

Drugău-Constantin, A.L. & Victoria, D. (2025). Crisis Management in the Public Sector in Romania: Between Resilience and Transformation. *Applied Research in Administrative Sciences*, vol. 6(2), 14-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24818/ARAS/2025/6/2.02>

MANAGING CRISES IN ROMANIA'S PUBLIC SECTOR: BETWEEN RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract:

This study investigates the effects of crises on human resource management in the public sector, with a particular focus on recruitment and retention processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis centers on the response of Romania's National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) to unprecedented challenges in workforce planning, candidate selection, and employee well-being.

Using a quantitative methodology, data were collected via a structured online questionnaire distributed to 107 permanent NACS employees, of which 85 (79%) completed it. The findings reveal significant disruptions in recruitment activity, with 76% of respondents perceiving a decline in position occupancy and 85% indicating that digital recruitment methods limited candidate accessibility. Major constraints included reduced financial resources, postponed competitions, platform instability, and poor internet connectivity. Psychological stress was reported by the majority of employees, especially during prolonged remote work or early lockdown periods, while ineffective internal communication was also associated with increased tension and uncertainty.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights perceived advantages of digitalization, including improved administrative efficiency, faster communication, and better access to evaluation materials. The research emphasizes the need for adaptive, inclusive, and resilient HR strategies in the public sector, drawing key lessons from the crisis for future institutional preparedness and policy development.

Keywords: Public Sector; Crisis Management; COVID-19 Pandemic; Resilience; Human Resource.

JEL: H83, H75, M12, J21

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24818/ARAS/2025/6/2.02>

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the public sector has faced an increasing number of disruptive events—ranging from economic downturns and political instability to large-scale health crises—that have tested the resilience and adaptability of administrative institutions. Crises such as COVID-19 pandemic, have not only highlighted the vulnerabilities of public systems but also accelerated the need for structural reforms and innovative responses in public governance. One of the most affected areas within public administration has been human resource management (HRM), particularly in relation to recruitment, retention, and employee well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on public institutions to maintain essential services while adapting swiftly to new constraints, including limited financial resources, mobility restrictions, and digital infrastructure challenges (Cherry, et al., 2023; Choi, et al., 2024; Robison, et al., 2025). These dynamics significantly influenced the processes of attracting, selecting, and

retaining qualified personnel, often under emergency conditions and with limited procedural clarity (Kapardi, et al, 2023; Zoheb & Ahamad, 2023). In this context, the role of HRM shifted from routine administration to a strategic function aimed at ensuring continuity, stability, and institutional learning. This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment and retention strategies within the Romanian public sector, with a specific focus on the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS). By combining theoretical insights with empirical data, the research seeks to evaluate the challenges encountered, the solutions implemented, and the lessons learned for improving institutional resilience and HR practices in times of crisis.

From this perspective, this research aims to identify the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on recruitment processes within the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS). The main research questions are:

Q1 How did the COVID-19 crisis affect the recruitment process within the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS), particularly in terms of the number of positions filled and the budgets allocated for recruitment?

Q2 What was the impact of the pandemic on the levels of stress and uncertainty among NACS employees, and how did this influence staff retention rates?

Q3 To what extent was the digitalization of recruitment processes effective in maintaining a minimum flow of hires during the pandemic, and what accessibility and adaptability challenges were encountered by employees and candidates?

The study's novelty lies in its empirical focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment and retention strategies within a central public institution in Romania—namely, the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS). By integrating both theoretical insights and field data, the research provides a contextualized understanding of how crisis-driven constraints influenced human resource management in the public sector.

Moreover, the study highlights underexplored aspects such as the limitations of digital recruitment, employee stress patterns, and institutional adaptation mechanisms, contributing to the broader discourse on administrative resilience and transformation during systemic crises.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic human resource management represents a fundamental process through which HR policies and practices are aligned with the strategic objectives of the organization, aiming to optimize performance and strengthen competitive advantage (Kareska, 2023). Boselie (2010) highlights that this strategic approach is essential for the continuous development of employee competencies and for fostering a strong organizational culture—one capable of supporting commitment, innovation, and adaptability. Furthermore, the success of this managerial endeavor depends directly on the organization's ability to identify and respond to individual employee needs through tailored solutions (Nica et al, 2024). In this way, strategic human resource management creates a dynamic balance between organizational goals and employee aspirations, enhancing organizational resilience in contexts marked by uncertainty, change, or crisis.

One of the foundational contributions to crisis management theory is offered by Fink (1986), who distinguishes between two primary types of crises: sudden crises and gradually evolving crises. Sudden crises are characterized by their unexpected nature, rapid onset, and limited control or

foresight from within the organization. These include events such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, pandemics, or abrupt political changes. In contrast, gradually evolving crises—also referred to as smoldering crises—emerge from internal weaknesses, systemic inefficiencies, or unresolved issues that escalate over time due to neglect or inadequate management responses. Examples include ethical scandals, declining employee morale, or repeated procedural failures. Fink's framework emphasizes the importance of early detection, preparedness, and adaptability, noting that while sudden crises demand immediate reaction and stabilization efforts, gradually developing ones require continuous monitoring, organizational learning, and proactive reform. This theoretical distinction is particularly relevant in public administration, where both categories frequently coexist, and where institutional resilience depends on the capacity to both absorb shocks and correct systemic vulnerabilities. As such, Fink's model remains a valuable analytical lens for understanding how different crisis typologies affect human resource management, recruitment processes, and long-term institutional transformation.

Cole (2004) argues that continuous professional development is a core pillar in enabling employees to adapt to ongoing technological and economic changes. This is echoed by Garavan, Carbery, and Rock (2012), who emphasize the need for learning-centered HR frameworks that support both individual growth and organizational performance. This involves the implementation of structured programs such as training, mentoring, and coaching, which contribute not only to skills improvement but also to increased job satisfaction (Nijssen & Paauwe, 2012). In today's context—defined by globalization, digitalization, and growing diversity—organizations face increasingly complex demands. Rainey (2014) emphasizes the need for organizations to respond effectively to an increasingly heterogeneous workforce, composed of multiple generations, cultures, and work styles. This diversity necessitates the development of inclusive policies and the implementation of flexible managerial practices designed to unlock the full potential of employees and support their harmonious integration into the organizational environment.

1.1 THE IMPACT OF CRISES ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Recent studies (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021) show that during the pandemic, employee mental health, work flexibility, and effective internal communication became top priorities for HR departments. At the same time, crises act as accelerators of organizational transformation. Institutions that were able to swiftly adopt digital solutions, invest in employee skills, and maintain a stable organizational climate demonstrated higher levels of adaptability and innovation (OECD, 2020; Durst & Henschel, 2021). Thus, HRM becomes not only a tool for managing the effects of crises but also a source of organizational learning and structural reform.

Economic, social, and health crises place significant pressure on human resource management systems, requiring organizations to adapt swiftly and effectively to new operational realities (Schakel & Wolbers, 2021; Mattajang, 2023). According to Hite and McDonald (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for profound transformations in the field of human resource management, accelerating the transition to remote work, elevating the importance of employee mental health, and prompting the adoption of innovative work models. In this context, emphasize the critical role of empathetic leadership and transparent, efficient communication—factors that are essential for maintaining morale, organizational cohesion, and productivity during times of crisis (Zivkovic, 2022, Eerola, 2025; Ravani, 2025).

Human resource management in the public sector is characterized by distinctive features, shaped by the sector's social mission and its service-oriented objectives (Brown, 2004; Knies, 2024). Rainey (2014) highlights that public employees are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, such as the desire to contribute to the common good and to make a meaningful impact on society. As a result,

HRM practices in the public sector must place strong emphasis on transparency, fairness, and equity, while consistently promoting professional development opportunities (Daly, 2015). These principles are essential for sustaining employee engagement and performance in a manner aligned with the core values of public service.

Although crises are generally perceived as imminent threats to organizational stability, they can also present significant opportunities for change and innovation. Baruch and Vardi (2020, p. 47) point out that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and fundamentally reshaped work models across many organizations (Amankwah-Amoah et al, 2021; Raghavan, Demircioglu, & Orazgaliyev, 2021). Similarly, Fink (1986) emphasizes that effective crisis management can not only mitigate negative outcomes but also strengthen an organization's reputation and enhance its long-term resilience. Faced with lockdowns, social distancing, and disrupted supply chains, organizations were forced to adopt digital tools and remote operations almost overnight (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). E-commerce, virtual services, and cloud-based platforms experienced unprecedented growth, reflecting a fundamental restructuring of consumer behavior and organizational processes (Brem, Viardot, & Nylund, 2021). According to Brynjolfsson et al. (2020), firms that had previously invested in digital infrastructure adapted more quickly and captured new market opportunities, while late adopters faced significant operational setbacks. Furthermore, the crisis highlighted not only the urgency of digital innovation but also the long-term strategic advantages of business agility, technological adaptability, and online customer engagement. As such, COVID-19 did not merely disrupt traditional activity—it redefined its trajectory, creating conditions for sustainable, tech-driven growth in the post-pandemic economy.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) in Romania. We used a quantitative research methodology in order to investigate the impact of crisis situations—particularly the COVID-19 pandemic—on recruitment and retention strategies, employee motivation, and institutional resilience in the Romanian public sector. The research is grounded in crisis management theory, drawing specifically on the distinction between sudden (unexpected, external) and gradually evolving (internally rooted) crises (Fink, 1986). This theoretical framework enables a nuanced exploration of how various types of crises generate operational disruptions, structural limitations, and emotional strain within public institutions.

To gather empirical evidence, it was utilized a structured questionnaire. This research instrument aimed at capturing employees' perceptions regarding recruitment dynamics, retention-related difficulties, digital transition, workplace well-being, and the quality of internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The quantitative approach was chosen to allow for the systematic testing of three research hypotheses:

- (H1)** The COVID-19 crisis negatively affected the recruitment process in NACS, leading to a significant reduction in both the number of positions filled and the recruitment-related budget;
- (H2)** The pandemic increased employee stress and uncertainty, which in turn reduced staff retention rates;
- (H3)** While the digitization of recruitment processes enabled the continuation of hiring activities, it also posed accessibility and adaptability challenges.

The survey was distributed electronically via Google Forms to a target of 107 permanent employees of the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS), covering all departments and hierarchical levels. Data collection took place between May and June 2025. Participation was voluntary, and full

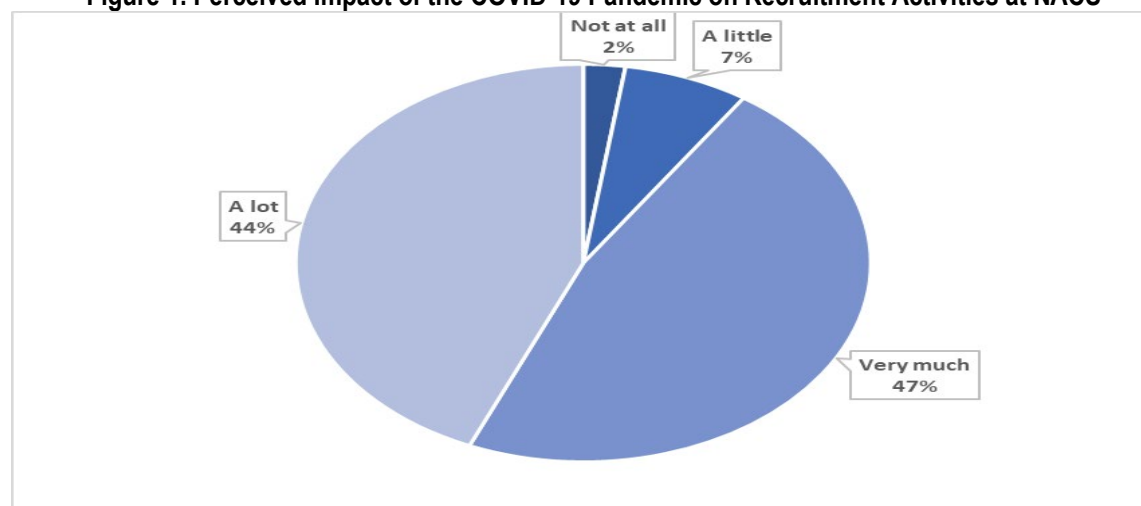
confidentiality was assured. A total of 85 valid responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 79%, considered statistically sufficient for institutional-level generalization. Data analysis focused on identifying respondent perceptions, using descriptive statistics to evaluate the frequency and intensity of reported effects.

The methodological design was chosen not only for its efficiency in capturing standardized responses across a relatively large group, but also for its suitability in assessing perceptual patterns across structurally diverse units. The findings contribute both empirical insight and policy-relevant recommendations for improving institutional preparedness and HRM resilience in future crisis contexts.

3. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following section presents the empirical findings derived from the structured questionnaire administered to employees of the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS). The data collected offer critical insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced key dimensions of human resource management, particularly recruitment, retention, digital adaptation, and employee well-being.

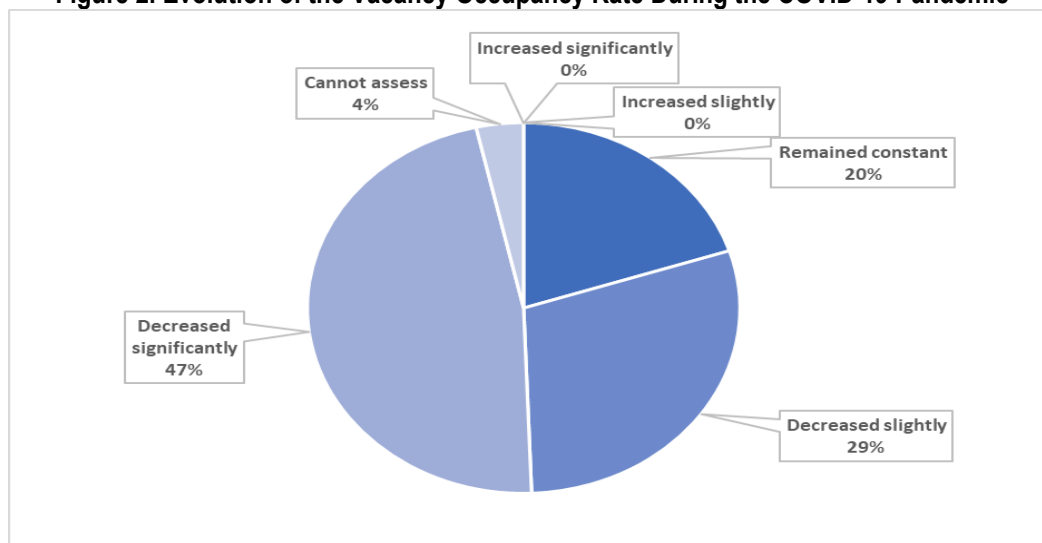
Figure 1. Perceived Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Recruitment Activities at NACS



Source: Author's elaboration, 2025

The chart from Figure 1 illustrates how employees of the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) perceived the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the institution's recruitment activities. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on recruitment processes within Romania's National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS), as evidenced by the empirical data collected. A significant majority of respondents—91% (47% + 44%)—perceived the recruitment process as being strongly or very strongly affected by the crisis, while 60% (51 out of 85) noted a marked decline in the frequency of public recruitment competitions. The most disrupted components were the number of available positions (54%) and recruitment budgets (62%), both seen as “very affected.” Additionally, variables such as candidate turnout, digital preparedness, and willingness to attend in-person exams were also seen as impaired by the majority of respondents, reflecting structural and logistical stressors. In contrast, dimensions like procedural transparency and access to vacancy information were reported as unaffected by 71% of respondents (60 out of 85), suggesting institutional consistency in communication standards

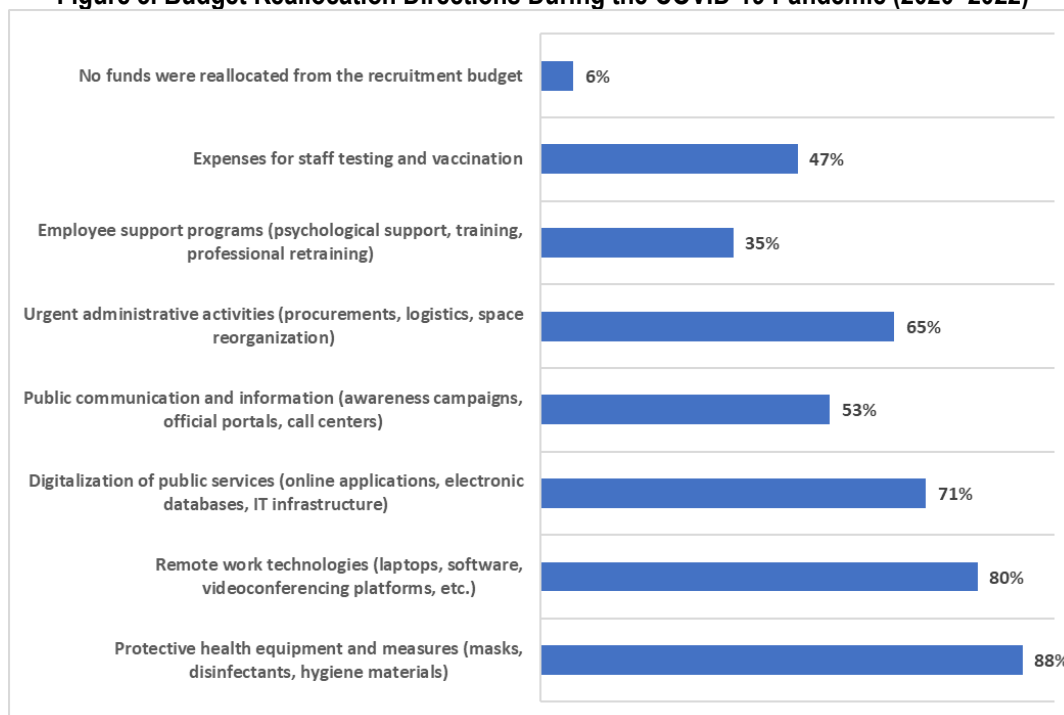
Figure 2. Evolution of the Vacancy Occupancy Rate During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: Author's elaboration, 2025

Major dysfunctions reported included insufficient financial resources (88%, 75 responses), reduced number of open positions (85%), repeated postponements of competitions (80%), and a decline in applicant interest (78%). The absence of clear procedures for online recruitment was also flagged by 71% (60 respondents), underlining digital unpreparedness. Furthermore, 76% perceived a decline in the actual occupancy rate of vacant positions, while 0% reported any increase, indicating widespread institutional difficulty in filling roles. Budget reallocations were confirmed by most participants, with funds redirected toward sanitary protection (88%), teleworking infrastructure (80%), and digital public service tools (71%). Other uses included urgent administrative tasks (65%) and public information campaigns (53%), whereas fewer respondents pointed to COVID-19 testing/vaccination (47%) or staff support programs (35%). Only 6% believed recruitment budgets remained untouched

Figure 3. Budget Reallocation Directions During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022)

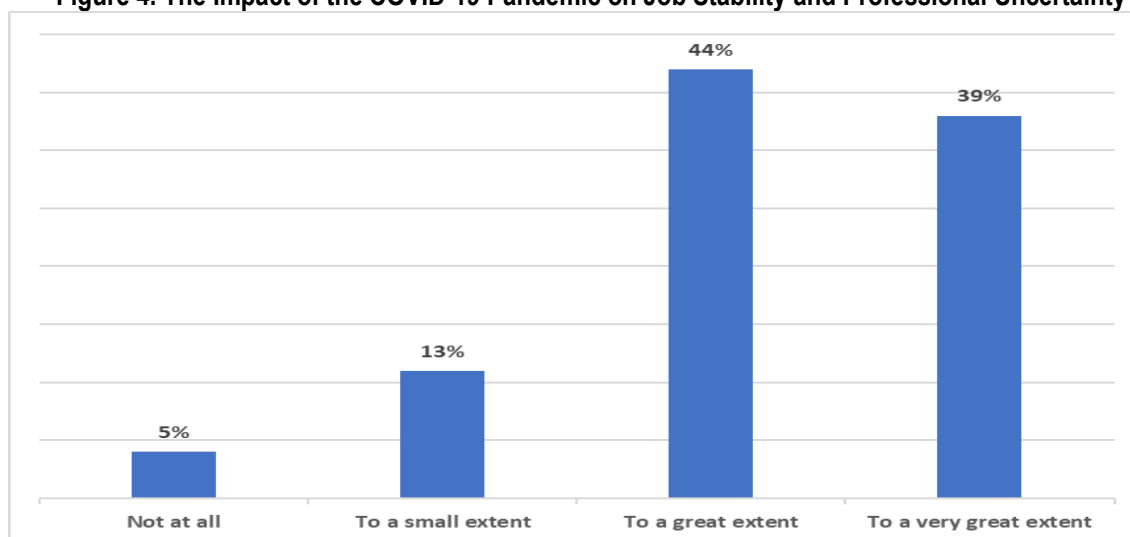


Source: Author's elaboration, 2025

In terms of employee well-being, 46% of respondents reported continuous high levels of stress throughout the pandemic, while 21% identified the lockdown period as the peak of psychological strain, and 18% marked the early phase of the pandemic as most intense. Despite these pressures, 79% stated they did not consider changing jobs, and only 6% actively contemplated it. Nonetheless, 57% believed poor internal communication contributed at least moderately to stress or turnover intentions. Concerning digital recruitment, 85% of respondents believed it limited candidate access—likely due to technical, digital, or economic barriers.

The most commonly cited issues included unstable internet during interviews (65%), platform instability (49%), document upload/access difficulties (42%), and interrupted interview sessions (39%). On the positive side, digital recruitment was credited with time efficiency (73%), improved communication (66%), smoother document handling (64%), easier access to evaluation materials (53%), and greater flexibility in scheduling (46%), suggesting strong potential for digitalization in future HR practices.

Figure 4. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Job Stability and Professional Uncertainty

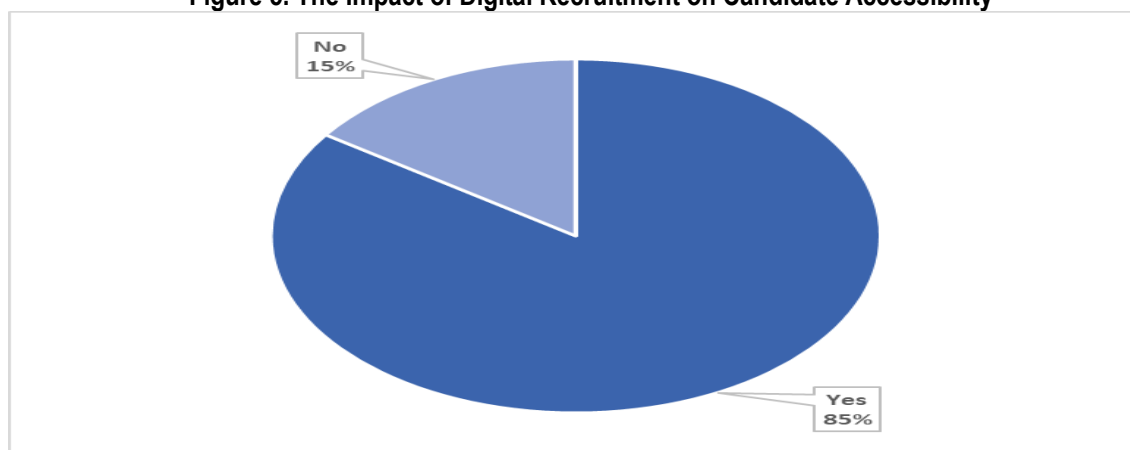


Source: Author's elaboration, 2025

Figure 4 illustrates employees' perceptions regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job stability and professional uncertainty within the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS). The data reveal that a significant majority of respondents viewed the pandemic as a considerable threat to their professional security: 37 participants (44%) reported perceiving this threat "to a great extent," while 33 respondents (39%) perceived it "to a very great extent." Combined, these categories account for approximately 82% of the total sample (70 out of 85 respondents), signalling a widely shared sense of professional vulnerability during the crisis. In contrast, only 11 individuals (13%) indicated a low level of perceived uncertainty, and 4 respondents (5%) reported no perceived professional threat at all.

The findings reveal a clearly defined majority opinion: 85% of respondents believe that the digital recruitment process limited access for certain candidates. This perception suggests the presence of systemic or structural inequalities that were exacerbated during the transition to digital methods. Identified barriers may include limited access to IT infrastructure, insufficient digital competencies, or economic constraints that hinder equal participation in recruitment procedures. In contrast, only 15% of respondents did not perceive digital recruitment as a barrier, indicating a minority likely operating under more favourable technical and social conditions, or within professional environments that were better equipped for digital integration.

Figure 5. The Impact of Digital Recruitment on Candidate Accessibility



Source: Author's elaboration, 2025

Instability of digital recruitment platforms emerged as the second most frequently reported issue, mentioned by 49% of respondents, reflecting technical challenges encountered by public institutions in efficiently supporting complex recruitment procedures through digital systems. Additionally, 42% of participants reported difficulties in accessing, uploading, or managing application documents, indicating procedural or interface limitations in the recruitment platforms used. Another significant impediment was reported by 39% of respondents, who experienced delays or interruptions during interview sessions caused by technical deficiencies—issues that directly affected the fairness and continuity of the selection process. In contrast, only 14% of participants identified equipment compatibility issues, and a further 11% mentioned the lack of adequate technical support for selection committee members, suggesting that these particular problems, while present, were not perceived as widespread or critical.

The data presented reveal a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted challenges faced by the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key trends indicate that recruitment processes were significantly disrupted, with budgetary constraints, limited candidate participation, and technological shortcomings emerging as central obstacles. Respondents also reported heightened levels of professional stress, largely driven by increased workloads, fear of illness, and job insecurity.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights organizational resilience: transparency and access to job-related information were largely preserved, and strategic reallocations of resources toward health safety and digital infrastructure ensured a degree of continuity in public service delivery.

In conclusion, the crisis exposed structural weaknesses but also opened a window for reform. Building future institutional resilience will require proactive investment in digital capacity, clear contingency planning, and a human-centered approach to workforce support during emergencies. The pandemic acted as both a stress test and a catalyst for change in public sector HR management.

H1 was confirmed. The data revealed substantial disruptions: 91% of respondents perceived recruitment as being significantly or very significantly affected. There was a clear decrease in the frequency of public competitions and a considerable reduction in budgetary resources allocated to

recruitment activities, as funds were redirected toward urgent health protection measures and digital infrastructure. Moreover, the limited digital readiness of the institution—manifested in unclear procedures for online recruitment—further hindered process efficiency.

H2 assumed that the pandemic increased stress and uncertainty among employees, which negatively influenced the staff retention rate within NACS. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed. While the study showed that over 80% of respondents experienced high or very high levels of professional stress, and many identified key stressors such as workload, fear of illness, and lack of institutional support, the majority of employees (79%) did not consider leaving their job. Therefore, although the psychological impact of the crisis was strong, it did not translate into a significant turnover rate during the pandemic period.

H3 was validated. While the respondents acknowledged several efficiency gains from digital recruitment—such as faster communication, easier access to documents, and flexible interview scheduling—85% reported that digital methods limited access for certain candidate groups. Those lacking digital competencies, proper equipment, or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected, raising concerns about equity and inclusion in public sector recruitment. These findings highlight the complex effects of crises on human resource management and the necessity of adaptive, inclusive, and well-resourced institutional strategies.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

The author/authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The empirical data presented in this article are based on the research conducted by student Dariana Victoria, under the academic supervision Andreea L. Drugău-Constantin, as part of a Master's dissertation, completed at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in 2025.

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