

# How Covid-19 Forced the Officials' Council of Slovenia to Select Highest State Officials Only Online

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**Purpose:** The present paper describes how one of the most rigid state entities responsible for the selection of highest public officials in Slovenia was forced, due to the COVID-19 limitations, to select candidates only online and how the members of the Officials' Council (OC) dealt with that shift from in-person to only online interviews. This paper also exposes further use of modern technology in the HR selection process, as we have different countries which have gone much further in their selection process, using AI, NLP and blockchain technology.

**Study design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative survey study was conducted, which focused on the members of the OC, to gain in-depth information about how moving to online interviews affected their selection process, which was done before the COVID-19 just in person.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that the majority of the OC's members did not use the online conferencing tools before the COVID-19, but they are now using them because of COVID-19 limitations to meet face-to-face. Also, half of them would be open to the possibility to keep online interviews also post-COVID-19. Nevertheless, none of them felt it was easier to evaluate candidates at online interviews; the majority said it was more challenging, mainly because of the inability to assess the candidates fully and their body language. Personal contact is absent. They also expressed privacy concerns and technical complexity/issues as regards online interviews.

**Originality/value:** We designed the questionnaire and asked all 12 members of the OC to answer it online using 1KA.SI survey tool in April 2021. We also used current articles about the use of modern technology in the HR selection process.

**Keywords:** Officials' Council, highest state officials, HR selection process, online interview, AI-driven tools, predictive analytics, Slovenia

## 1. Introduction

This paper will focus on how the situation with the COVID-19 forced such a traditional institution as the Official's Council (OC) of Slovenia to select the highest public officials only online, without meeting in person with them and especially how moving ultimately online affected their view of the selection process, which was well established but had to be changed because of the COVID-19 situation.

As a deputy-chairman and a member of the OC, the author of this paper was personally involved in this process. However, as a researcher, he wanted to understand how members of the OC perceive the selection of the most important officials in the public sector only online, without in-person meetings, which was the standard procedure for many years before the COVID-19. In that manner, a survey study was conducted with members of the OC to explore the usage of online conferencing tools before COVID-19, the advantages and disadvantages of online meetings with candidates, their evaluation of candidates at the online meeting, how hard it is, why is it hard and the possibility to keep online meetings with candidate also post COVID-19.

Firstly, We will describe the use of technology in the HR selection process, and then explain the selection procedure of the highest public officials in Slovenia before the COVID-19, then continue with the explanation of how the COVID-19 forced changes how the highest public

officials are selected in Slovenia and how the members of the OC perceive the shift from in-person to online interviews. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for developing the selection process of top public managers in Slovenia to take further steps towards using the technology in the HR selection process.

## **2. The use of technology in the HR selection process**

First interviews that were not done in-person were conducted by phone, as Graham Bell invented the first phone in 1876 and Motorola releases the first commercial mobile phone in 1984 (Smith, 2015). Besides the usual live video interviews, we have seen the use of pre-recorded video interviews and automated video interviews, used by some public sector bodies, like in Ireland (Top Tips to Help You Prepare for a Video Interview, 2020).

Nevertheless, the newest development goes all the way to using the interview software with automation and conversational AI to remove bias from the hiring process. AI can support the public sector's diversity and inclusion goals through the automation of data scoring. When applied to the public sector, AI-driven assessments can significantly decrease the likelihood of bias creeping into the candidate selection process: offering greater insight into data we already have, ensuring consistency across teams of recruiters, allowing transparency into the hiring process. This is already used in the Swedish public sector with the help of HR startup company Tengai (a spinoff of TNG). They developed Furhat's social robot that autonomously performs interviews, scores the interview according to an established framework and summarizes the output for the human recruiter. Through a supporting software program, the entire process from candidate selection to interview summary is made anonymous and can easily be handled by a non-technical recruiter (The World's First Unbiased Interviewer, 2021).

There are also high-tech HR tools using sophisticated Natural Language Processing (NLP), like HireVue, as well as platforms, which automate the applications process by scanning applicants' resumes for specific skills and experience, and smart texting tools (capable of conducting recruitment outreach and facilitating communications throughout the hiring process) are also on the rise (Steinberg, 2020).

Even blockchains, which are usually associated with Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, have become beneficial to hiring and recruiting regarding credential and qualification verification. A blockchain ledger can record academic credentials, professional certifications, and other qualifications that a potential job seeker may want to include on a resume, and it could make it nearly impossible for unscrupulous job seekers to falsify their resumes (Yi et al., 2020).

When discussing the use of modern technology in the HR selection process, we must mention the use of predictive analytics for hiring and recruiting teams, as predictive analytics can offer forward-looking insights on their current workforce that could help find top talent that fits the needs of the organization. With predictive analytics based on personal attributes, educational background, and performance within the company, HR teams can find correlations in this data to determine the ideal profile of an employee who is likely to be successful (Johnson, 2019). That is even more important in a bureaucratic organization such as the public sector, where careers are restricted through formalized exams, public employees enjoy lifetime tenure protection, and special labour regulations are applied to public sector employees (Suzuki & Hur, 2020).

We can protect our health (during COVID-19) and be flexible and reduce costs by not meeting face-to-face to have a live interview with potential candidates for the job. However, with the usage of technology, we are inevitably changing the process of selecting the candidates at its core as well. Therefore, Cyber-readiness is becoming a critical skill for all workers (AON'S ASSESSMENT SOLUTIONS, 2019).

Of course, there are also some negative implications of using the technology in the HR selection process as regards (excessive) use of personal data on one side data, like questions of data privacy, ethical and legal standards and illegal usage of technology on another side, like the use of deepfake video manipulation, which is difficult to detect ((Koopman et al., 2018). Also, we must know how to use all technological novelties, both recruiters and candidates, which can also be a challenge. It is safe to conclude that even having all possible technological help, in-person interactions remain significant in the HR selection process (Morse, 2019).

### **3. The selection process of the highest public officials in Slovenia before the COVID-19**

The OC was established in 2007 by the Civil Servants Act, as defined in chapter XXIV (articles 174 – 178), to depoliticize the public sector and ensure the highest level of professionalism and independence of officials in the highest official positions, namely directors-general, secretaries-general, heads of ministries, heads of government services and heads of administrative units, which all must be chosen through special open competitions that are run by the Special Competition Commissions (SCCs) (article 60 of the Civil Servants Act).

The OC is an autonomous body that works independently based on its Rules of Conduct, which it also passes. It counts 12 members (article 175 of Civil Servants Act), that are appointed for a term of six years: 3 members are appointed by the President of the Republic, 3 members are elected by the officials holding the titles of senior secretary and secretary among themselves, 2 members are appointed by representative trade unions and 4 members are appointed by the Government upon the proposal of the Minister of public administration. The chairman and the deputy chairman are elected by the members among themselves by majority vote and secret ballot.

The OC sets the Standards of professional qualifications (Uradniški svet RS, 2020), the selection criteria and the methods of qualification testing, appoints SCCs for the selection procedure in special open competitions, gives opinions to the Government and the National Assembly about regulations concerning official's system and their status and adopts the Code of Ethics of civil servants in state bodies and local community administrations in cooperation with representative trade unions and professional associations of civil servants. It can also propose the annulment of the particular contract of employment (article 76 of Civil Servants Act).

Each SCC counts 3 - 5 members and is composed of a member of the Official Council as the chairman and an official employed in the public administration body which initiated the open competition and an expert in the fields of public administration or personnel resources management or in the particular field where managerial tasks shall be performed. The mandatory member comes from the OC and is appointed together with others by OC at its session, usually held monthly. The rules of conduct for the SCCs are set by OC, which regulate the work of SCCs. After the appointment of the SCC, a written order is issued by the OC, which

is notified to the principal who initiated the special open procedure and to the appointed members of the commission.

After the notification, the open competition is published on the Ministry of Public Administration website and The Employment Service of Slovenia. It can also be published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia or daily newspapers (article 58 of Civil Servants Act). The open competition is the only legal procedure for recruiting new officials for the highest official positions in Slovenia, as there is no career-based system for Slovenian top public managers. In the other EU Member States, there is no strict career-based system as well, and most of the countries with a hybrid system have a position-based system for their top public managers (H. Kuperus and A. Rode, 2016). However, for other civil servants (not top public managers), the traditional Max-Weberian bureaucracy model still applies (Hammerschmid et al. 2016), so we still find a clear dominance of the career-based system in a large number of EU Member States (Thijs et al. 2017).

Firstly, all candidates must satisfy the formal requirements as stipulated by related laws, executive regulations and in the corresponding act of job classification for the public administration body that runs the job competition, like prescribed education, needed work experiences, professional exams, knowledge of a foreign language(s), certification of impunity, etc. and SCC must check those formal requirements during the screening procedure. Secondly, potential candidates are then chosen to check if the candidates that satisfied the formal requirements also meet the criteria laid down in the Standards of professional qualifications with selection criteria and methods of qualifications adopted by the OC.

Standards of professional qualifications from May of 1, 2021 (Standardi Strokovne Usposobljenosti, 2021) are divided into four main sets: valuation of candidate's vision of the public administration body's development; candidate's professional knowledge and understanding of the mission of the position for which candidate is running and of the corresponding public administration body; assessment of candidate's core competencies and expression of candidate's leadership potential. There were just two sets in previous Standards of professional qualifications from May 1 2016 (Standardi Strokovne Usposobljenosti, 2016), substantially similar to the first and second set of new Standards. The third and fourth sets are entirely new ones and were not used yet when writing this article.

This is similar to the procedures from other EU member states where there are also using CV screening, interviews and different types of testing: from psychometric and general aptitudes to knowledge on management, public administration and finances to foreign language and IT skills (H. Kuperus and A. Rode, 2016).

The SCC ends the selection procedure by submitting the list of suitable candidates (or just one candidate or even none if no suitable candidate was chosen) to the functionary to whom the position official is held responsible. Then the functionary can select the candidate he believes to be the most suitable, and the latter is appointed or is proposed to be appointed. In case that the functionary does not find any of the candidates suitable, the functionary may request the OC to start the new procedure or may himself appoint an SCC (article 64 of Civil Servants Act).

Every eligible candidate must present a CV and all written proofs to fulfil formal requirements within the special open competition's deadline, either by post or by e-mail. First, those CVs and appropriate written proofs are checked if the candidates fulfil all the formal requirements

described above. Then the SCC checks the fulfilment of all substantive conditions, as laid down in Standards of professional qualifications. The most important part is the candidate's written vision on 2-5 A4 pages of priorities and development of the public administration body that the candidate is running for. The vision must be professionally justified and feasible as well as proactive and ambitious as possible. It must include the candidate's vision of the public administration body's development, priority objectives, actions and key performance indicators with timeline and financial and personnel metrics. The vision must also contain possible legislative amendments which are needed for the fulfilment of that vision.

The SCCs must then evaluate whether the candidate's vision: is based on the candidate's expertise, builds on notable achievements and successes of the public administration body's, takes into account the requirements and expectations of the environment and all stakeholders, exposes problems that need to be addressed as a matter of priority, includes priorities that need to be addressed over the next five years, can be used immediately, is acceptable from the point of view of the applicable legislation or seeks further legislative changes, is set more broadly than the organization currently operates and that would be welcome for users, can be used for motivating employees to improve the quality of work.

The SCCs must also check the candidate's professional knowledge and understanding of the position's mission for which the candidate is running and of the corresponding public administration body. In that manner, the most important are: understanding the mission and role of the public administration body within the public administration system, knowledge of legal responsibilities of the public administration body, knowledge of public administration strategy and the development trends of the state administration, knowledge of regulations and procedures of personnel policy planning, staffing, budget planning and legal and efficient use of budget funds as regards the public administration body, recognizing the importance and use of resources (i.e., information equipment and facilities), understanding of the principle of action in the public interest as well as focus on users, respecting the rule of transparency and openness, the candidate's view on the development of the public administration system and candidate's understanding of sectoral national and EU legislation as regards the public administration body.

The SCCs must assess the candidate's core competencies: commitment to professionalism, strengthening cooperation, proactive action and focus on users. More specifically, they must check if the candidates: have necessary expert knowledge that is continuously upgraded, are focused on users in the consciousness of fast and effective services, are proactive in their work, so they act on their own initiative to find solutions and suggest improvements, and they do all that in close cooperation with internal and external stakeholders.

Lastly, the external expert must check the expression of the candidate's leadership potential and ability to direct activities, coordinate and optimize the work process, and the candidate's decision-making ability based on expertise, experience, and skills. That is done with psychological testing, which determines: emotional stability and stress resilience; self-esteem and positive self-image; the candidate's openness to the innovations brought by development and how much he takes them into account and includes them in his work; how much he strives to achieve the goals set or set by his superior and how much he knows how to motivate his colleagues, with an emphasis on perseverance to complete the activity or task despite difficulties, obstacles or an unforeseen complication; ability to effectively organize the work of the body, meaning own work and the work of employees and monitoring the implementation

of work; the willingness of the candidate to take time for employees when they need him to share his knowledge with them and thus direct them to proper development. The external expert finishes his work with a report about the psychological testing he provides to the SCC. That report is valid for 1 year and can also be used in other open competitions for which the candidate may apply.

Each candidate must fulfil all formal and all four substantial conditions as described above to be suitable for the official position from the open competition procedure. The SCC convenes and goes through the candidate's CV and submitted documents with professional care, especially regarding the candidate's vision. Before the SCC meets with the candidates, the external expert must finish the candidate's psychological testing of the candidate(s) and present the report to the SCC for each candidate. The members of the SCC then scrutinize that report to assess the leadership potential of the candidate as a fourth substantial condition. Then they conduct panel interviews with suitable candidates that passed the formal conditions further to determine the fulfilment of all four substantial conditions. Finally, each member of the SCC votes on the candidate's fulfilment of each substantial condition as laid above. The members must reach the majority at each condition for the candidate to get their approval – the candidate is marked as suitable for the position for which the candidate ran. If by any chance, the SCC has 4 members and half of the votes in favour and half against the candidate, then the chairman's vote is decisive.

#### **4. The COVID-19 forced changes in how the highest public officials are selected in Slovenia**

As described above, the SCCs must meet with potential candidates to assess them for a desired public post, so each candidate is called for the meeting with the SCC at the Ministry of public administration in Ljubljana to have the panel interview. Before that interview, each candidate must meet with an external expert for psychological testing. In the pre-COVID-19 period, those interviews were done only in person. Furthermore, if the candidates did not show up and did not excuse their absence, that was automatically regarded as the candidate's application withdrawal. Therefore, there was no other way than a live panel interview in front of the members of the SCC and offices at the Ministry of public administration as an official venue.

As COVID-19 stroke and shook all our lives since March 2020, most countries, including Slovenia, imposed strict restrictions regarding free movement and many other activities, together with closing down schools, public institutions, public transport, etc. The epidemic in Slovenia was declared on March 12 2020 (Coronavirus Disease COVID-19, 2020), and the first wave lasted until May 31 2020 (Kronologija Ukrepov Za Zaježitev Epidemije, 2020), when it officially ended (in Slovenia). The second, much stronger COVID-19 wave began in October 2020 (Janez Janša Predstavil Ukrepe Za 2. Val COVID-19, 2020) with more or fewer restrictions spanned into the third wave, which has begun in March 2021 and still lasts. So, since March 2020, only four months (June-September 2020) were somewhat normal. Since the begging of the pandemic, schools shifted their classes online (Slovenia: Response to the Covid-19 Outbreak, 2020), and many private and public organizations ordered their employees to stay and work from home. The entire country had to adapt almost overnight to learn and to do business online. That also meant pursuing measures that strengthen labour process flexibility and digitalization in most Slovenian companies, as showed in the study, carried out in

September and October 2020 by consultancy Kearney in cooperation with AmCham Slovenia (STA, 2020).

The OC also went online for the first time since its constitution (July 14 2007) and had its 44th meeting on October 12 2020, entirely online using Microsoft Teams as a conferencing tool. We had the honour to chair that meeting as the deputy-chairman of the OC. In the first COVID-19 wave, they had three monthly meetings only by correspondence session, as its Rules of Conduct also permit this, so they did not meet live or online. As per the CSSs, the situation was different as there is no correspondence sessions allowed for CSSs, only live meetings. Nevertheless, as the whole country was in lockdown and everybody went online, the CSSs had to adapt, and they also went online, sooner than the OC itself. It was simply very urgent to get new top public managers as the new 14. Slovenian Government was appointed on March 14 2020 (About the Government | GOV.SI, 2020), and subsequently, many governmental offices looked for new directors-general, secretaries-general, heads of ministries and heads of government services. So, the first CSS was held online on April 16 2020, and since then, over 40 online CSS's meetings (D.M. Pogorevc, personal communication, April 16, 2021) were implemented (as of May 1 2021).

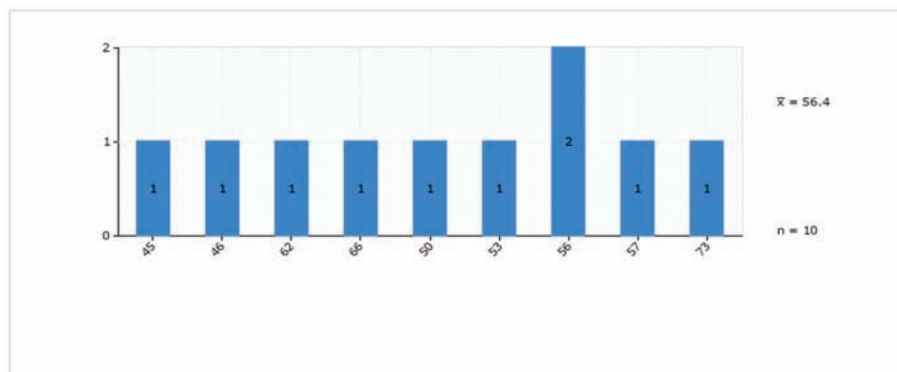
However, only recently, on April 12 2021, the OC adopted the Rules of conduct for SCCs (which entered into force on May 1 2021) to explicitly include the formal possibility of conducting CSS's meeting with the candidate(s) also online (Uradni ski svet RS, 2021). That was also the case for the OC's Rules of conduct which were changed on January 18 2021, and entered into force on February 1 2021 (Uradni ski svet RS, 2021), to include the formal possibility of online meetings. However, with restriction, if the meeting will include some kind of voting by secret ballots, there must be an in-person meeting to conduct validly such voting. In all other cases, there can be an online meeting. That was also the requirement in the public tender for external experts who will, from May 1 2021, conduct psychological testing, that they can do it also online without the need to meet the candidate in person.

Although technology has been used for many years to streamline the HR recruitment process, screening and selection procedure (Chapman & Webster, 2003), top officials in the Slovenian public sector are just recently and only because of the COVID-19 situation being selected using the online interviews and with use of video-conferencing software Microsoft Teams and that is the only technological novelty for selection of top public managers in Slovenia. Before COVID-19, the only technology used was the Dictaphone to record the in-person interview in order to make a record of the interview. In addition, the candidates were allowed to submit their applications by e-mail with PDF or word attachments and not just by "snail-mail", which is not much technology. We have seen worldwide the usage of technology in the HR recruitment process in much more extensive ways.

## **5. Research design**

In order to find out about the effects of shifting from in-person to completely online interviews as part of the selection process of highest officials in Slovenia, a survey study was conducted, which focused only on members of the OC, as they also act as chairmen for all SCCs. Therefore, they were asked to participate in an online survey using the 1KA.SI survey tool in April 2021, and 10 out of 12 answered the questionnaire, which had 12 questions.

Half of the respondents were men and half of them women, all highly educated, two of them with PhD and two with Master's degrees, with an average age of 56,4 years.



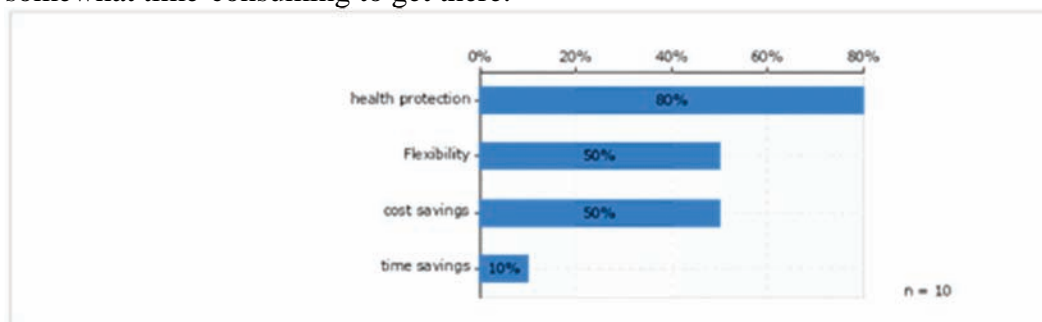
**Figure 1: Age of respondents**

When asked about usage of online conferencing tools before COVID-19, 60 % did not use any of the video-conferencing tools at their work before COVID-19, and of that 40% who did, 75 % used Microsoft Teams, 25 % used Skype, and none of them used Zoom or another tool.

**Table 1: Usage of video-conferencing tools before COVID-19**

Which video-conferencing tool did you use before COVID-19?				
Answers	Frequency	Percentage	Valid	Cumulative
1 (Zoom)	0	0%	0%	0%
2 (Skype)	1	10%	25%	25%
3 (Microsoft Teams)	3	30%	75%	100%
4 (other)	0	0%	0%	100%
Together	4	40%	100%	

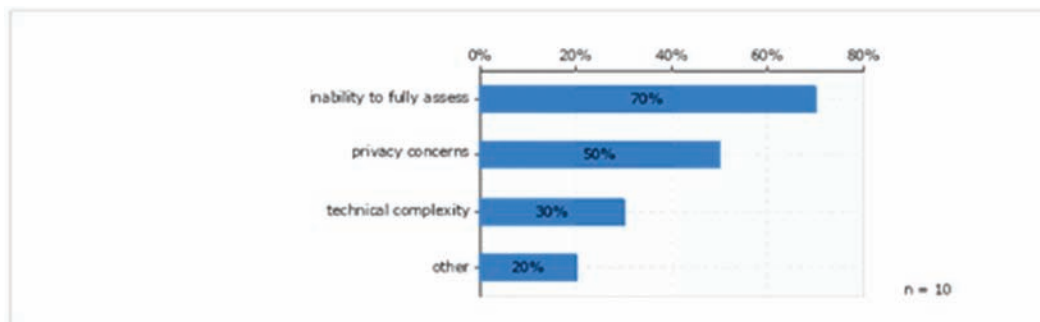
When considering advantages of an online meeting of the CSS and answers could be given simultaneously, it is notable that the OC values the health protection very highly as 80 % stated health protection, 50 % flexibility, 50 % cost savings, as those are also important for the OC and 10 % time savings, which is kind of surprising as the meetings for in-person interviews with candidates would take place at the Ministry of Public Administration venue and that is somewhat time-consuming to get there.



**Figure 2: Advantages of online meetings**



When considering disadvantages of an online meeting of the CSS and answers could be given simultaneously, online interviews present a significant hindrance for the OC to wholly evaluate the candidates, as 70 % of respondents stated inability to fully assess the candidate and 10 % inability to understand candidate's body language. There is also an issue with privacy as 50 % expressed privacy concerns, then 30 % expressed technical complexity and 10 % fear of internet connection disruption, which could be avoided with better technical support.



**Figure 3: Disadvantages of online meetings**

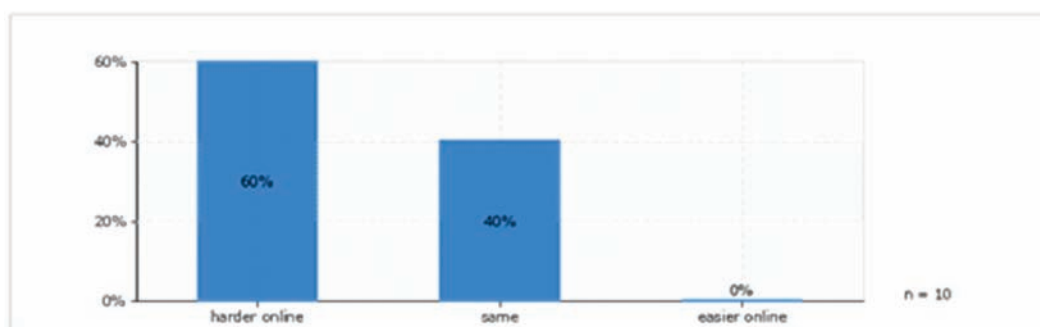
When asked about typical technical issues while having online interviews with the members of OC, 50 % did not have any problems or problems with software, 20 % had problems with a poor internet connection, 20 % had problems with bad sound and 10 % with weak video.

**Table 2: Technical issues with online interviews**

Which technical issue typically occurs when conducting an online interview?

Answers	Frequency	Per cent	Valid	Cumulative
Software issue	0	0%	0%	0%
Poor internet	2	20%	20%	20%
Weak video	1	10%	10%	30%
Bad sound	2	20%	20%	50%
No issues	5	50%	50%	100%
Valid	10	100%	100%	

When asked about the candidate evaluation online compared to an in-person interview, none of the OC members felt that it was easier to evaluate candidates at an online interview. Furthermore, 60 % answered that it was more complicated, and 40 % answered that it does not matter how the interview is conducted (online or in-person) to evaluate the candidate.



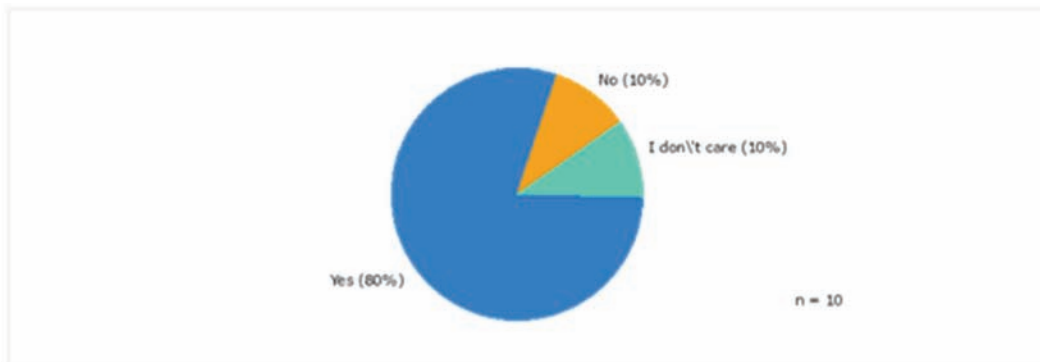
**Figure 4: Online in comparison to an in-person interview**

When asked about the duration of online vs live interviews, there was no difference.



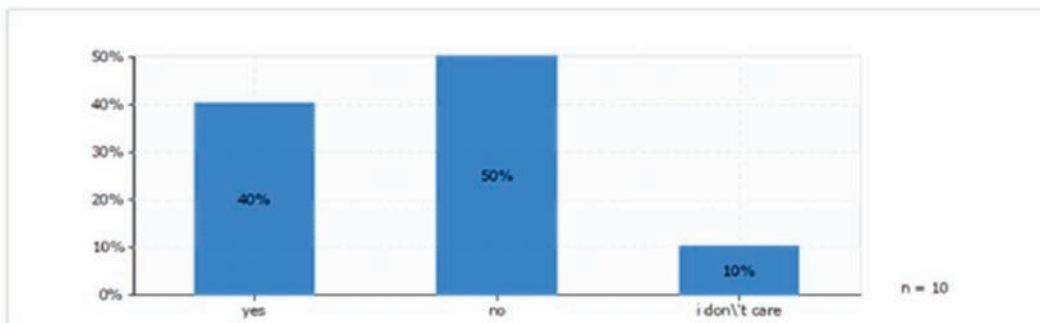
**Figure 5: Length of online interview compared to an in-person interview**

When asked if it was crucial for the OC members that the candidates know how to conduct an online interview, 80 % answered positive, 10 % negative, and 10 % did not care. So, the online interviews are also important for candidates to know how to conduct them, not only the members of the OC.



**Figure 6: Importance for the candidates to know how to conduct the online interview**

Finally, when asked about the possibility of online interviews also post COVID-19, 50 % answered negative, 40 % positive and 10 % indifferent if there are online or live interviews after COVID-19.



**Figure 7: Would the OC members keep the online interviews after the COVID-19**

The majority of OC's members did not use the online conferencing tools before COVID-19. However, considering the situation, particularly health protection and taking into account flexibility and saving time and costs, they are now using it because of COVID-19 limitations to meet in-person. Also, half of them would be open to the possibility to keep online interviews also post-COVID-19. They also clearly stated that the candidates should know how to conduct an online interview; also, some considered it necessary for the candidates to respect the "internet manners" (netiquette). However, none of them felt it was easier to evaluate candidates at online interviews; the majority said it was more challenging, mainly because of the inability to assess the candidates fully, their body language, and personal contact. They also expressed privacy concerns and technical complexity/issues as regards online interviews.

## 6. Conclusions

Using an online conferencing tool such as Microsoft Teams, the OC made its first step towards technological innovation when selecting the top public managers in Slovenia. Although it was a forced step because of the COVID-19 situation, and as we can conclude based on the survey that the initial results are not just positive, we firmly believe that the OC and SCCs should not be afraid to take further steps towards using the technology in the HR selection process.

For example, as all candidates must satisfy the formal requirements (education, work experiences, knowledge of foreign languages, etc.) that there are present in their CVs with appropriate written documents and this screening part could be done by automated scanning using some kind of NLP platform to sift through candidates' application and CVs. Also, their vision of priorities and development of the public administration body that the candidate is running for could be automatically scanned.

With appropriate automated video interviews, SCCs could check candidates' professional knowledge and understanding of the position's mission for which the candidate is running. Correspondingly, the technology could support the assessment of candidates' core competencies which the candidate must possess – with the pre-set questionnaires in the form of pre-recorded videos and subsequent automated and unbiased grading system of candidates' answers, using AI technology. The same goes for psychological testing as part of the selection process.

The final step should be reserved for an in-person interview to cross-check the previous more or less automated steps that led to the final stage of selecting the appropriate candidate. Nevertheless, keeping some kind of human touch and being positive is essential.

However, the most important technological breakthrough could be using predictive analytics in public sector HR recruitment. We have a vast collection of data regarding public sector workers, like their personal attributes, educational background and their performance, that is (should be!) measured using different kinds of key performance indicators (KPI). In order to use them properly, there should be a standard methodology for data quality control (Markic, 2014). Using described predictive analytics, we could identify potential top public managers within the public sector workforce and maybe even strategically approach them in the early stages to develop their professional knowledge and core competencies needed for the top public management posts.

We can safely conclude that using technology in the HR selection process of top public managers in Slovenia should be at least further explored and embraced, as Slovenia is with its

newly formed Strategic digitization council (Vlada Republike Slovenije, 2021) stepping towards digitalization.

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