Career Success and Work Attitudes:
Insights from Top Leadership

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Abstract

Recognized by their performance and behaviors, and influenced by the micro and macro cultures they came into contact with, leaders are expected to deliver appropriate results regardless of environment. This paper is aimed at uncovering the way top leadership sees careers and career success, explore their attitude toward work (through Hofstede's five cultural dimensions model), and if these have been transformed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation is based on 86 interviews with top leaders (C-level, entrepreneurs and board members from Romania). The findings are compared with opinions regarding the five cultural dimensions at national level. Furthermore, the research inquires about the way they perceived the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other events in their lives. The results were analyzed as a whole, as well as by putting into contrast different positions (i.e. executives, entrepreneurs, board members), career stages (i.e. early, mid, blossom, late) and genders (i.e. men, women).

1. Introduction

During the past three years, the COVID-19 pandemic generated socio-economic panic (Suthar, et al. 2021; Bratianu, 2020). Companies in multiple sectors suffered great losses, and leaders were expected to act under tremendous uncertainties (Caligiuri, et al. 2020). Some even compared the pandemic with Taleb's

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(2007) description of a "black swan" (Halliburton, 2020; Antipova, 2020), although not everyone agrees (Taleb, as cited by Avishai, 2020; Drake, 2021). Apart from their duty within the organization, leaders had to consider their personal lives and never forget their societal role. They were challenged at all levels, and that might have changed their view over what career success means, shape career development schemes and coping strategies, and reconsider their attitudes toward work (Guan et al., 2020). Naturally, culture, at micro and macro level, could also play a role, as the collective mindset, values and beliefs are shaping individual behaviors (Hofstede, 2001).

Nowadays, COVID-19 is playing a crucial role in human resource management such as worker deficiencies creating supply shortages (Collings et al., 2021; Hamouche, 2021); or the disengagement phenomenon, now under the newly coined concept of "quiet quitting" on the background of a "search for meaning", resulted after the psychological shock of the pandemic (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Even though COVID-19 has led to a grand career shock (Akkermans et al., 2020) and has profound consequences regarding career plans (Hite & McDonald, 2020), we do not yet know the full impact of the pandemic on careers and career successes.

This paper investigates the current way of thinking leaders have, and their work attitudes considering the cultural perspective. The literature review explores the COVID-19 pandemic in relationship with leadership, the concepts of career and career success, as well as work attitudes viewed through the cultural lens. Then, the research methodology is introduced, followed by data analysis and interpretation. The last section presents the main conclusions of the paper and suggests areas for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1 COVID-19 and leadership

The pandemic impacted differently various businesses and populations. Changes in the way of working, communicating and company expectations are pandemic consequences which could have been perceived as career shocks by many (Bolisani et al., 2020). Defined by Akkermans et al. (2018, p. 4) as a "disruptive and extraordinary event" generated by external factors, a career shock varies in terms of intensity and duration, being different for each individual (Akkermans et al, 2020). A successful management of career shocks is enabled by career competencies (Blokker et al., 2019) or by the individual's flexibility to readjust to the new context, with long-term positive effects that are personalized along the career and life stages (Akkermans et al., 2020).

The pandemic created a new sensemaking (Christianson and Barton, 2021), requiring a drastic shift in approaching work, managing old and new stakeholders' tensions and challenges (Crane and Matten, 2020; Hite and McDonald, 2020), as business survival depended on both internal actors (e.g. employees) to be carefully managed, but also external ones (e.g. customers). The human resources practices

design and implementation in the post-pandemic era held a critical role in the way the customers and the employees were treated in order to maintain the business survival and growth (Shepherd et al., 2020), as leaders guided them through dramatic times, granting their teams the social, role modelling and vocational support for exploding needs and expectations, offering security and satisfaction. For the higher managerial levels, COVID-19 was an opportunity to positively influence, from a distance, the productivity and wellbeing of the employees (Stoker et al., 2021).

2.2 Career. Career success

A "career" is a succession of work experiences over time (Arthur et al., 1989). For years, there is no longer a formula that works for most people in terms of their career, such as the linear path, which was customary in the past and recollected in the traditional theories of careers (e.g., Super, 1957). It has been argued that careers are becoming "boundaryless", following more flexible paths, i.e. "sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings" (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994, p. 307), and that the boundaryless careers have both positive and negative effects on career success (Guan et al., 2019). However, the way career success (i.e. ``positive psychological or work related outcomes or achievements that the individual accumulates as a result of work experiences'' (Seibert et al., 1999, p. 417)) is obtained differs from one person to another. Various outcomes of career success were discussed by Spurk (2019), mentioning career attitudes, health and wellbeing.

Research presented career success as either objective, with observable measures like promotions or remuneration, or subjective, when personal requirements such as job satisfaction and personal fulfillment are met (Arthur et al., 2005; Jansen et al., 2022a, 2022b). Still, Callanan (2003) noted that these measurement approaches only consider the individual, without taking into account the organization's perspective, and that by considering both, friction can be observed between the individual's preferences and the organization's interests. Jackall (1983) indicated that career success in terms of achieving middle or senior positions within an organization is a function of the individual's willingness to adhere to the rules dictated by corporate culture. Previous research presented corporate culture as a product of senior leaders' conceptions of the roles and actions subordinates should take (deRoche, 1998), as well as their expectations regarding ethical behavior (Sims and Brinkmann, 2002). Overall, culture is defined as "customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation" (Guiso et al., 2006), or "the collective programming of the mind" as Hofstede (2001) said. It is considered to influence individual behavioral patterns (Hofstede, 1984), personal (Suddle, Beugelsdijk, & Wennekers, 2010), and business decisions (Saad & Samet, 2020), and thus, it is critical to study leadership in relationship with culture.

2.3 Work attitudes through the cultural perspective

The pace of change during the pandemic pushed for a dynamic approach in leadership, and human resources strategies (Collings et al., 2021; Hamouche, 2021).

The pandemic forced states, organizations, people to take action and build fast coping strategies, which, studied through a cultural perspective, shed light on individual and collective reactions to external factors. For instance, according to Guan et al. (2020), the role of the national culture proved to be crucial in COVID-19 impact study on career development.

During the past decades, several models to understand cultural differences were created. The most popular, and used, is the Hofstede Model (Hofstede 2001, Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, 2007; Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). In the review done by Shi and Wang (2010), they outlined how Hofstede noticed cultural differences between employees of the same company working and living in various countries, leading to the first version of the model, with four-dimensions: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). They also mention that the fifth dimension – the Long-Term Orientation (LTO) – was added later. The latest version of the model has a sixth dimension (i.e. Indulgence) (Hofstede, 2022), however, the five dimensions model continues to be the most well-known, and thus, the one chosen to investigate work attitudes in this paper. While popular, the Hofstede Model received criticism over the years (Nakata, 2009; McSweeney, 2002; Signorini et al., 2009).

The Hofstede Insights (2022a) resource provides estimations for each of the five dimensions within different countries. For Romania, it's suggested that the culture is defined by a high PDI (90 out of 100), a cultural heritage of unequal power distribution and high degree of hierarchy acceptance with no further justification need and willingness of subordinates to be told what to do; and high UAI (90 out of 100) showing an inflexible mindset, a need for rules, hard work and security, and reduced tendency for innovation. The IDV has a low score of 30, showing a society favoring collective relationships, which are seen as a moral bond. The MAS dimension scores 42 in Romania, representing a rather feminine society, based on negotiation and compromise, appreciating fairness, cohesion, well-being, free time and flexibility. The fifth dimension, LTO, has an intermediate value of 52.

However, as previously stated, the reliability of the Hofstede cultural dimensions model has been criticized. Moreover, differences might arise when studying sub-groups (i.e. sub-cultures). For instance, Littrell and Lapadus (2005) found that German workers are much less tolerant of uncertainty than Romanian workers, even though Hofstede Insights (2022b) considers German culture as uncertainty avoidant, but less so than Romanian culture. Vrânceanu and Iorgulescu (2016) provide another example, showing that culture in Romanian service organizations might not reflect the estimations regarding national culture. Considering that organizational culture is dominant over national culture and that leadership drives change (Kattman, 2014), it has been demonstrated that Romanian management/leadership style is further influenced by age differences (i.e. the Romanian Revolution of 1989 moment determining the age range of the respondents) and gender (i.e. women have a higher transformational leadership preference (psychological empowerment and stimulating innovation (Stanescu et al.,

2021)) than for transactional leadership (i.e. motivating employees for optimal performance)) (Fein et al., 2010).

In view of these issues, it seems worthwhile to explore career success and work attitudes from the top leadership perspective, and assess the potential changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in the way leaders think and act, and the influence different career stages, leadership positions and genders might have.

3 Methodology

A qualitative research was performed based on 86 structured interviews with Romanian top leaders. This target population was chosen because, to the best of our knowledge, no study investigates the Romanian top leadership sub-group in relationship with opinions on the country's national culture, and no similar study has been performed on this population post-pandemic. The sample size is appropriate for qualitative studies while also allowing for non-parametric tests, as explained in the data analysis section.

The paper is aimed at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic change the definition of career success and work attitudes of Romanian top leaders?

RQ2: How are different top leadership positions (i.e. executives, entrepreneurs, board members), career stages (i.e. early, mid, blossom, late) and genders (i.e. men, women) influencing the answers to RQ1?

The interviews were conducted in the August-November 2022 period, by asking the participants to fill in 20 demographics questions with predefined categorical answers and a set of open questions investigating topics related to career success and whether it was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, their work attitudes (through the lens of each of Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture; and if they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic), the changes they perceived as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at different levels (individual, family, company, society) and to compare the pandemic to other stressful events in their life.

3.1 Sample demographics

The interviewees are 45% men and 55% women, most of them married and aged 36 to 55. They are highly educated and have at least two top positions in organizations, as presented in Figure 1. No statistically significant difference was found in the distribution of the gender variable across the demographic variables in Table 1.
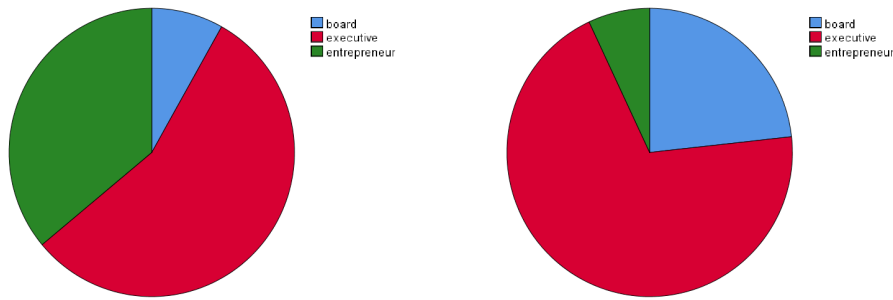
Figure 1. Primary position (job1) – left; Secondary position (job2) – right
Source: own research

90% of the people who selected entrepreneur as their primary position (job1) chose executive for their secondary position (job2). No board member (job1) is an entrepreneur (job2). 63% of the executives (job1) are also executives (job2), 27% of them are board members (job2), the rest (10%) being entrepreneurs (job2).

Table 1. Sample demographics

Category	Characteristics	Freq.	%	Cumula-tive %
Gender	man	39	45.3	45.3
	woman	47	54.7	100.0
Age	<35	5	5.8	5.8
	36-45	28	32.6	38.4
	46-55	39	45.3	83.7
	56-65	9	10.5	94.2
	>65	5	5.8	100.0
Marital status	single never married	5	5.8	5.8
	unmarried	1	1.2	7
	married once	52	60.5	67.5
	married more than once	17	19.8	87.2
	divorced	10	11.6	98.9
	window	1	1.2	100.0
Last education	Bachelor	6	7.0	7.0
	Master	12	14.0	20.9
	MBA	29	33.7	54.7
	PhD	16	18.6	73.3
	Post-University	23	26.7	100.0
Primary position (job1)	board	7	8.1	8.1
	executive	48	55.8	64.0
	entrepreneur	31	36.0	100.0
Secondary position (job2)	board	20	23.3	23.3
	executive	60	69.8	93.0
	entrepreneur	6	7.0	100.0
Industry	Business services & Consulting	14	16.3	16.3
	Education	5	5.8	22.1
	Education - University	1	1.2	23.3
	Financial Services	22	25.6	48.8
	Hospitality	2	2.3	51.2

Category	Characteristics	Freq.	%	Cumulative %
	Industrial	27	31.4	82.6
	MarCom & Technology	6	7.0	89.5
	Medical	3	3.5	93.0
	NGO - Education	3	3.5	96.5
	NGO - Professional Association	1	1.2	97.7
	NGO - Services, Education	2	2.3	100.0
Company size	0-49	38	44.2	44.2
	50-249	13	15.1	59.3
	250-499	4	4.7	64.0
	500-1000	8	9.3	73.3
	>1000	23	26.7	100.0
Ownership	mixed public/private	3	3.5	3.5
	private	80	93.0	96.5
	state organization	3	3.5	100.0
Spread	international 100%	10	11.6	11.6
	local 100%	26	30.2	41.9
	local and international	50	58.1	100.0
Career type (throughout time)	organization-driven 100%	32	37.2	37.2
	organization-driven partially	17	19.8	57.0
	organization-driven partially, self-driven 100%	1	1.2	58.1
	organization-driven partially, self-driven partially	4	4.7	62.8
	self-driven 100%	26	30.2	93.0
	self-driven partially	6	7.0	100.0
Social ties (self-evaluation)	low-average	2	2.3	2.3
	average	22	25.6	27.9
	average-high	39	45.3	73.3
	high	23	26.7	100.0
Career stage	early (1-10 years)	2	2.3	2.3
	mid (10-20 years)	20	23.3	25.6
	blossom (20-30 years)	46	53.5	79.1
	late (>30 years)	18	20.9	100.0
Number of children	0	17	19.8	19.8
	1	33	38.4	58.1
	2	29	33.7	91.9
	3	7	8.1	100.0
Child1	interviewee doesn't have children	17	19.8	19.8
	before high school	34	39.5	59.3
	high school	14	16.3	75.6
	still studying	1	1.2	76.7
	university	9	10.5	87.2
	working	11	12.8	100.0
Child2	interviewee has no second child (has none or 1)	50	58.1	58.1
	before high school	8	9.3	67.4
	high school	14	16.3	83.7
	still studying	1	1.2	84.9
	university	5	5.8	90.7
	working	8	9.3	100.0
Child3	interviewee has no third child (has none, 1 or 2)	79	91.9	91.9
	before high school	2	2.3	94.2
	still studying	1	1.2	95.3

Category	Characteristics	Freq.	%	Cumula-tive %
	university	3	3.5	98.8
	working	1	1.2	100.0
No. of people in care (other than children)	1	22	25.6	25.6
	2	15	17.4	43.0
	no people in care	49	57.0	100.0
Person1	_interviewee doesn't have people in care	49	57.0	57.0
	complex situation	5	5.8	62.8
	simple situation	32	37.2	100.0
Person2	_interviewee has no second person in care (has none or 1)	71	82.6	82.6
	complex situation	4	4.7	87.2
	simple situation	11	12.8	100.0

Source: own research

Although the respondents have multiple top positions, the interview questions are focused on their primary one (job1). The main industries in which they have this position are Business services & Consulting, Financial services, and Industrial, covering 73.3% of the sample. The people working in these industries are mostly executives (71% of the top leaders in these industries). Considering the full set of interviews, the executives had a tendency to say their careers were organization-driven, while entrepreneurs were more likely to rate their careers as self-driven, X^2(10, N=86) = 25.543, p<0.05. Overall, 93% of the organizations in the sample are private. ~60% are SMEs (<250 employees) and ~40% are larger. 30% of the total are purely local. 84% of the interviewed entrepreneurs are coming from small enterprises (0-49 employees), as available in Table 2, and all entrepreneurs are at least 36 years old.

Table 2. Interviewees' distribution based on primary job and company size

Category		Company size					Total
		0-49	50-249	250-499	500-1000	>1000	
Primary position (job1)	board	1	2	0	1	3	7
	executive	11	8	4	6	19	48
	entrepreneur	26	3	0	1	1	31
	Total	38	13	4	8	23	86

Source: own research

The career stages classification used in this paper is the result of a pilot phase of five interviews, where 10 professional years was agreed upon to be an optimal interval for each stage. Out of the 86 top leaders, more than half are in their blossom stage (20-30 years of work experience). In terms of their social ties self-evaluation, almost half of the interviewees (45.3%) consider they have an "average-high" number of connections, while only 2.3% consider it to be "low-average". The rest are equally distributed between "average" and "high".

Since the COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamics between the personal and professional lives, the leaders were asked about their number of children and

level of independence, as well as about other people they might have in care. These questions are aimed at increasing the level of detail regarding the studied sample. In terms of children, ~20% of the respondents have none, the others having a maximum of three children, mostly under 18 years old. 57% of the sample reported to have no other people in care, the rest having one or two, but mostly in "simple", rather than "complex", situations.

3.2 Data analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed in order to be analyzed. The answers to all open questions related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on particular topics were manually coded as "no changes", "small changes", and "major changes". Depending on the interviewee, these changes were perceived on a more positive or negative note. Codes were also used when the interviewees were asked to compare the pandemic to other stressful events in their lives (codes: "other events were more shocking", "the pandemic was similar to other events", and "the pandemic was the most shocking event").

This manual process was aided by software analysis in two ways. First, VOSviewer (software for creating and visualizing co-occurrence networks through text mining) was used for creating clusters of the most related terms used by the interviewees when defining the career and career success concepts. This revealed, in an objective way, the different perspectives the interviewees had when defining these concepts.

Second, in order to answer RQ2 (i.e. putting into contrast the opinions of different positions (i.e. executives, entrepreneurs, board members), career stages (i.e. early, mid, blossom, late) and genders (i.e. men, women)), the Chi-square test was used to test relationships between each coded question (codes as mentioned above) and:

- Gender (men, N=39; women, N=47);
- Primary position (board (B), N=7; executive (C), N=48; entrepreneur (E), N=31);
- Career stage (early, N=2; mid, N=20; blossom, N=46; late, N=18);
- Men executives (MC, N=20) vs. women executives (WC, N=28);
- Men entrepreneurs (ME, N=15) vs. women entrepreneurs (WE, N=16);
- Men in mid-career (MMC, N=9) vs. women in mid-career (WMC, N=11);
- Men in career blossom (MBC, N=22) vs. women in blossom (WBC, N=24);
- Men in late career (MLC, N=7) vs. women in late career (WLC, N=11).
  * No comparisons were made between Men board members (MB, N=4) vs. women board members (WB, N=3), and between Men in early career (MEC, N=1), vs. women in early career (WEC, N=1) due to low sample sizes.

Only found statistically significant differences were reported. The test results are limited by the small sample sizes. Testing the coded questions is further limited by researcher intervention (when coding), which might have altered the validity and reliability.

4   Results and discussions

4.1   Defining career and career success

The 86 leaders were asked to define the career concept. Figure 2 and Table 3 present a typology of the results, i.e. the most related terms they used in their answers. This is an essential investigation before asking what career success means to them.

People in the first cluster (blue) mostly see careers as personal development, including constant learning, competences acquisition, and contribution to society that may lead to an increase in status and impact. This cluster considers that career progression can only happen in parallel with education and development. The second cluster (red) is more inclined to see careers in a pragmatic way, a professional evolution with the aim of obtaining a higher position, better benefits and recognition within their community. The third cluster (green) considers careers are life-long journeys guided by passions and opportunities.

Figure 2. Clustering of the most related terms used by the interviewees when answering the question "How do you define the career concept?"
Source: own research

Table 3. Clustering info for Figure 2

Cluster1 (blue)	Cluster2 (red)	Cluster3 (green)
achievement	community	occupation
competency	evolution	opportunity
education	process	passion
expertise	professional activity	progress
impact	professional development	role
status	professional path	sequence
	society	time

Source: own research

They were also asked to explain what career success means to them from a general and personal point of view. Figure 3 and Table 4 present the most related terms they used in their answers.
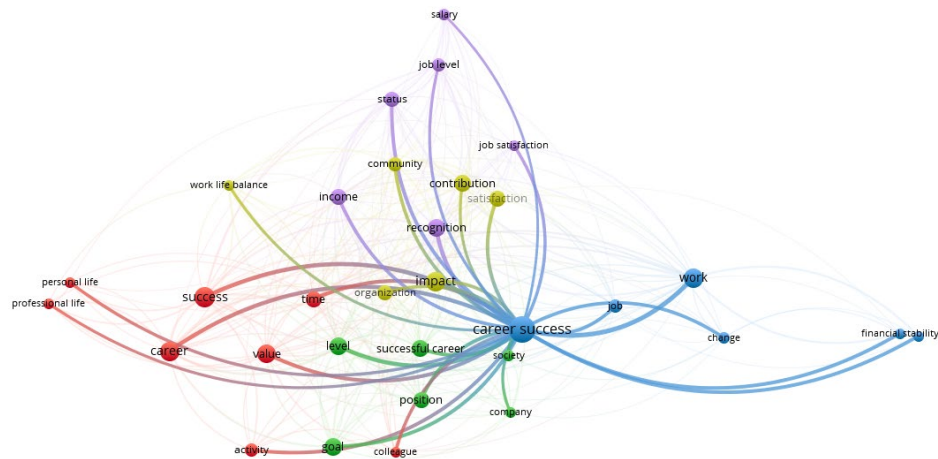
Figure 3. Clustering of the most related terms used by the interviewees when answering the question "What does career success mean to you (generally and personally)?"
Source: own research

Table 4. Clustering info for Figure 3

Cluster 1 (red)	Cluster 2 (green)	Cluster 3 (blue)	Cluster 4 (yellow)	Cluster 5 (purple)
activity	company	career success	community	income
career	goal	change	contribution	job level
colleague	level	financial stability	impact	job satisfaction
personal life	position	job	organization	recognition
professional life	society	reasonable level	satisfaction	salary
success	successful career	work	work life balance	status
time				
value				

Source: own research

Cluster1 (red) mostly defines career success through subjective measures such as value creation and the work-life balance, while Cluster5 (purple) views career success mainly through objective measures, i.e. financial and occupational prestige. A female interviewee noted that, in her perspective, career success is largely objective as perceived by the society, but, at a personal level, she believes it is predominantly subjective. Cluster2 (green) and Cluster3 (blue) offer a pragmatic view of career success, the first being oriented on achievement, and the second on stability. Cluster4 (yellow) defines it through relationships and social impact.

When asked if the COVID-19 pandemic brought adjustments to their personal definition of career success, 52% said their definition of career success didn't change, 28% consider it changed considerably, while 20% perceive only small changes. The leaders who consider it didn't change had a normal career progression according to their initial plans, with no alterations as a result of the pandemic. Their career paths were clear and strong before the pandemic started. Moreover, they welcomed the opportunities for developing new skills and acquiring knowledge. The

ones who made "small changes" in their personal definition of career success mentioned the increasing level of responsibilities and challenges produced by the new environment, and the need for adjustments in order to maintain success. The COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness of unfinished issues in need of completion, and the importance of a flexible and agile mindset. The 28% stating "major changes" mostly refer to the work-life balance, personal life and social interactions gaining more importance due to remote work. They also mentioned the need of contributing to society. For some, the changes meant it was the time to strengthen their own business and/or career.

The interviewees were also asked "What are your future goals?" Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, 43% of the interviewees said their future goals weren't changed, as they intend to follow their pre-pandemic plans, progressing according with their dreams and values, 34% made small changes, and 23% recognize a redefinition of their goals.

42% of leaders consider their career progression was substantially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (such as through career shifts to other fields), while the others are equally distributed between perceiving "no changes" or "small changes".

When considering the COVID-19 pandemic, no statistically significant difference was found between genders in the way they changed their views over what career success means. However, women were more inclined to say they adjusted their future goals as a result of the pandemic ($X^2(2, N=86) = 8.143$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, at the 94.5% confidence level, women were more likely to consider that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their career progression considerably ($X^2(2, N=86) = 5.790$, $p=0.055$). However, they seem to view these changes through a positive lens, accentuating the importance of adaptability, interpersonal relationships and stress management.

WMC were more inclined to say the pandemic changed their future goals, and that it impacted their career progression considerably compared with MMC, ($p<0.05$). WBC were more likely to report small changes in their future goals as a result of the pandemic, compared with MBC, ($p<0.05$). WC were more likely to say the pandemic changed their future goals, compared with MC ($p<0.05$).

4.2 Work attitudes (Hofstede's cultural dimensions)

The 86 top Romanian leaders were asked "What is your attitude towards work? Did your attitude change post-pandemic? If yes, in what sense?" considering each of Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture.

In terms of the way the COVID-19 pandemic affected their attitudes, the interviewees were ~equally likely to say they perceived "no changes", "small changes" or "major changes" in their short term – long term orientation (LTO). Approximately half reported "no changes" in the way they view power distance (PDI), uncertainty avoidance (UAI) and the masculinity-femininity (MAS) dimensions, with ~30% and ~20% seeing "small changes" and "major changes",

respectively. 46.5% reported "small changes" in their individualism-collectivism (IDV) perspective, 36% "no changes" and 17% "major changes".

Generally, the interviewees mentioned they always had a mix of short, medium and long term objectives, the ones perceiving changes in their LTO as a result of the pandemic saying that it pushed them toward shortening the time-frames and being more efficient. They mostly said they challenged authority before the pandemic whenever appropriate, the ones noting changes in their PDI saying the pandemic increased this tendency even more. The UAI answers were the most diverse, some interviewees having high UAI before and after the pandemic, being most comfortable with stable plans, others changing from high UAI to embracing uncertainty, while others did not consider uncertainty a threat before the pandemic and, if anything, this tendency increased as a result of it. For IDV, the leaders largely mentioned the importance of group achievements, the pandemic's effect being an increase in delegation. Generally, the interviewees consider themselves as balanced in terms of MAS, with a slight inclination toward the "masculine" traits (i.e. assertiveness, material achievements), the ones who noted changes as a result of the pandemic saying it pushed them toward more "feminine" traits (i.e. empathy, interest for work-life balance).

Compared with the Hofstede Insights (2022a) resource mentioned in the literature review, which is estimating the five dimensions at Romania level, it seems that the top leaders' answers align with the LTO, MAS, IDV measures at national level, while their levels of PDI, UAI seem lower than the national ones. The changes they mentioned as a result of the pandemic align with lower values for each dimension, except for IDV. It is important to mention that, Mueller and Clark (1998) showed that collectivist societies do not exhibit a general concern for others. Instead, they have a pragmatic concern for specific in-groups, mostly based on reciprocity (Littrell, 2002).

No statistically significant differences were found between primary positions (B, C, E), nor between career stages (early, mid, blossom, late) when answering these questions in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic. No statistically significant difference was found between genders on this subject, neither as a whole, nor split by primary position, or by career stage.

4.3 Changes

The interviewees were asked about the changes they perceived as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at different levels (individual, family, company, society) and to compare the pandemic to other stressful events in their life (Table 5).

Table 5. Perceived COVID-19 pandemic impact at different levels

Impact	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Individual level	no changes	12	14.0	14.0
	small changes	10	11.6	25.6
	major changes	64	74.4	100.0

Impact	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Family level	no changes	16	18.6	18.6
	small changes	8	9.3	27.9
	major changes	62	72.1	100.0
Company level	no changes	16	18.6	18.6
	small changes	8	9.3	27.9
	major changes	62	72.1	100.0
Societal level	no changes	15	17.4	17.4
	small changes	5	5.8	23.3
	major changes	66	76.7	100.0
COVID-19 pandemic vs. other events	other events were more shocking	22	25.6	25.6
	the pandemic was similar to other events	34	39.5	65.1
	the pandemic was the most shocking event	30	34.9	100.0

Source: own research

WBC were more inclined to say the pandemic created small changes at individual level, compared with MBC (X^2(2, N=46) = 6.210, p<0.05). No other statistically significant differences were found (in answering the questions in Table 5) between primary positions, career stages or genders.

Even if most interviewees mentioned "major changes" at all levels, these changes are broadly perceived as positive. At individual level, the leaders mentioned: more opportunities, the need for flexibility, adaptability, balance, meaning, authenticity and wellbeing, the importance of mentors and autonomy, and the need for financial security. At family level, they discussed safety, spending quality time, adaptability, flexibility and harmony. At organizational level the need for communication and creating a space for development, having a flexible mindset, being adaptable, dependable, empathetic and proactive were mentioned, working with colleagues who are not mission-driven and passionate about their work being an impediment. At societal level they accentuated the importance of ethics, meaning, safety, transparence, giving back, education, and having positive impact.

In terms of how the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other events in their lives, 35% see the pandemic as the most shocking event, and 40% say it was similar to other events. The 25% who consider other events were more shocking compared with the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned the loss (or fear of losing) dear ones, difficulties as a result of the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the 1997-1999 economic contraction in Romania, and uncertainties as a result of the December 1989 Revolution. Some also saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a blessing in disguise.

5 Conclusion

The paper offers insights regarding the way of thinking and acting top leadership has, through an exclusivist panel of 86 Romanian top leaders. The research questions have been answered, having both theoretical and practical

implications, by suggesting how top leaders differ from the national estimations of Hofstede's five cultural dimensions provided by Hofstede Insights (2022a) (and thus, that subgroups have their own characteristics which might not align with opinions regarding national culture, as was also found by other studies assessing different sub-groups (e.g. Littrell and Lapadus, 2005; Vrânceanu and Iorgulescu, 2016)), by uncovering what "career" and "career success" mean for them, as well as if all of these were transformed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results also show limited differences between leaders of different positions (i.e. executives, entrepreneurs, board members), career stages (i.e. early, mid, blossom, late) and genders (i.e. men, women), contributing to research concerning these issues (e.g. Stanescu et al., 2021) and to the update of practitioners' future strategies and policies.

The research limitations represent opportunities for further research. First, the sample size, appropriate for qualitative studies, increased the error margin where some statistical tests were concerned. Further studies could take a quantitative form to investigate culture at top level leadership. Second, the industries addressed within this paper were not equally affected by the pandemic. Further studies could explore the impact crises have on leadership within a particular industry. Third, lowering the leadership level to middle management might uncover more diverse differences in their perspectives when accounting for miscellaneous demographic variables.

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