

THEORETICAL APPROACH ON CURRENT CHALLENGES OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENTS. RETHINKING LEADERSHIP TOWARDS EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING

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Abstract. *The year 2020 changed work forever, impacting every person and organization across the globe. Remote work has created new job opportunities for some people, offered more family time, and provided options for when and whether to commute. However, this brought up new challenges because teams have become more siloed and digital exhaustion has become a real threat. The paper proposal examines the effects of human resources leadership - primarily oriented towards business productivity - on higher attrition rates, subsequently enhancing disengagement and burnout. To this end, the focus will be on investigating whether the hybrid environment generated by the COVID-19 pandemic created a leadership style oriented more towards productivity (task-oriented) or, on the contrary, a leadership style oriented towards the employee (human centric). Further, it will be explored whether and to what extent, each of the two leadership styles influences the engagement vs. disengagement, and the well-being vs. burnout of the employees. The analysis is intended to unfold within organizations performing in hybrid work environments, thus combining online and on-site work and interactions with colleagues and the leadership team. The main assumption is that the leadership style significantly influences employee engagement and well-being, respectively their disengagement and burnout when not in line with the current work challenges. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees are expecting their leaders to empathize more with the novel challenges in the work environment*

Keywords: *burnout, disengagement, engagement, hybrid work environments, human resources, leadership style, wellbeing.*

Introduction

The topic of this paper is concerned with the way the leadership style impacts the employees' engagement and well-being, respectively the disengagement and burnout issues, especially after pandemics when the workforce has started to change dramatically, and the hybrid model work has become critical for leaders looking to attract and retain talented human resources. It is a preliminary theoretical paper on an emerging topic, a work in progress meant to bring forward some tendential issues in hybrid work environments. In what concerns the search of relevant papers, I have considered the usage of keywords by exploring the international database EBSCO and I have selected the relevant papers considering their abstract while including various recent official reports of the professional services companies trying to define the broader implications of the future of work under pandemic context.

In their research, the COVID-19 crisis, as explained by Brătianu & Bejinaru (2021), "came like any other natural disaster, finding people and organizations unprepared for

disruptive power and social power nexus. The unthinkable became a reality, and people realized that organizations and governments have no strategies to fight against such a pandemic". The COVID-19 crisis proved that we are managing in an uncertain world. This new uncertainty "landscape induced emergent knowledge strategies and imposed and integration process of deliberate and emergent knowledge strategies. Thus, managers could incorporate critical knowledge into deliberate strategies and explore new opportunities for knowledge creation and reducing chronic business uncertainty" (Brătianu & Bejinaru, 2021, p. 15).

Today, the chronic uncertainty dominating business organizations generates emergent thinking and probabilistic models for creating solutions (Murgatroyd, 2015; Brătianu & Bejinaru, 2021), which determine even authentic leaders to adhere to different leadership styles. This is mainly because they need to redefine the company's critical dynamic capabilities based on new knowledge structures and knowledge competencies (Brătianu et al., 2020). To support this idea, Deloitte has shown in one of its studies from July 2020 that the social and economic crisis caused by the current pandemic is an extreme but relevant example of the challenges leaders face today. Mastering crisis management requires a leadership style that would be perceived as an overly directive, actionist one-leader show during business as usual. In times of uncertainty, quick decisions are essential; these exceptional circumstances call for a more human-centric and radically driven leadership style. From the theoretical point of view, most researchers agree that leadership style significantly influences the level of employee engagement, respectively disengagement. Employees are more likely to be engaged and perform in their work when their leadership is characterized by some of the following features: a leader shows resilience, consistency, trust, and competence (Kahn, 1990); the leader is engaged (Welbourne, 2007) and committed to the organization (CIPD, 2006); leader provides care and support (Kahn 1990) and recognition for a job well done to employees (Wellins et al., 2005), and has an interest in the worker's wellbeing (Tower Perrin, 2003). The effects of authentic leadership in the workplace can result in trade-offs between the dimensions of well-being, which may strengthen and weaken the level of engagement among employees. To understand how perceived authentic leadership translates into work engagement, Vui-Yee and Ho's paper (2020) explains that authentic leadership will happen only if the actions of the leaders will be perceived as authentic by the employees (Hsieh & Wang, 2015).

Employee work engagement is considered today a key force for organizational success and many organizations increase their employee motivation through employee engagement strategies one of the key strategies to getting employees engaged is through leader behavior. Undoubtedly, the well-being of the employees is one of the key factors that indicate high return value for both the individual and the organizational growth and productivity. To support this, the paper published by Mohd et al. (2020) reveals that the positivity of authentic leaders indirectly influences employee well-being through financial rewards and meaningful work. It also suggests that financial and non-financial rewards should be measured separately considering current socio-economic conditions and employees' motivational needs. From the organizational perspective, authentic leaders can foster the growth of authenticity in the employees, which consequently contributes to their well-being and performance (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The reason why this happens is that authentic leaders are good listeners and responsive to the employees' needs, whereby these behaviors make employees feel important and appreciated. They also know how to reward their employees and foster pride and

mutual loyalty between co-workers. And on top of that, this relationship between the authentic leader and employees is suggested to lead to a positive experience in employees' meaningful work.

COVID-19 has significantly changed the world of work, disrupting how organizations manage their businesses and especially leaders engage with their teams. A critical issue right now when most organizations plan to return their workforce to the workplace is understanding how organizations are coping with the new normal in working and keeping their employees engaged. Companies are reimagining work and establishing a hybrid approach to work that supports their people today and in the future. This topic is extremely new considering that we are currently facing a pandemic and there are not enough studies to support how to act or approach employee engagement and well-being. We currently have limited knowledge of the implications of flexible and remote working and hybrid arrangements call for in-depth studies that would explore various scenarios for organizations. We will need to first identify the benefits and drawbacks of remote working during the pandemic from both the employee and leadership perspectives and then map the potential scenarios to work for a sustainable work environment. This paper is trying to understand the viability of remote working in a post-pandemic setting while rethinking employee experience to compete for the best and most diverse talent. The choices leaders make in this next wave of hybrid work will impact the organization's ability to drive innovation and collaboration and to create an inclusive work environment for years to come. For example, Ernst & Young (EY) is working with leading global organizations to support a range of transformations related to reimagining work. EY commissioned the Physical Return to Work Reimagined (PRWR) survey and JAM analysis (from an interactive crowdsourcing event) using the MilionYou platform in June and July 2020. 3683 employees were involved, including 708 employers, and included US, UK, and Germany data. This report could be a starting point in understanding how to enable new ways of working efficiently within the current context.

We can also use the 2021 Work Trend Index: Annual Report launched by Microsoft as a way forward in understanding this new hybrid workforce. This report outlines findings from a study of more than 30,000 people in 31 countries and analyses of trillions on productivity and labor signals across Microsoft 365 and LinkedIn. It also includes perspectives from experts who have studied collaboration, social capital, and space design for decades. Even though many leaders acknowledge the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic at the behavioral level, more substantial changes are expected in order to adapt to the new context. The leadership style should be properly adjusted to meet the challenges of hybrid work environments to limit employees' burnout and disengagement. Therefore, the present paper intends to address the interconnections between the leadership style and employees' responses as a premise to develop insightful recommendations for professionals and managers

Literature review

To better understand the complexity of the COVID-19 crisis, Brătianu paper (2020), highlights the fact that the key element in all these crises is people's behavior because human nature is not fully rational. Emotions, personal experiences, beliefs, and values are dominated by the unconscious cognitive processes, and thus it is very hard to understand the psychology of decision-making adequately, especially in times of crisis, when the irrational aspects are more important than the rational ones (Ariely, 2011;

Baron, 2000; Blake, 2008; Kahneman 2011; Sutherland 2013). COVID-19 generated high uncertainty about what is happening due to the absence of critical knowledge to understand and fight against it (Chang & Velasco, 2020; McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Surico & Galeatti, 2020). “The current disruption will change how we eat, work, shop, exercise, manage our health, socialize, and spend our free time at an unprecedented rate of change” (Mey & Ridders, 2020). After this pandemic, there is no way to return to the old way of living and working. There will be “a new normal” life and a new way of thinking. Staying home and working from home also created a new way of doing things and communicating. The knowledge dynamics change by reducing the emotional contribution and increasing the rational role (Brătianu & Bejinaru, 2021). The transition to a new way of working, either in business as usual or in response to interruptions, changes both the employment contract and the psychological contract between companies and employees (Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010). If companies do not recognize the change in these dynamics, the potential effectiveness of teleworking may be limited (Eckhardt et al., 2019). In a review of the literature conducted by Moroşan-Dănila, Grigoraş-Ichim & Bordeianu (2021), challenges of telework have been extracted, which are reflected in possible technological challenges in the work environment, communication, and management, which are interconnected and, without paying attention to these areas, telework can have negative effects, such as isolation, work from home conflict, and work intensity (as also highlighted by Bentley et al., 2016; Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). And, in return, these can have a negative effect on well-being (physical and mental health) and work performance (Eurofound & ILO, 2017). From this, companies must not forget that human resources are the most important resource they have at their disposal and can always adapt (with the right impulse).

Organizing employees in telework was necessary for 2020, but it has become a long-term solution to the company's cost-cutting needs and efficiency. In this context, companies must always look for solutions and methods for organizing employee work, supervision, motivation, and evaluation of telework. Brower (2020) forecast that mental health and leadership will grow during the crisis, company culture will become more focused, working from home will be the new norm, greater work-life balance disparities, more frequent team engagement, vast flexibility, and significant use in technology. Companies will increase their speed, reduce bureaucracy, standardize practice, and reduce unnecessary systems, increasing employee empowerment. The current pandemic appears to be an ultimate test for leadership worldwide. Organizational leaders rely on human resources professionals' instincts and insights to ensure their organization and employees feel supported (Dirani et al. 2020). Losing good employees means losing knowledge and experience (Ramllal, 2004). Many organizations also try to reduce the number of employees to minimize their costs during the crisis and simultaneously expect greater resilience from the remaining employees (Naude, 2012). On the other hand, employees respond differently during crises and discrete individuals behave differently to change with reactions varying from acceptance to change, minor discomfort, fear, anger, frustration, and even full resistance (Smollan, Sayers, & Matheny, 2010). Data extracted in Microsoft 2021 Work Trend Index provides a clear snapshot of the new normal brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the work environment. Extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace. Employees want control of where, and how they work and expect their leaders and organizations to provide options. Business leaders' decisions in the coming months to enable flexible work will impact everything from culture and innovation to how organizations attract and retain top talent.

The role of leaders in employee engagement has been the highlight of many studies throughout the years. As defined by Skalkon et al. (2010), leadership can play an important part in shaping and defining an organization's psychological work environment. Leadership, directly and indirectly, influences employee engagement and psychological well-being (Hetland, Sandal & Johnsen, 2007). As Wakabi (2016) highlighted in his research on leadership style and staff retention in organizations, managers adopt different leadership styles depending on their orientation. Any leadership style adopted by a particular manager impacts staff motivation, performance, and organizational commitment, which leads to employees' decision to leave or stay in the organization. One of this paper's major findings is that leadership style influences organizational staff retention. Ng'ethe (2012) has studied the influence of leadership style on academic staff retention in public universities, arguing that employees are more likely to remain with an organization if they believe that their managers show interest and concern for them, if they know what is expected from them, if they are given a role that fits their capabilities and if they receive regular positive feedback and recognition. As Bakker & Costa (2014) also demonstrated in their research article on chronic job burnout and daily functioning, employees with a high level of burnout need help structurally changing their work conditions and health status. It has been proved that chronic burnout strengthens the loss cycle of daily job demands, exhaustion, and self-undermining. It weakens the gain cycle of daily job resources, daily work engagement, and daily job crafting. As described by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996), "Burnout is a syndrome characterized by chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of personal accomplishment". It is a state of "exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform. Burned-out individuals experience chronic fatigue and distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work activities".

As indicated by the study conducted by Microsoft in 2021, over 40% of the global workforce considers leaving their employer this year, therefore a very in-depth approach to hybrid work is critical for leaders looking to attract and retain diverse talent. Now more than ever, people expect their employers and leaders to empathize with and understand their current challenges. As per the same study, self-assessed productivity has remained the same or even higher over the past year, but at a human cost. Nearly one in five global survey respondents say their employer does not care about their work-life balance. Fifty-four percent feel overworked. Thirty-nine percent feel exhausted. The digital intensity of workers' day has increased substantially, with the average number of meetings and chats rising since last year. Furthermore, this paper has also shown that workers are feeling the pressure to keep up despite meeting and chat overload, 50 percent of people respond to team chats within five minutes or less which proves that the intensity of the workday and what is expected of employees during this time, has increased significantly. Another study developed by Ernst & Young (2020) highlights that employees want to return to the office for social contact but do not view working at the office and working remotely as a binary choice. They want flexibility and a greater mix of work from home in the future. They want to return to the office for social contact and are looking to their employers to enhance digital tools for remote working. Therefore, tools to support a greater connection and virtually collaborate are critical. On top of the current context, competition between companies becomes vaster and vaster and managers need to keep up with new ideas and strategies for the future. As explained by Drosos et al. (2021) in their research, the permanent search for flexibility changes patterns in employment as well. On the one hand,

organizations are not looking to offer permanent employment to all employees, but only to a small elite, considered the multi-skilled core group and provides flexibility because of its ability to perform various tasks. The rest of the workforce tends to be more part-time, temporary, seasonal, contractors, or self-employed. At the time of crisis, as we live, the leader's main focus would be to reopen, recover the business, and begin crisis management mode. As a result, employees might be at the most risk in several ways. They might go through traumatic experiences, need to learn how to deal with complexity, adapt to the new reality of work, and need emotional and interpersonal support. In this sense, leaders can support supervisors by boosting motivation and frequent employee engagement. It is essential for business leaders and supervisors to become more flexible as employees are, also, unprepared and need to adjust to the new situation. All these trends and research need more reflection and exploration since we are all facing something extremely new regarding workforce change. It is a big mental shift, one that will require leaders and organizations to fundamentally reexamine and rewire their operating mode and must put employee well-being, diversity and culture at the center of a reimagined workplace where most probably working and collaborating with others remains a key element of the overall employee experience

Conclusions, limitations, and future research area

The purpose of this paper is to explore if and to what extent, each of the two leadership styles has an influence on engagement vs disengagement, wellbeing vs burnout of the employees. There are many papers that present different aspects of the way COVID-19 impacted organizations and leadership but few of them are doing the research in an integrative way and are investigating dichotomously the relations between concepts. The present paper proposal intends to address the interconnections between the leadership style and employee responses to develop insightful recommendations for professionals and managers in a hybrid work environment. The main assumption is that the leadership style significantly influences employee engagement and well-being, respectively their disengagement and burnout when not in line with the current work challenges. One of this paper's major findings is that leadership style influences organizational staff retention. Leaders need to think, act, and behave in new ways. Now is the time for leaders to lead in a human-centered way. People are questioning who they are and what matters to them and, in many cases, they're finding new confidence to show up as themselves and live their true lives. Understanding human-centered leadership and why it is a required paradigm shift is an important first step. HR will play an important role in this and, as we emerge from the pandemic, it will be critical to developing new leadership mindsets, capabilities, and behaviors. Social learning, caring for people and their well-being, and connecting with the team in the new reimagined workplace, will be the key elements for the overall employee experience.

The limitations of the present paper come from the fact that the search explored full-text articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals retrieved via the exploration of EBSCO Business Source Complete and to a larger perspective, additional online databases could have been considered. A bibliometric analysis could come up with significant relevance for practitioners and researchers as we continue to understand the challenges of hybrid working environments. To meet the theoretical exigencies of the literature review it will be necessary to study the most relevant theoretical developments and research directions on understanding the complexity of the crisis generated by COVID-19, especially in the business environment, to understand the

implications of a hybrid work environment and teleworking in general and then to see how it impacts the leadership styles and employees. Official reports from various institutions will be added and analyses of engagement surveys that organizations themselves applied to their employees

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