¹	12	18	11	2	19	10
SER Making environment casual	17	34	21	2	38	17
SER Making work duties easier	18	27	18	1	25	17
SER Providing information	6	4	6	1	5	8
SER Social events	29	51	32	6	43	38
SER Training and development activities	23	21	31	3	22	27
TOTAL	93	137	108	13	133	107

¹ Documents mean interview transcription and fulfilled questionnaires.
Source: Authors.

information sessions, and other professional services are prolific in CSs that form part of international chains such as Impact Hub or HubHub. These CSs advertise events with chain partners or full network events and use those for marketing. During the pandemic, such events were held online, which made sharing even more effortless. Some independently run Slovakian CSs have also recently adopted online sharing to increase the chances of survival following the pandemic.

Coworkers' expectations may also influence the services offered. For example, R23 (Slovakia) mentioned that the CS concentrates on people visiting the city for short periods, and that they provide them with everything they need, including great coffee. Similarly, R05 (Czech Republic) said that 95% of coworkers are women and including a café at the CS encourages coworkers' families to visit.

Lastly, the services offered are influenced by the owners' attitudes and experiences and the possibility of gaining subsidies. A convenient example of this is babysitting. R22 (Slovakia) said that an opportunity for a subsidy allowed this service to be started, but it was also a way to create a family-friendly atmosphere and a feeling of acceptance. R02 (Czech Republic), R22 (Slovakia), and R57 (Hungary) mentioned that their CSs offered work-life balance services because they have children and want to take care of them while feeling self-actualized at work. R01 (Czech Republic) mentioned a belief in training and education as a way to move forward, which is why such services are offered to coworkers.

Impacts of COVID-19 on services offered for coworkers' work-life balance

The last research question deals with how the pandemic of COVID-19 has influenced the work-life balance services offered for coworkers. The findings stem from respondents' opinions on the change in demand for the services in question. Many services were reduced or somehow limited with respect to both offer and demand. This seemed to be the case especially for training/development activities and social activities such as those related to community building, recreational events, or children's events. Access to CSs was limited. In many cases, only regular coworkers were let in and often in reduced numbers. Therefore, it is understandable that the involvement of people from the local community was reduced and sometimes even totally halted. In general, it seems that one of the main strengths of CSs, the vision of the CS as a place where it is possible to meet and discuss with others, was impaired. The CSs could not adequately fulfil their mission of interconnecting people.

In some cases, the use of the services continued as before the pandemic. One example is the possibility of bringing a pet to the CS if the CS was not closed. Some services also transferred to an online version. Development activities (courses, seminars) especially received this treatment, as mentioned by R04 (Czech Republic) or R22 (Slovakia).

Table 17.2 Intensity of demand for the defined categories of services for work-life balance during and post pandemic.

Categories of offered services	Change in the intensity of demand for the work-life balance services due to the pandemic						Supposed change in the demand for work-life balance services post pandemic					
	drop		no change		growth		drop		no change		growth	
	freq ¹	c ²	freq ¹	c ²	freq ¹	c ²	freq ¹	c ²	freq ¹	c ²	freq ¹	c ²
SER Making environment casual	5	0.03	2	0.02	0	0	1	0.01	6	0.06	0	0
SER Making work duties easier	4	0.02	1	0.01	0	0	3	0.04	2	0.02	1	0.01
SER Providing information	1	0.01	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.02	0	0
SER Social events	14	0.07	0	0	0	0	5	0.04	14	0.11	5	0.04
SER Training and development activities	9	0.05	2	0.02	0	0	0	0	9	0.09	5	0.06

¹ Frequency count of quotations related to particular service category

² c-coefficient

Source: Authors.

The respondents had different expectations about future demand for these services after the COVID-19 pandemic ends. In many cases, they presumed demand would return to the same level as before the pandemic. In other cases, they thought it might even increase. For example, R05 (Czech Republic) expected that reduced consultations during the pandemic would result in increased post-pandemic demand. Nevertheless, several participants believed that the intensity of demand would drop in some cases. For example, R04 (Czech Republic) thought that people would not be willing to attend social events with many other people. R02 (Czech Republic) was afraid that companies that used to book spaces at the CS would not have enough money after the pandemic, and would reduce costs by not booking, which would strongly affect the business model and survival of the CS.

Discussion

The findings show that services, business hours, CS location, and equipment may contribute to the work-life balance of people at CSs. The perception of work-life balance among the participants related to increased freedom and flexibility, reduced stress, ability to concentrate on work, and the ability to separate work and private life. Similarly, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) mention flexibility and reduced stress as important factors in the improved work-life balance of flexible workers.

The services offered to coworkers were divided into the five categories illustrated in Figure 17.1. The category of ‘social events’ included diverse, primarily in-person interactions, which may include coworker family members and foster informal interactions and community building. The existence of a community is a supposed vital trait of CSs, as also confirmed by Orel (2019), who cites supportive relationships and reduced loneliness as conducive to balancing life and work for individual coworkers. The ‘training and development activities’ may also include the communities surrounding CSs, as well as individualized events. ‘Making work duties easier’ refers to convenience and the ability to concentrate on the work at hand. The lack of distractions and ability to concentrate was also appreciated by coworkers in a study by Robelski et al. (2019). ‘Creating a casual environment’ was a category often highlighted by the respondents. Services in this category contribute to reducing professional isolation and loneliness among coworkers, among other aspects, as Orel (2019) notes. Finally, the category of ‘providing information’ concerns information going beyond the expected basic characteristics, such as pricing. Such information also included networking-related data and was closely related to social events. This information corroborates Orel’s (2019) findings of increased opportunities at CSs for building social networks and gaining access to others with professional knowledge.

As for factors influencing the offer of work-life balance services, size seemed to be the most frequently confirmed factor. Smaller CSs, especially those outside CS networks, frequently lack personnel for professional services (Ross

et al., 2017; Luo & Chan, 2020) and have difficulties meeting coworker expectations (Lumley, 2014), whereas larger or networked CSs often standardize their environments (Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017).

With regard to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, training and development activities and social activities such as those related to community building, recreational events, or events for children were especially impacted. Thus, the findings indicate that several essential advantages of working at CSs disappeared or were reduced to a minimum during the COVID period studied. This could be a reason why not all CSs survived and the number of independently run CSs was lower at the end of the period. This is in line with reported closures and losses reported by Manzini Ceinar and Mariotti (2021) and Mayrhofer (2021).

Concluding remarks

CSs are equipped to help resolve the conflict between the various social roles a person takes on in work and private life. This chapter examined how coworking spaces may contribute to balancing work and private life; it described which services these spaces offer to improve work-life balance, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted these services.

The findings show that the services offered, equipment, business hours, and location of the coworking place may support a balance between work and private life. The services identified were divided into five categories based on their thematic similarities and purpose: 'social events', 'training and development activities', 'making work duties easier', 'creating a casual environment', and 'providing information'. The results show that the type and number of services offered is influenced by context, such as country, CS size, coworker characteristics and expectations, and the owners' attitudes and experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted training and development activities above all and understandably reduced social activities. Thus, the vital role CSs play in connecting people could not be adequately fulfilled during the pandemic. Closures, reduced membership, and cuts in rents have heavily affected the business viability of independently operated CSs. How many will survive the pandemic period in the long term remains to be seen.

This study presents some limitations. The survey was conducted in three Central and Eastern European countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. While all three were impacted by the pandemic, they also took various measures to curb it, which differed from one another and from countries in other geographical areas. Since the research was based on a qualitative approach, the results should not be generalized. The sample was purposive and international CSs were not included. In some cases, the CSs were willing to participate only either via a questionnaire or interview, which may have influenced the richness of the available data.

Future research could focus on the characteristics of coworkers in greater detail and their impact, usage, and demand for work–life balance services. It may also be beneficial to understand how the owners’ or managers’ life situations influence the work–life balance services offered and what overall changes a post–pandemic, more digitized, more flexible working world will bring to the services offered by CSs.

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