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Article

Emotional assertiveness, assertive communication and assertive training enhancing the employees' performances: A China banking perspective

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Abstract: The study acknowledges empirical, conceptual, and policy-driven papers that address emotional assertiveness, assertive communication, and assertive training as means of improving employee performance in Chinese banking, which is a significant contributor to the Chinese economy. Most banking enterprises have suffered from poor performance and a lack of aggressiveness in operation. It can be used by both managers and employees to create a good interaction process and a favorable work environment, which can help elevate performances. The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a questionnaire survey and simple random sampling. The sample comprises 381 employees from the Chinese banking industry, with a response rate above 70%. The regression analysis confirms that emotional assertiveness, assertive training, and assertive communication significantly impact employee performance. In conclusion, this study contributes to academia and industries by addressing the importance of assertiveness in improving performance. The policy-driven evidence on the conceptual framework of HR literacy in emotional, training, communication, and job performance should be adopted and reviewed in the country's existing management by objective policy and legal framework in resolving employee job performance and training that are still underutilized and have a great deal of potential to satisfy the employees and management needs by establishing and emerging nations.

Keywords: emotional assertiveness; assertive communication; assertive training and employees' performance

1. Introduction

The Chinese banking industry plays a vital role in the country's economy, serving as the primary channel for allocating savings to various investment opportunities (Turner et al., 2012). Over the years, the industry has witnessed significant growth alongside China's economic expansion, with major global banks establishing a presence in the country. Although the government retains influence over banking activities, the banks have become increasingly commercially oriented. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the banking industry in China demonstrated resilience and contributed to the nation's economic recovery (Deloitte, 2021). The sector's performance, supported by employee engagement, resulted in increased assets and a growth rate of 10.1%. The banking industry in China has been instrumental in providing financial support for national policy objectives, including stability in employee, foreign investment, and financial domains. Efforts to reform the Chinese banking industry have shown progress, with greater independence for banks in adopting active monetary policies and managing credit, supervising banks, and deregulating foreign exchange control (Deloitte, 2021).

The lack of assertiveness in operational activities within the banking industry has been found to have detrimental effects on service delivery, internal conflict, and customer loss due to ineffective communication skills (Pipas and Jaradat, 2010). Effective communication is a crucial factor in cultural and social aspects of human life, and inappropriate communication can lead to diminished satisfaction and an overall decline in organizational performance (Samovar et al., 2014). Assertive communication skills place employees in a favorable position for achieving success (Pipas and Jaradat, 2010).

Given the significant impact of insufficient assertiveness in the Chinese banking industry, numerous studies have been conducted to address this issue. These studies have focused on employee performance by considering various factors such as assertiveness, communication, workload, leadership, work environment, satisfaction, and motivation levels (Khan et al., 2015). Assertiveness is believed to enhance employee performance by enabling individuals to change their self-perception and effectively express their opinions, feelings, and thoughts, ultimately leading to improved performance (Mijatović and Stiković, 2019). Organizations that prioritize assertiveness training and promote assertive communication tend to observe decreased levels of depression, stress, and anxiety among employees, resulting in improved performance (Speed et al., 2018).

In the context of the banking industry in China, particularly the Bank of China, fostering assertiveness among employees is crucial. Employees with higher levels of assertiveness and self-esteem are better equipped to handle banking perspectives and meet customer needs. Therefore, this research seeks to address the necessity for employees in the Chinese banking sector to confidently express their beliefs, ideas, and feelings to contribute to the sustainable development of the country.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotional assertiveness and performance

Butt and Zahid (2015) found that assertiveness enables individuals to express their rights without violating others' rights, promoting stress management and group task performance in organizations. They investigated the impact of assertive skills on work burnout using random sampling and advanced econometric analysis, revealing a negative relationship between assertiveness skills and work burnout. Increased assertiveness skills were associated with enhanced confidence, consistency, conflict reduction, and stress management, resulting in improved performance. Osariemen et al. (2021) examined the relationship between academic performance, assertiveness, and self-esteem, utilizing a sample from a different sector for comparison. They found a significant association between performance and assertiveness, suggesting that assertiveness training can enhance performance. However, the association was only significant for males and not females, indicating the gender-specific nature of the relationship. The study concluded that emotional assertiveness can positively impact student performance.

Moreover, Ahmed et al. (2016) reviewed the effects of behavioral therapies on anxiety, stress, and depressed mood in relation to performance. The study employed a

quasi-experimental design with random sampling and ANOVA analysis. While no statistical differences were observed among subgroups, the researchers emphasized the importance of assertiveness training in reducing psychological stress, tension, and depression to improve performance. Using a convenience sampling approach, the study included 110 respondents and employed the Role-Based Performance Scale and Rathus Assertiveness Scale. The findings demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between assertiveness skills and employee performance, with notable differences in performance between less assertive and highly assertive employees.

Furthermore, Montserrat et al. (2012) conducted a study on self-assured abilities and performance success in a different sector, allowing for relevant comparisons with the banking industry. Their sample was drawn from a population in Spain, and the researchers found a statistically significant positive relationship between performance and assertiveness achievement, suggesting that a lack of assertiveness can negatively impact academic performance. Oladipo et al. (2012) observed that there was no strong relationship between the need for assertiveness and achievement among male students' academic performance. They highlighted the importance of self-confidence as a component of understanding basic arithmetic among secondary school students in Ogun State. These findings provide insights into the impact of emotional assertiveness on performance and its relevance to the Chinese banking industry.

2.2. Assertive training and employee performance

Confidence-building programs can help individuals modify their self-perception and effectively express their feelings and opinions. These programs cover various aspects of assertiveness, such as identifying individual rights, categorizing assertive behaviors, active listening, rejecting unrealistic demands, making suggestions, showing affection, expressing approval, managing anger, giving criticism, providing feedback, and responding to requests. Effective communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, including response length, eye contact, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, contribute to improved performance. Previous studies have demonstrated that interactive training enhances confidence, reduces work-related pressure and hopelessness, prevents burnout, and improves self-esteem. Maheshwari et al. (2015) evaluated the impact of skills training for team mental therapy on anxiety issues among learners, finding a significant reduction in anxiety levels. Additionally, Shin and Jung (2014) established a strong negative association between determination and academic stress.

2.3. Assertive communication and employee performance

Effective communication plays a crucial role in employee performance, teamwork, and customer relations. Poor communication skills are associated with issues such as employee dissatisfaction, the intention to quit, a lack of commitment, and stress. Creating an open and supportive communication environment is essential for organizations to achieve their goals. In healthcare settings, proactive communication among nursing staff is vital for the early detection of dangerous situations, reducing risks, preventing clinical errors, and enhancing patient safety. Cantero-Sánchez et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of fostering a positive job

environment and promoting open communication to attract and retain highly trained nurses and provide better client services in the financial sector.

Assertive individuals are often characterized by high self-esteem. Those with higher self-esteem have positive self-perceptions, recognize their strengths and limitations, believe their strengths outweigh their weaknesses, view themselves as powerful individuals, and effectively express their attitudes, opinions, and emotions to others. On the other hand, individuals with low self-esteem struggle to assert themselves and communicate their needs, ideas, and emotions in a straightforward and assertive manner. This indicates a positive correlation between self-esteem, confidence, and assertive communication, which contributes to higher employee performance. Maheshwari et al. (2015) emphasized the role of communication skills in boosting employees' self-esteem within the Chinese financial system.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between communication and employee performance in the banking industry. Paudel et al. (2021) focused on communication's impact on employee performance at Barclays Bank, highlighting the significance of effective managerial communication in creating a favorable work environment and fostering respect. Mote (2014) emphasized the importance of communication in promoting employee performance within the banking industry and identified the use of key communication cues, such as written and oral communication, as essential for effective communication and employee efficiency. Mote (2014) found a positive relationship between communication and employee performance, particularly through information provision, direction, and rationale, which positively influenced task availability and overall performance.

2.4. Gaps within the literature

The lack of research on assertiveness and its impact on employee performance is a significant gap in the current literature. Despite numerous studies on employee performance, assertiveness has received less attention, and its potential influence on organizational success remains underexplored. Understanding the relationship between assertiveness and employee success is crucial for organizations seeking to improve their performance and address underperformance issues. Existing literature shows a dearth of scientific findings regarding the level of assertiveness among employees in the banking sector in China. This knowledge gap is also evident at the organizational level, where limited research exists on how assertive interactions can enhance employee performance. The lack of research in this area hinders the development of effective strategies to support employees and facilitate positive performance outcomes.

Additionally, there is a limited understanding of the role of assertiveness training in employee development. Although studies highlight the importance of training employees, there is a lack of research exploring the specific components that should be incorporated into assertiveness training. Further research is needed to investigate the benefits of assertiveness training and its impact on employee performance. Moreover, there is a scarcity of empirical data on the assertiveness levels of managerial employees in China. This situational gap in the literature hampers the understanding of how managerial interactions, particularly aggressive behaviors, can

influence employee performance. Gaining insights into the effects of managerial assertiveness on employees is crucial for improving goal achievement and fostering positive interactions in the workplace.

In conclusion, the existing literature lacks comprehensive research on the relationship between assertiveness and employee performance. This knowledge gap hinders organizations' ability to effectively support and engage employees in assertive interactions. Further research is needed to explore the role of assertiveness in employee development, address the scarcity of empirical data, and provide insights for enhancing organizational performance.

2.5. Conceptual framework

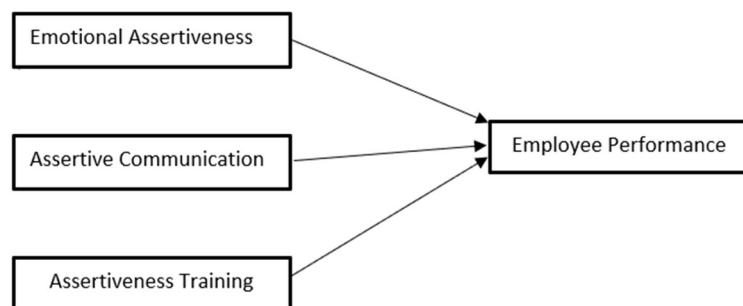


Figure 1. Emotional assertiveness, assertive communication and assertive training enhancing the employees' performances.

Source: Authors' compilation.

The conceptual framework employed in this study incorporates elements from various theories, such as assertive training, assertive communication, and emotional assertiveness, as independent variables, while worker performance serves as the dependent variable. For instance, Butt and Zahid (2015) found that emotional assertiveness positively influenced individual performance by managing stress levels during group tasks. Similarly, Maheshwari et al. (2015) conducted a study on the effects of training programs on reducing anxiety issues among employees, which resulted in improved performance. Additionally, Paudel et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of communication, particularly at managerial levels, in enhancing productivity and performance. Social exchange theory incorporates assertive communication within organizations, facilitating the exchange of thoughts and ideas without communication barriers. This theory promotes equal opportunities for all parties involved to freely express themselves while actively listening to others' perspectives. The social exchange theory is a positive challenge that is used in assertiveness, where everyone is in the same position to speak their mind freely (Poyraz, 2020). Implementing social exchange theory and assertiveness fosters harmonious collaboration in problem-solving and idea-sharing, thereby enhancing organizational performance. For instance, employees applying social exchange theory and assertiveness in emotional communication and training can better understand customers' needs and provide improved services or products. This theory plays a vital role in promoting interactions among stakeholders within organizations, shedding light on the practical implementation of assertiveness. Perhaps in organizational

settings, the social learning theory helps to understand how learned behaviors, acquired through observation, imitation, or practice, can affect performance when individuals apply these learned traits in their actions and communication. By integrating this theory into assertiveness, it guides individuals on how to socially teach and interact with one another effectively. Learning, as an ongoing process, encompasses interactions and communication through which individuals derive mutual benefits. By integrating this theory into assertiveness, it guides individuals on how to socially teach and interact with one another effectively. Learning, as an ongoing process, encompasses interactions and communication through which individuals derive mutual benefits.

3. Research method

The study involved sampling from the target population, which consisted of employees working in Chinese banks, to gather information for analysis. The selected samples were considered representative of the general population, following the principles outlined by Sharma (2017). According to Statista (2022), the number of employees in Chinese banking institutions ranged around 4.17 million individuals between 2009 and 2017. A non-probability sampling technique was utilized in this research, allowing for the subjective selection of units from the population (Sharma, 2017). This approach is commonly used in explanatory research to gather large amounts of data efficiently (Eisinga et al., 2013). The study anticipates a survey questionnaire of bank employees and managers, regardless of gender. The location of the survey will be various provinces in China, including Guangdong. This convenience sampling research is determined using Cochran's formula, whereby n seems to be the required random sample, p is indeed the proportion of prevalence of such a scenario, and E seems to be the maximum error percentage, but also z is just the number equivalent to that same required amount of assurance. Accordingly, 5% of errors are acceptable.

$$n = 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5) \times (1.96)^2 \div (0.05)^2, \text{ whereby } n = 381.$$

The appropriate sample is employed within the analysis to establish a representation of the general population. To justify this, about 381 participants were involved in the study. Hair et al. (2018) established that for statistical data to be accurate as well as apparent, there should be at least 100 questionnaires distributed. As such, the study was within this scope. Both primary and secondary sources of information can be utilized to gather data for the study. In this research, a quantitative approach will be employed, making questionnaires a reliable and effective method for data collection (Rahi, 2017). An online, self-administered questionnaire will be implemented, allowing respondents to access and complete the survey at their own convenience and uninterrupted time through web browsers (Saunders et al., 2019). The data collected from the primary source will be analyzed using the SPSS software, which is commonly used for statistical analysis. The questionnaire structure, as described by Boparai et al. (2018), was designed to be attractive and straightforward. It consisted of four sections (A, B, C, and D).

4. Analysis and discussion of results

The graphical representation reveals a significant gender imbalance within the banking sector, with a notable majority of male individuals compared to females. The male participants constituted 100% of the 381 individuals included in the study. **Table 1** also highlights that the majority of employees in the banks fell within the age range of 27 to 35 years, accounting for approximately 65.4% of the total. The next largest age group was between 22 and 26 years old, contributing around 24.9%. A very small percentage of individuals above 50 years old were observed (0.3%). In terms of educational background, the graph indicates that the highest proportion of participants were undergraduates, representing about 69.6% of the total. College-level individuals constituted around 19.9% of the participants. Regarding work experience within the banks, the study found that a significant percentage of participants had been employed for over 5–6 years, accounting for approximately 61.7% of the surveyed population. This was closely followed by those with 1–2 years of work experience, comprising around 27%.

Table 1. Demographic data.

Demographic	Categories	Frequency (n = 381)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	381	100
	Female	0	
Age	22–26	95	24.9
	27–35	249	65.4
	35–45	32	8.4
	46–50	4	1.0
	Above 50	1	0.3
Education background	College	76	19.9
	Associate degree	15	3.9
	Undergraduate	265	69.6
	Graduate	20	5.2
	Doctorate level	5	1.3
Work experience	1–2 years	103	27
	2–4 years	14	3.7
	5–6 years	235	61.7
	Above 6 years	29	7.6

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 illustrates the median of all components in the independent and dependent variables. The range of the study's average across all items is 2.55 to 3.84. The highest mean, 3.84, on the item about assertive communication helps me to increase my confidence, demonstrating its significance. The lowest mean, 2.55, is on whether my skills of assertiveness have a negative impact on my work performance.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
I am satisfied with your work performance.	1	5	3.66	1.198
My rights are heard effectively within the company to promote work performance.	1	5	3.66	1.239
My skills of assertiveness have negative impact on the work performance.	1	5	2.55	1.190
I believe that behavioral therapies on anxiety, stress, and depressed mood have great impacts on individuals' performances.	1	5	3.72	1.187
During group task, I manage stress effectively.	1	5	3.70	1.164
Assertive communication helps me to increase my confidence.	1	5	3.84	1.118
Assertive communication helps me to enhance my performances.	1	5	3.81	1.107
Individuals with good levels of self -esteem may articulate their attitude.	1	5	3.81	1.058
Interactive training benefits me by boosting my confidence.	1	5	3.77	1.121
Interactive training benefits me by minimizing my work pressure and increases my performance.	1	5	3.82	1.083
Skills training for team human mental therapy reduced anxiety and increased performance.	1	5	3.76	1.134
Interactive training benefits us by boosting our skills and performances.	1	5	3.82	1.082
My performance fulfillment, teamwork, and customer relations also benefit from effective interaction.	1	5	3.76	1.135
My reduced work shock is linked to effective communication.	1	5	3.78	1.110
Open line of communication atmosphere amongst employees promotes key performances.	1	5	3.81	1.107
Stress are all linked to poor communication skills.	1	5	3.70	1.162

4.2. Reliability test

Reliability analysis is conducted to assess the consistency and stability of variables (Sekaran and Bougie, 2019). The Cronbach's Alpha test is used to evaluate the reliability of measurements, while the reliability analysis helps determine the validity of the items (Zulkepli et al., 2017). In the pilot survey, Cronbach's alpha scores greater than 0.6 and less than 0.7 are considered acceptable, while values between 0.7 and 0.9 indicate strong reliability. Results are more reliable when they

demonstrate strong associations among the variables (Hair et al., 2018). **Table 3** reveals that the Cronbach's Alpha scores range from 0.600 to 0.781, suggesting strong reliability and conformity with the general rule of thumb that states that sixteen independent variable components and the dependent variable element are suitable for further examination.

Table 3. Reliability test.

Measurement item	Cronbach's alpha
I am satisfied with your work performance.	0.638
My rights are heard effectively within the company to promote work performance.	0.622
My skills of assertiveness have negative impact on the work performance.	0.802
I believe that behavioral therapies on anxiety, stress, and depressed mood have great impacts on individuals' performances.	0.651
During group tasks, I manage stress effectively.	0.710
Assertive communication helps me to increase my confidence.	0.690
Assertive communication helps me to enhance my performances.	0.684
Individuals with good levels of self-esteem may articulate their attitude.	0.659
Interactive training benefits me by boosting my confidence.	0.658
Interactive training benefits me by minimizing my work pressure and increases my performance.	0.767
Skills training for team human mental therapy reduced anxiety and increased performance.	0.779
Interactive training benefits us by boosting our skills and performances.	0.781

4.3. Multiple regression

The evaluation of the independent variables' impact on the dependent variable relies on the results of the multiple regression analysis in **Table 4**. The R^2 coefficient is used to determine the percentage of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables (Copper and Schindler, 2018). According to Zikmund et al. (2016), a model is considered suitable if the R^2 value exceeds 0.5 (0.714 in this case). The R^2 value takes into account the number of variables in the model to avoid overestimating the effect of adding a significant variable on the explained variability (Saunders et al., 2019). The adjusted R^2 is considered a more accurate measure of shared variation once a strong relationship between the variables is established. In this study, the multiple regression analysis yielded an R^2 value of 0.714, indicating a good fit for the model in **Table 5**. The internal consistency and robustness of the model are demonstrated by the slight variation between the R^2 value (0.714) and the R value (0.851). Furthermore, the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test indicates that each variable is independent and satisfies the multicollinearity requirement (Sekaran and Bougie, 2019).

Table 4. Coefficients.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
		B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)							
	My rights are heard effectively within the company to promote work performance.	0.501	0.050	0.518	10.050	0.000	0.284	3.523
	My skills of assertiveness have negative impact on the work performance.	0.018	0.029	0.018	0.615	0.539	0.912	1.097
	I believe that behavioral therapies on anxiety, stress, and depressed mood have great impacts on individuals' performances.	0.018	0.056	0.018	0.320	0.749	0.245	4.089
	During group task, I manage stress effectively.	0.122	0.071	0.118	1.728	0.085	0.160	6.236
	Assertive communication helps me to increase my confidence.	0.136	0.071	0.127	1.922	0.055	0.173	5.775
	Assertive communication helps me to enhance my performances.	0.002	0.079	0.002	.023	0.982	0.141	7.102
	Individuals with good levels of self-esteem may articulate their attitude.	0.074	0.073	0.065	1.009	0.314	0.180	5.554
	Interactive training benefits me by boosting my confidence.	0.132	0.077	0.124	1.708	0.088	0.144	6.954
	Interactive training benefits me by minimizing my work pressure and increases my performance.	−0.221	0.086	−0.199	−2.575	0.010	0.126	7.955
	Skills training for team human mental therapy reduced anxiety and increased performance.	0.069	0.071	0.065	0.974	0.331	0.167	5.991
	Interactive training benefits us by boosting our skills and performances.	−0.021	0.081	−0.019	−0.255	0.799	0.140	7.164
	My performance fulfillment, teamwork, and customer relations also benefit from effective interaction.	−0.007	0.074	−0.006	−0.092	0.927	0.153	6.524
	My reduced work shock is linked to effective communication.	0.071	0.079	0.066	0.901	0.368	0.142	7.038
	Open line of communication atmosphere amongst employees promotes key performances.	0.071	0.064	0.065	1.097	0.273	0.213	4.698
	Stress are all linked to poor communication skills.	−0.022	0.057	−0.021	−0.390	0.696	0.251	3.987

a. Dependent variable: 6. I am satisfied with your work performance.

Table 5. Model summary.

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate
1	0.851 ^a	0.725	0.714	0.641
a. Predictors: (Constant)				

4.4. Regression ANOVA

Examining the regression ANOVA findings, as shown in **Table 6** below, the simple linear regression criterion has been satisfied. The *p*-value for a significant link between multiple independent variables and a dependent variable has to be lower than

0.05 at the 95% degree of assurance when using the regression ANOVA statistical method (Hair et al., 2019). If the p -value is more than 0.05, the null hypothesis should not be rejected because the evidence against it is weak. The statistical significance of the variation between the supporting variables and the independent variable, as well as between the independent variables themselves, is illustrated in the table above, where the p -value is Sig. 0.000.

Table 6. ANOVA.

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	395.523	15	26.368	64.111	0.000 ^b
	Residual	150.120	365	0.411		
	Total	545.643	380			

a. Dependent Variable: 6.I am satisfied with your work performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

4.5. Discussion and findings of study

The aim reached was addressed based on the analysis by giving questionnaires to the 381 individuals working in banking industry, China. Based on **Table 7**, three hypotheses were created as a result of addressing those objectives, and they were examined further in this chapter.

Table 7. Summary of hypothesis result.

Item	Hypotheses	Significant ($P < 0.05$)	Status
H1	There is a positive relationship between emotional assertiveness and employee performance.	Sig. 0.00	Accepted
H2	There is a positive relationship between assertive communication and employee performance.	Sig. 0.00	Accepted
H3	There is a positive relationship between assertiveness training and employee performance.	Sig. 0.00	Accepted

H1: There is a positive relationship between emotional assertiveness and employee performance.

From the SPSS output in the ANOVA table, $R^2 = 0.672$, $F = 776.852$. Furthermore, Sig. = 0.000. This provides proof that there is a significant and positive relationship between emotional assertiveness and employee performance. In support of these findings, a study by Zahid and Butt (2015) suggests a positive correlation between assertiveness skills and job performance, particularly in the banking sector. Their research, conducted with bank managers, revealed a significant inverse relationship between assertiveness skills and job burnout. Similar findings were reported by Patel et al. (2018). These studies highlight the importance of assertiveness in reducing job burnout and improving employee performance. In light of the banking sector's significance in China's economy, it is crucial for managers to address job burnout and enhance employee performance by fostering emotional assertiveness. Emotional assertiveness is defined by Zahid and Butt (2015) as the ability to assert one's rights without infringing upon the rights of others. It is widely recognized as a

vital skill in various work settings, including the banking sector, for managing workplace stress. Lack of assertiveness among employees can lead to job burnout, negatively impacting commitment, productivity, and performance. One important aspect of emotional assertiveness is self-respect, which involves recognizing one's rights in the workplace and communicating with confidence. Assertiveness empowers individuals to express their thoughts and opinions confidently while respecting the rights of others. It aims to enhance individuals' self-confidence, promote open communication, and improve their ability to handle situations effectively. Studies, such as those by Seyedfatemi et al. (2013), highlighted the significant role of assertiveness in improving mental health and workplace performance. Developing assertiveness skills leads to effective communication, conflict resolution, and personal growth, creating a safe and healthy work environment. Furthermore, Montserrat et al. (2012) found a negative correlation between assertiveness and academic achievement among students, suggesting that assertiveness weaknesses may lead to poor performance in various settings. Emotional assertiveness plays a crucial role in employee performance and well-being. Employees who are more emotionally assertive tend to exhibit greater confidence, self-assurance, and effective communication, leading to improved job performance.

H2: There is a positive relationship between assertive communication and employee performance.

From the table above, a regression analysis was employed to determine the relationship between assertive communication and employee performance. F values = 516.237, $R^2 = 0.577$, and $Beta = 0.759$. The outcome of the analysis indicated $Sig = 0.000$. This provided proof that there was a positive and significant relationship between assertive communication and employee performance. Sowko et al. (2019) argue that effective communication, which requires assertiveness, is crucial for a successful company. An assertive communication style enables management to express their thoughts and opinions directly without attacking others, provide constructive feedback, offer timely praise and recognition, and create a motivational environment. Moreover, Sigroha (2021) confirms a positive association between employee performance and assertive communication. Assertive communication allows employees to express themselves effectively, respect others' needs, and find constructive solutions to conflicts without compromising their performance. It boosts self-esteem, strikes a balance between passive and aggressive communication styles, and promotes a sense of confidence and boundary respect. Nonetheless, assertive communication still positively impacts job performance, creates a positive work environment, reduces turnover, and enhances customer satisfaction. Pipas and Jaradat (2010) also support the idea that assertive communication leads to better workplace relationships, reduces stress and anxiety, and provides employees with the necessary social support to perform effectively.

H3: There is a positive relationship between assertiveness training and employee performance.

The SPSS output indicates $F = 322.359$ and $R^2 = 0.460$. Furthermore, $Beta = 0.678$. The sig. value = 0.000. This showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between assertiveness training and employee performance. The findings

indicate that there is a positive association between assertive training and employee performance. To ascertain these findings, Cantero-Sánchez et al. (2021) conducted a study on assertiveness training in relation to social learning theory for OHS environmental practitioners and found that such training increases assertiveness levels and improves job performance. The study revealed that assertiveness training was effective in the banking sector, leading to improved assertiveness and reduced social anxiety among employees at China Banking. The results demonstrated moderate effects of assertiveness training, with 50.4% of participants reporting improved assertiveness levels. Supporting these findings, Eslami et al. (2016) found that assertiveness training reduces anxiety levels and improves assertiveness. The study focused on young people and showed that assertiveness training decreased levels of depression, stress, and anxiety. Given the importance of performance in the banking sector, assertiveness training and skills are crucial. Similarly, Manesh et al. (2015) concluded that assertiveness training enhances job performance by reducing social anxiety among employees. The banking sector, including Chinese banking, is likely to benefit from reduced social anxiety resulting from effective assertiveness training. Assertiveness training equips employees with the skills to interact confidently and effectively, leading to better performance and communication with stakeholders. Another study by Maheshwari et al. (2015) evaluated the impact of assertiveness skills training on treating learners' anxiety problems, further supporting the positive effects of assertiveness training on reducing anxiety issues. The literature review reveals that assertive communication promotes harmonious information exchange with respect. Effective interaction enhances employee performance in terms of fulfillment, teamwork, and customer relations. On the other hand, poor communication skills contribute to reality shock, the intention to quit, a lack of commitment, and stress among workers. Overall, assertive communication plays a significant role in enhancing employee performance and fostering positive work environments. It encourages open dialogue, consideration of diverse perspectives, and respectful engagement, ultimately benefiting both employees and organizations.

5. Conclusion and future directions

In today's dynamic business environment, it is crucial for organizations to adapt and thrive by cultivating long-term employee performance. The analysis findings demonstrate that assertive communication, assertive training, and emotional assertiveness are significantly correlated with employee performance in Chinese banks. These findings can aid organizations in formulating effective strategies to enhance key performance indicators within the company. Moreover, they enable management to prioritize work-life balance and rewards as means to motivate and retain skilled employees, thereby avoiding the substantial costs associated with recruiting and training new personnel. Assertiveness plays a pivotal role in improving job performance, preventing workplace harassment, fostering the adoption of safe behaviors, and facilitating important decision-making concerning occupational safety and health. Particularly in the banking sector, assertiveness is vital for promoting teamwork and mitigating communication errors that could negatively impact individual job performance.

The application of regression analysis to investigate the relationship between independent factors (emotional assertiveness, assertive training, and assertive communication) and employee performance in China's banking industry has contributed to addressing a knowledge gap in the academic field. This research work serves as a valuable reference for future studies, providing a foundation for further research that explores mediating factors influencing employee performance. The results obtained can be utilized to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework for future investigations, incorporating additional variables and employing diverse research methodologies to uncover additional variations. Consequently, this study provides a solid basis and guidance for academic scholars to continue exploring new components or employing different approaches to identify further factors impacting employee performance.

The lack of assertiveness in organizational operations is identified as a key factor contributing to poor service delivery, internal conflicts, and customer loss resulting from ineffective communication skills. Therefore, organizations, including banks, should recognize the importance of employees' ability to express themselves assertively and not underestimate its impact on their work performance. The study reveals that assertiveness training among employees plays a significant role in understanding their job requirements. Additionally, employee satisfaction with assertive communication enhances their emotional connection with the organization, leading to reduced absenteeism. The findings further highlight the positive association between organization-based self-esteem and job performance among employees. Based on these insights, the authors recommend that organizations implement training sessions to promote assertive communication skills among all employees, including superiors and managers. This approach can enhance support for junior workers, increase employee commitment and performance, and reduce absenteeism in the workplace. Overall, the research findings emphasize the importance of assertive communication in improving organizational outcomes and suggest avenues for practical interventions and future research in this area. This study investigated the factors influencing employee performance in the Chinese banking industry using four variables.

However, future research should consider incorporating and exploring additional factors that may impact employee performance in both the banking industry and other financial sectors, enabling meaningful comparisons. The focus of this investigation was solely on the Chinese banking industry, and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other industries in China. To enhance the research's credibility within China, it is recommended to broaden the scope of analysis to include various sectors such as computer technology, industrial, and international business, among others. By diversifying the focus beyond a specific sector, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing talent retention can be gained. Furthermore, this study adopted a descriptive research design, which limited the duration of data collection. Expanding the data collection period and timeline would provide more comprehensive insights into employee performance.

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Article

Telework and new work practices: The role of managers

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Abstract: Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic research has primarily focused on the challenges posed by flexible working arrangements. However, there has been a lack of exploration into managers' intentions to either promote or reject remote work. This paper utilizes a TAM analysis to examine managers' attitudes and motivations towards implementing telework in a sample of European companies. Our findings reveal that this intention is largely influenced by their perception of its usefulness. Additionally, telework is more likely to be accepted when managerial teams believe that those who hold significance to them also support the implementation of flexible work practices in their companies. Our research contributes to the existing literature by considering the impact of job performance, quality of output, and digital skills on telework adoption. The results confirm that skills related to communication and team building are crucial competencies for successfully implementing telework. The ability of leaders to effectively build, motivate, recognize, and hold accountable teams in virtual environments can make all the difference.

Keywords: telework implementation; remote work; managers' attitudes; digital skills; organizational culture

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a widespread adoption of telework in the business community, as it proved to be an efficient solution for continuing work from home (Eurofound, 2022). This experience has allowed companies to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of implementing this flexible work practice on a regular basis in order to ensure that remote work does not disappear once the pandemic is over (ILO, 2021). With a significant portion of workers currently engaged in some form of remote work, there is a process underway to reshape work organizations. However, it is unclear to what extent companies plan to support further teleworking policies or prevent their expansion (Jemine, 2023).

Previous research on telework has focused on regulatory issues and the new frameworks that have emerged to address the challenges of remote work. Various topics have been explored, including access to telework, organization of working time and resource distribution, prevention of psychosocial and health risks, interaction with co-workers, and the right to disconnect (Sostero et al., 2020). Academic research has also examined the impact of telework on organizational and individual performance, highlighting both the advantages and disadvantages for teleworkers and companies (Eurofound and International Labour Office, 2017).

Mello (2007) found that successful telework initiatives are often supported by broad institutional support and by managers who understand the value of telework and have confidence in its positive outcomes. Recent studies have confirmed the crucial role of management teams in the decision to promote remote work, with telework

adoption being more influenced by leadership than technology (Beauregard et al., 2019). More recent research has provided recommendations for management, such as adapting leadership styles, implementing innovative communication methods, and finding new ways to measure teleworkers' performance. However, there is a lack of research on the factors that determine managers' attitudes towards telework.

This paper aims to contribute to previous investigations by examining the attitudes and motivations of managers and testing the influence of job relevance, output quality, and digital skills on their intention to implement telework. Our main research hypothesis is that underlying factors, such as perceptions, skills, and attitudes of managerial teams, play a significant role in their preference for promoting remote work. Building on Lee's analysis (2021), we expect that managers' attitudes and skills in managing remote work will determine the successful implementation of telework.

To achieve this goal, we conducted a data collection process and a quantitative analysis. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire and a self-administered online survey sent to a sample of entrepreneurs, CEOs, and managers from several European companies. We applied a technology acceptance model (TAM) and a Partial Least Square method to gain insight into the processes underlying the acceptance of this new work practice.

This paper is organized as follows: The first section provides a literature review, providing an overview of existing research on telework adoption and the factors influencing managers' attitudes. The second section presents the research hypotheses that guide our study. The third section describes the data collection process and statistical techniques used for analysis. The fourth section presents the results and discusses their implications. The final section presents the concluding remarks, the limitations of this investigation, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The literature on telework is extensive and varied, often presenting conflicting and inconclusive findings. The significant amount of research conducted on this topic, the challenges in comparing results, and the lack of consistent conclusions pose difficulties for both researchers and practitioners. It has even been criticized for lacking a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses all aspects of remote working (Bélanger et al., 2013).

According to Athanasiadou and Theriou (2021), most recent literature has primarily focused on the productivity and overall performance of organizations that have adopted telework or have compared teleworkers with on-site workers. In general, the literature on telework reports organizational benefits such as increased agility, improved customer service, higher productivity and efficiency through reduced absenteeism, and enhanced organizational performance (Morikawa, 2018; Silva et al., 2019). However, as stated by Gschwind and Vargas (2019), telework often develops differently among companies and countries, depending on the social and economic context. Therefore, while some of the observable advantages of teleworking for employers have been well documented (Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998; Baruch, 2000; Gibson et al., 2002), several challenges remain to be addressed from a managerial perspective. These include the well-being of teleworkers (Oakman et al.,

2020; Azzolari et al., 2021; Chung, 2022), the risk of losing the benefits of face-to-face communication, the potential difficulties in managing and monitoring employees in different locations (Greer and Payne, 2014), and the potential impact on team dynamics and interdependencies.

Research on the factors that facilitate or hinder the adoption of remote working practices has gained increasing interest and attention over time, including the role of managers and organizational culture. Previous studies have highlighted the critical role of managers in the development of teleworking. As they have the authority to approve or deny requests made by their subordinates, their reluctance to adopt this practice may hinder its implementation (Pérez et al., 2004). Additionally, managers' attitudes can significantly influence other critical factors, such as organizational support (Baker et al., 2006), communication and trust (Kowalski and Swanson, 2005), output controls (Groen et al., 2018), and organizational culture (Junça Silva and Coelho, 2022), making their involvement crucial for the successful implementation of telework arrangements.

Previous literature has also focused on the reasons for managers' resistance to telework. A few studies suggest that managers may be hesitant to adopt new work practices because they often require a change in organizational culture and overcoming technological barriers (Pyoria, 2011). The difficulty in anticipating the potential positive impacts of telework on performance may also lead to objections to its implementation, particularly among smaller companies (Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2022). Early studies have also highlighted the essential role of organizational culture and strategy. Managers' attitudes are highly influenced by the organizational context, and they may be more motivated to authorize flexible work arrangements in the context of broader organizational programs that support and legitimize their decision (Hornung et al., 2009). One of the main tensions associated with workplace flexibility arises from the contrast between supportive and unsupportive work climates (Putnam et al., 2014). As a form of flexible working, telework requires a cultural shift to be successful (Breaz et al., 2022), as organizational culture and subcultures can significantly impact work processes and interactions among employees. Therefore, new remote working practices should align with the prevailing organizational cultures and value systems to achieve a higher success rate. Additionally, Cook et al. (2014) have shown that telework is a human resources practice that must be implemented consistently with the organizational strategy. Based on these findings, managers can facilitate the preparation of workers and guide organizational culture changes that will support telework as a successful strategic intervention, fostering its perception as a standard operating procedure through which work is accomplished (Greer and Payne, 2014). Beauregard et al. (2019) conclude that some crucial organizational elements must be in place for telework to succeed, such as an organizational culture characterized by trust and openness and an objectives-based performance management system. Similarly, behavioral intention is affected by previous experiences with remote working practices, as they can reduce uncertainty and increase control over situations (Labrado et al., 2022).

Recent research has focused on the management of telework during the pandemic, including adapting leadership styles (Biron and Casper, 2021), implementing innovative communication mechanisms (Tavares et al., 2020), and

finding new ways to measure teleworkers' performance (Kim et al., 2021). Tokarchuk et al. (2021) highlight the role of organizational readiness, particularly based on institutional objectives. Green et al. (2020) emphasize the communication challenges that arise from this flexible work option, such as preventing social and professional isolation and disruptions in knowledge and information flows. Jemine (2023) confirms the critical role of managers in promoting or preventing telework and reveals the high heterogeneity in their attitudes. In addition to flexibility requirements and the provision of sufficient technology, Saragih et al. (2021) point out the need to manage employee performance by clearly setting concrete goals, reducing ambiguity, and clarifying expectations when working remotely with supervisors and team members. Organizational goal clarity critically influences interpersonal collaboration in telework (Lee et al., 2023). Knoesen and Seymour (2020) find that managers' attitudes towards telework improve after experiencing the practice, making them more likely to support this working arrangement in the organization as it can make the organization more resilient to business interruptions. Fana et al. (2020) highlight the managers' need for direct control, which is not feasible outside the firm's premises, and tends to mutate into new forms of remote control, which can be equally pervasive. However, they also observe that regular contact with managers leads to increased worker engagement and motivation. Finally, Urbaniec et al. (2022) suggest that the way a company and its employees are managed, the approach of superiors to the evaluation and control of work, and the adaptation to the real needs of employees are crucial factors in the adoption of telework.

Several studies have focused on managers' intentions to implement telework using the planned behavior approach and the technology acceptance model. These investigations are inspired by the theory of planned behavior developed by Ajzen (1991) to predict supervisors' acceptance and behavior. This theory states that if someone has a positive attitude or believes they are expected to perform a behavior, they will have the intention to do so and are more likely to exhibit the expected behavior (Da Silva et al., 2022). Consequently, the adoption of a specific technology is affected by users' attitudes, beliefs, and intentions.

In this model, managers' perceptions are evaluated to examine and understand the factors involved in the adoption of telework in their companies. The beliefs preceding behavior can be behavioral (related to an individual's positive or negative attitude), normative (related to the expectations of other people), or related to control (the individual's perception of how easy or difficult it will be to perform the behavior). Two key factors influence an individual's intention to use a new technology: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness refers to the degree to which an individual believes that using the technology will improve their performance or make their tasks easier to complete. Perceived ease of use refers to the degree to which an individual believes that using the technology will require tolerable effort. Accordingly, most previous studies predicting the intention to implement telework are based on these two critical factors, providing evidence of their positive influence (Langa and Conradie, 2003; Pérez et al., 2004; Ollo et al., 2021). Other researchers have extended the model to reveal the favorable effect of subjective norms (Morrison et al., 2019) or the influence of efficiency, controllability, and manageability (Lang

and Hofer-Fischanger, 2022). Additionally, Silva et al. (2019) included the effects of perceived compatibility, self-efficacy, anxiety, and the importance of work.

Our research complements previous studies by considering the influence of managers' skills and their perceptions of job relevance and output quality. We also explore the potential links between different factors in forming attitudes toward telework.

3. Research hypotheses

When managers and employers are faced with the decision to implement a new work practice, their behavioral intention is influenced by various factors. One of the key factors is the perceived usefulness of the practice, which is determined by the individual's belief that it will enhance their work performance. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is a well-established theory that identifies perceived usefulness as a key variable in explaining the adoption of any innovation (Davis, 1989; Ma and Liu, 2004). In the case of teleworking, it is expected that a greater perceived benefit will be a clear predictor of its adoption. Therefore, the following hypothesis is stated:

- Perceived usefulness positively influences managers' intentions to implement teleworking practices in their companies.

Previous research on the adoption of innovations has also highlighted the importance of perceived ease of use, which refers to the individual's belief that using a particular system will make their work easier (Tornatzky and Klein, 1982). Studies suggest that the perceived ease of use of telework should be considered as a facilitator of its implementation (Ollo et al., 2021). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- Perceived ease of use positively influences managers' intentions to implement teleworking practices in their companies.

From the perspective of companies, teleworking will only be considered if managers and employees perceive it as a useful and manageable way to organize their work. These perceptions will also influence the managers' attitude, which in turn may impact their intention to accept and offer teleworking (Pérez et al., 2004). Therefore, the following hypothesis is considered:

- The intention to implement telework practices positively influences their actual implementation.

In terms of the factors influencing perceived usefulness, this research focuses on the relevance of teleworking to managers' jobs, social influences, and quality of output. One of the key elements in perceiving technology as useful is its ability to help individuals perform their functions. Concerning individual motivations to implement telework, managers have often been reluctant to adopt this practice when they do not see the need for change or perceive too many difficulties in its implementation (Pérez et al., 2004). As alternative work arrangements, such as telework, place new demands on managers and make their jobs more complex, their attitudes towards telework are determined by considerations of usefulness or job performance (Lang and Hofer-Fischanger, 2022). The perception of increased complexity in managerial work may stem from the belief that employees need to be directly supervised to ensure their

performance, making supervision and coordination more difficult (Pérez et al., 2002). Several studies have also revealed managers' concerns about the productivity of employees working remotely (Manochehri and Pinkerton, 2003; Crandall and Gao, 2005). In other words, managers' attitudes towards teleworking policies are heavily influenced by their perception of their employees' level of responsibility (Stout et al., 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- Job relevance has a positive influence on the perceived usefulness of telework.

Social influences can also impact the perception of usefulness. Subjective norms refer to an individual's perception of whether important people in their life believe they should perform a particular behavior. This is based on Ajzen and Fishbein's (2005) theory of reasoned action, which suggests that attitudes alone may not be accurate predictors of behavior, and social contexts, exposure to information, and norms may have a larger influence on individuals' actions. This suggests that managers may only promote flexible work practices that they know will continue to perform well and make them look good in the eyes of their colleagues and superiors (Stout et al., 2013). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- Subjective norms have a positive influence on the perceived usefulness of telework.

The decision to facilitate teleworking is also affected by the degree to which managers trust that this work practice will allow their teams to perform their tasks effectively. Recent studies have found that managers' experience with telework has a significant impact on their confidence and perceptions of compatibility, adequacy, and results of teleworking. In general, managers with positive perceptions of their experience with telework also tend to believe that it has a positive impact on their organization (Park and Cho, 2022). This positive perception is reinforced when managers feel that telework is supported by the organization (Silva et al., 2019). Therefore, an environment with adequate information and appropriate incentives will likely drive managers to effectively support telework (Forgacs, 2010). Additionally, the acceptance of remote work will heavily depend on its compatibility with existing organizational norms and cultures (Peters and Heusinkveld, 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- Output quality has a positive influence on the perceived usefulness of telework.

Finally, the proposed model analyzes the impact of three factors on perceived ease of use: the self-confidence of management teams in their capabilities and their skills to lead and communicate in the context of remote work. These personal attributes, in addition to organizational characteristics, could be crucial for successful telework adoption and minimizing anxiety and concerns when implementing an emerging work practice.

Self-efficacy, defined as the degree to which managers consider themselves competent to perform a given task correctly, could influence telework adoption. As stated by Silva et al. (2019), managers who have confidence in their team's ability to solve any situation on their own, manage ICTs properly, and do not require supervision to perform their work perceive telework as a useful technology to implement in their functional areas. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

- A high level of self-efficacy favors the perceived ease of use of teleworking.

Managers' attitudes are also decisive as they affect the perception of organizational support, which positively influences teleworkers' job satisfaction and outcomes (Bentley et al., 2016). Previous research has shown that a more relationship-oriented behavior on the managers' side, particularly focused on communication, is crucial for telework implementation, as professional isolation negatively impacts job performance (Golden et al., 2008; Dahlstrom, 2013). Effective supervision, defined as managing results and building proactive communication policies for achieving inclusion and building trusting relationships through communication (Baruch, 2001), as well as the existence of a collaborative relationship (Ionescu et al., 2022), play a significant role in the link between telework arrangements and organizational performance.

Pearlson and Saunders (2001) noted the need to focus on teleworkers' results, clear business objectives and measures, frequent and multiple communications, and well-supported infrastructure. The coordination based on mutual trust addresses the lack of face-to-face contact and direct supervision (Golden, 2006). Performance-based monitoring through teleworking has emerged as one of the most crucial elements for its implementation, which implies adapting forms of leadership to the digital context (Vrchota et al., 2020). The deployment of telework as a new form of autonomy and self-organization for workers could be hindered by the reordering of control based on the reshaping of norms that were normally associated with the traditional workplace and with the use of traditional surveillance methods (Sewell and Taskin, 2015). This highlights the need to adapt forms of leadership to the digital context. Vilhelmson and Thulin (2016) found evidence of increased employers' willingness to permit telework, which implies that essential constraining factors associated with managers' trust, power, and control had been eased through the introduction of increasingly advanced systems for distance monitoring, supervising, and evaluating work.

Bentley et al. (2016) state that the more an individual teleworks, the more support they will need to enhance organizational outcomes. Therefore, it is expected that managers with skills in team management and communication using digital tools will find it easier to implement teleworking. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

- Skills related to team management using digital tools favor the perceived ease of use of teleworking.
- Skills related to interaction using digital tools support the perceived ease of use of teleworking.

4. Data and methods

After introducing the theoretical framework and hypotheses based on relevant literature, this section will outline the methodological stages used to analyze the main factors influencing telework adoption and validate the proposed hypotheses. As a quantitative approach was utilized, a survey instrument was designed to collect data for measuring the latent variables in the TAM model and estimating the causal relationships between them using a PLS methodology. The data collection procedure is outlined in Section 4.1, and some important descriptive statistics of the sample are provided. The survey included adapted items to ensure the validity and reliability of

the measurement model, which is discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3. The results of the PLS estimation are presented in Section 4.4, demonstrating the validity of the structural model and the statistical significance of the path coefficients used to test all proposed hypotheses. These findings are interpreted within the context of the research objectives and theoretical framework and are detailed in the conclusions section, offering practical insights and managerial implications. The methodological steps taken ensure a systematic and thorough investigation into the factors influencing telework adoption.

4.1. Survey design

To gain a better understanding of the main factors influencing managers and employers to accept and implement telework in their organizations, we designed a questionnaire based on the TAM model, as it provides a comprehensive and integrated framework for studying perceptions about the factors that lead to the intention and use of an innovation.

In order to collect empirical data from the countries participating in the Erasmus+ Working Smart Project, we conducted an online survey using a specific questionnaire. As there was no existing list of members of the target population, participants were recruited through snowball sampling. It is worth noting that participation in the survey was not financially rewarded, and respondents answered out of self-interest.

Out of the 664 people who participated in the survey, only 186 were included in the final sample after cases with incomplete questions and those not matching the targeted population were deleted. The number of participants from each country was not evenly distributed, with 51 from France, 48 from Spain, 47 from Slovenia, 25 from Italy, and 15 from Greece. In terms of sample composition, 44.1% of the respondents were women, 64.0% were over 45 years old, 85.0% had a higher education degree, 58.1% were managers, 18.3% were CEOs, and 23.6% were business owners. Additionally, the majority of responses (87.1%) came from companies with less than 50 employees.

4.2. Methods

We assessed the constructs in the model with self-report scales, all validated by previous studies. All items were measured with a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“completely disagree”) to 7 (“completely agree”). The actual implementation of telework was measured through a single observable variable (USE).

We analyzed the measurement model and tested the proposed model and hypotheses using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique and R software. PLS is particularly suitable for testing complex modeling systems and multivariate, non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2014). This is our case, since the structural model includes 34 items (associated with 9 different constructs) and one observable variable, and as shown by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.164$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), the data do not meet the multivariate normal property.

4.3. Measurement model

All Cronbach's alpha and Dillon-Goldstein's rho values exceeded the minimum required value of 0.70 (Vinzi et al., 2010). The first eigenvalues of the correlation matrix for each set of items were higher than 1, and the second eigenvalues were clearly lower than 1 (**Table 1**). These analyses led us to affirm that the internal reliability of the constructs in our measurement model was established.

Table 1. Internal reliability of the constructs.

	Number of items	Cronbach's α	Dillon-Goldstein's ρ	First eigenvalue	Second eigenvalue
E-Social skills	3	0.781	0.873	2.090	0.548
E-Team building skills	3	0.771	0.868	2.060	0.546
Job relevance	4	0.912	0.938	3.170	0.420
Subjective norms	4	0.843	0.895	2.720	0.517
Output quality	5	0.898	0.925	3.570	0.537
Self-efficacy	3	0.711	0.822	1.820	0.667
Ease of use	4	0.886	0.921	2.980	0.464
Usefulness	4	0.838	0.892	2.700	0.560
Behavioural intention	4	0.946	0.961	3.440	0.292

Item loadings on the associated constructs exceeded the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010), so that the communalities were all above 0.50. In most cases, more than 70% of the variability of the items was captured by their associated latent variables (**Table 2**). Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) values of all constructs exceeded the minimum value of 0.50. These results indicated that the convergent validity of the constructs was acceptable.

Table 2. Individual item reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model.

	Item	AVE	Weight	Loading	Communality
E-Social skills	SSK1	0.694	0.395	0.793	0.629
	SSK2		0.348	0.843	0.711
	SSK3		0.456	0.862	0.743
E-Team building skills	TSK1	0.680	0.483	0.887	0.787
	TSK2		0.259	0.731	0.535
	TSK3		0.450	0.848	0.719
Job relevance	JR1	0.792	0.296	0.910	0.827
	JR2		0.281	0.892	0.796
	JR3		0.27	0.864	0.746
	JR4		0.276	0.894	0.800
Subjective norms	SN1	0.679	0.260	0.789	0.622
	SN2		0.326	0.851	0.725
	SN3		0.257	0.772	0.595
	SN4		0.363	0.880	0.774

Table 2. (Continued).

	Item	AVE	Weight	Loading	Communality
Output quality	OQ1	0.713	0.264	0.840	0.705
	OQ2		0.222	0.861	0.741
	OQ3		0.261	0.920	0.846
	OQ4		0.194	0.744	0.554
	OQ5		0.239	0.848	0.719
Self-efficacy	SE1	0.606	0.504	0.845	0.713
	SE2		0.382	0.719	0.517
	SE3		0.391	0.766	0.587
Ease of use	PEOU1	0.746	0.296	0.888	0.789
	PEOU2		0.302	0.865	0.749
	PEOU3		0.259	0.835	0.697
	PEOU4		0.299	0.865	0.748
Usefulness	PU1	0.674	0.331	0.785	0.616
	PU2		0.262	0.770	0.593
	PU3		0.304	0.852	0.726
	PU4		0.320	0.872	0.761
Behavioural intention	BI1	0.861	0.258	0.936	0.876
	BI2		0.261	0.930	0.865
	BI3		0.287	0.916	0.840
	BI4		0.272	0.929	0.863

To examine the discriminant validity of the measures, we considered the cross-loadings of the items and the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. The loadings of each item on the corresponding construct (in bold) exceeded the cross-loadings on other constructs (**Table 3**), and the AVE of each construct was above the highest quadratic correlation of that construct with any other construct (**Table 4**). Therefore, discriminant validity was also considered acceptable.

Table 3. Cross-loadings of items.

	e-Social skills	e-Team building skills	Job relevance	Subjective norms	Output quality	Self-efficacy	Perceived ease of use	Perceived usefulness	Behavioral intention
SSK1	0.793	0.506	0.311	0.271	0.357	0.360	0.434	0.277	0.212
SSK2	0.843	0.467	0.224	0.236	0.253	0.349	0.382	0.178	0.204
SSK3	0.862	0.667	0.417	0.378	0.502	0.410	0.501	0.355	0.330
TSK1	0.679	0.887	0.434	0.327	0.540	0.471	0.590	0.365	0.329
TSK2	0.424	0.731	0.303	0.211	0.297	0.335	0.317	0.227	0.260
TSK3	0.508	0.848	0.646	0.604	0.654	0.496	0.549	0.598	0.568
JR1	0.360	0.539	0.910	0.685	0.712	0.595	0.547	0.704	0.721
JR2	0.335	0.493	0.892	0.655	0.639	0.465	0.472	0.669	0.596
JR3	0.367	0.508	0.864	0.737	0.592	0.588	0.509	0.642	0.638
JR4	0.331	0.522	0.894	0.676	0.665	0.483	0.489	0.658	0.654

Table 3. (Continued).

	e-Social skills	e-Team building skills	Job relevance	Subjective norms	Output quality	Self-efficacy	Perceived ease of use	Perceived usefulness	Behavioral intention
SN1	0.385	0.440	0.576	0.789	0.505	0.506	0.463	0.494	0.577
SN2	0.283	0.392	0.669	0.851	0.522	0.481	0.413	0.620	0.580
SN3	0.233	0.320	0.521	0.772	0.374	0.493	0.368	0.488	0.464
SN4	0.303	0.441	0.746	0.880	0.670	0.531	0.503	0.689	0.640
OQ1	0.304	0.553	0.682	0.562	0.840	0.403	0.543	0.671	0.572
OQ2	0.508	0.610	0.594	0.507	0.861	0.572	0.662	0.563	0.445
OQ3	0.474	0.593	0.712	0.611	0.920	0.462	0.575	0.663	0.558
OQ4	0.336	0.409	0.507	0.451	0.744	0.375	0.456	0.491	0.433
OQ5	0.320	0.489	0.576	0.555	0.848	0.477	0.564	0.608	0.569
SE1	0.377	0.503	0.632	0.601	0.579	0.845	0.572	0.613	0.571
SE2	0.299	0.372	0.330	0.319	0.253	0.719	0.433	0.335	0.187
SE3	0.374	0.364	0.394	0.467	0.388	0.766	0.443	0.377	0.357
PEOU1	0.419	0.535	0.527	0.548	0.607	0.579	0.888	0.579	0.497
PEOU2	0.437	0.586	0.622	0.539	0.678	0.514	0.865	0.590	0.532
PEOU3	0.521	0.460	0.303	0.294	0.484	0.480	0.835	0.375	0.315
PEOU4	0.472	0.532	0.482	0.437	0.513	0.586	0.865	0.424	0.461
PU1	0.355	0.504	0.683	0.603	0.704	0.505	0.585	0.785	0.592
PU2	0.280	0.317	0.544	0.464	0.459	0.408	0.340	0.770	0.575
PU3	0.216	0.384	0.589	0.591	0.547	0.475	0.446	0.852	0.642
PU4	0.239	0.430	0.635	0.640	0.614	0.519	0.485	0.872	0.601
BI1	0.271	0.443	0.668	0.582	0.533	0.443	0.449	0.714	0.936
BI2	0.289	0.456	0.678	0.577	0.566	0.471	0.486	0.655	0.930
BI3	0.314	0.478	0.702	0.733	0.604	0.521	0.518	0.670	0.916
BI4	0.256	0.409	0.672	0.659	0.577	0.414	0.501	0.687	0.929

Table 4. Quadratic correlation between constructs.

	E-Social skills	E-Team building skills	Job relevance	Subjective norms	Output quality	Self-efficacy	Perceived ease of use	Perceived usefulness
E-Team building skills	0.444	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Job relevance	0.153	0.335	-	-	-	-	-	-
Subjective norms	0.131	0.234	0.596	-	-	-	-	-
Output quality	0.210	0.399	0.539	0.410	-	-	-	-
Self-efficacy	0.203	0.289	0.359	0.368	0.293	-	-	-
Ease of use	0.284	0.377	0.321	0.283	0.441	0.393	-	-
Usefulness	0.111	0.254	0.564	0.498	0.513	0.342	0.329	-
Behavioral intention	0.093	0.232	0.539	0.476	0.378	0.249	0.278	0.539

4.4. Structural model

The R^2 values of the four regressions included in the main effects model exceeded the required value of 0.33 for moderate predictive accuracy (Chin, 1998); one of them

had an R^2 very close to 0.67, which implies that we obtained an almost substantial accuracy (**Table 5**).

Table 5. Model estimation.

		Coefficient	Std. Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -Value	R^2
Regresión 1						0.514
Intercept		0.000	0.052	0.000	1.000	
eSocial →	Ease of Use	0.156	0.070	2.230	0.027	
eTeam →	Ease of Use	0.297	0.074	4.000	0.000	
Self Efficacy →	Ease of Use	0.397	0.062	6.410	0.000	
Regresión 2						0.648
Intercept		0.000	0.044	0.000	1.000	
Job Relevance →	Usefulness	0.324	0.079	4.080	0.000	
Subjective Norms →	Usefulness	0.253	0.070	3.610	0.000	
Output Quality →	Usefulness	0.316	0.066	4.810	0.000	-
Regresión 3						0.556
Intercept		0.000	0.049	0.000	1.000	
Ease of Use →	Intention	0.158	0.060	2.630	0.009	
Usefulness →	Intention	0.643	0.060	10.700	0.000	
Regresión 4						0.396
Intercept		0.000	0.057	0.000	1.000	
Intention →	Use	0.629	0.057	11.000	0.000	

As the data did not follow a multivariate normal distribution, the significance of each path coefficient was tested by bootstrapping (500 resamples). Once *p*-values were calculated for all statistics, the Benjamini-Hochberg method (1995) was used to correct for alpha error ($\alpha = 0.05$) in multiple hypothesis testing. As all *p*-values are less than the corresponding correction (**Table 6**), it is concluded that the coefficients associated with all causal relationships in the model are significantly different from 0 and, therefore, that the proposed hypotheses are supported (**Figure 1**).

Table 6. Bootstrapping results.

		Coefficients (original)	Coefficients (bootstrapping)	Std. Error	<i>p</i> -Value	alpha Correction
eSocial	Ease of Use	0.156	0.157	0.071	0.028	0.050
eTeam	Ease of Use	0.297	0.298	0.070	0.000	0.039
Self Efficacy	Ease of Use	0.397	0.397	0.062	0.000	0.017
Job Relevance	Usefulness	0.324	0.324	0.083	0.000	0.033
Subjective Norms	Usefulness	0.253	0.255	0.069	0.000	0.028
Output Quality	Usefulness	0.316	0.317	0.074	0.000	0.022
Ease of Use	Intention	0.158	0.157	0.068	0.025	0.044
Usefulness	Intention	0.643	0.643	0.064	0.000	0.011
Behavioral Intention	Use	0.629	0.630	0.051	0.000	0.006

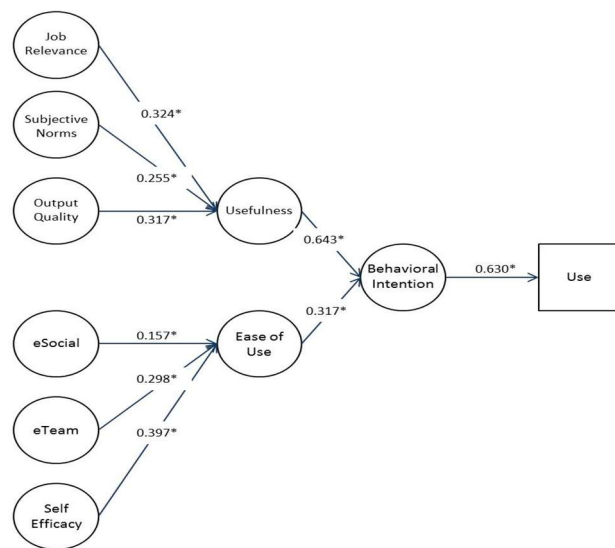


Figure 1. Coefficients of causal relationships.

* p -value < 0.05.

5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the decision to adopt telework is strongly influenced by managers' perceptions of its usefulness and ease of use. As suggested, a positive intention to implement telework practices leads to their actual implementation, validating hypotheses H1 to H3. Other factors, such as the skills, attitudes, and perceptions of employers and managers, also play a role in their preference for telework in their organizations. The study found that managers' attitudes towards telework were more favorable when they believed it would improve their job performance. Additionally, managers' positive attitudes towards telework are reinforced by their belief that it is suitable and compatible with their tasks. Consequently, hypothesis H4a is fully confirmed.

Research has verified that the organizational context affects the willingness of management teams to implement flexible working practices. When managers perceive that their organization supports telework, they are more likely to view it as important and useful for their work. One significant finding from the study is that organizational support for telework is reinforced by factors such as peer influence and role models, as suggested by Bloom et al. (2022). The implementation of telework is more acceptable when management teams perceive that their professional peers believe they should implement telework in their companies. When managers see that their role models support telework, they are more likely to implement it in their companies. These subjective norms positively influence the behavior of managers and employers. Consequently, hypothesis H4b is validated.

The data collected supports the idea that a positive perception of the impact of telework on managerial tasks leads to a perception of usefulness. Despite the challenges of objectively measuring the impact of teleworking on efficiency and productivity, the data collected in this research are clear. Previous studies have shown mixed results, depending on factors such as the amount of time spent teleworking (Illegems and Verbeke, 2004; Kazekami, 2020), level of computer skills (Bosua et al.,

2013), management practices (Bosua et al., 2018), and tasks performed by employees (Greer and Payne, 2014). Consequently, hypothesis H4c is corroborated.

Another important finding is that the decision to implement telework is influenced by managers' confidence in their ability to effectively lead and supervise a remote team. Self-confidence plays a crucial role in promoting the adoption of telework, as suggested in Hypothesis H5a. As Raghuram et al. (2003) suggest, individuals who are more confident in their ability to telework are more likely to achieve positive outcomes and proactively adapt their job responsibilities to meet the demands of telework.

As expected, competencies related to building and interacting with teams using digital tools are crucial. In the context of telework adoption, leaders must possess the ability to build, motivate, recognize, and hold teams accountable in virtual environments. According to Van Wart (2019), the capacity to build e-teams is a critical competency for effective leadership. The results obtained confirm the importance of team motivation, interaction, direct communication, accountability, and recognition, as online workers may feel less visible and valued. As noted by Bezzina et al. (2021), managers should utilize essential tools to motivate their teams to adopt remote working and encourage excellent performance from their remote locations. Hypotheses H5b and H5c were supported by the data collected.

6. Conclusions

The adoption of telework was slow before COVID-19, but the pandemic has made it difficult for firms to return to traditional forms of work organization. Workers have become accustomed to remote and hybrid work, and teleworking has the potential to significantly improve organizational performance, as suggested by Labrado et al. (2022). Business owners and managers have gained experience and are now able to assess the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking, leading to the possibility of implementing this flexible working strategy on a regular basis.

This research explores the factors influencing the adoption of telework by European managers and employers. The study delves into previously unexplored aspects, such as the impact of job relevance, output quality, and skills on managers' attitudes and motivations towards telework adoption. Our findings emphasize the significance of managers' perceptions and attitudes, adding to previous studies by demonstrating that personal attitudes, social influences, organizational culture, and contextual factors all play a crucial role in the decision-making process of management teams when considering telework adoption.

Specifically, this research sheds light on the influence of organizational culture, digital skills in communicating and managing remote teams, and subjective perceptions of usefulness, based on job relevance and output quality, on the decision to implement remote working practices. The main theoretical contribution of the paper is to reveal that managers' decision to put into practice telework is also influenced by their belief in its usefulness, its applicability to their job, and their confidence in their ability to successfully lead and supervise a remote team. Additionally, contextual factors also play a role in their motivation. Telework is more acceptable when there is

an organizational culture that supports flexible work practices and when managers and employers perceive it as important for their companies.

Our findings also show that virtual team leadership and technology-mediated communication skills are crucial for managers to feel confident in implementing telework. The ability of leaders to communicate effectively and build, motivate, recognize, and hold accountable teams in virtual environments makes a significant difference.

Regarding practical implications, this research provides valuable insights for organizations looking to implement telework policies. It emphasizes the importance of promoting team-building skills, creating facilitating conditions, and ensuring active participation from individuals in virtual teams. However, some situational factors may hinder the deployment of new work practices, such as a lack of resources required to perform the job effectively. Therefore, supervisors of flexible work arrangements should be well-equipped to respond to these changes and manage them effectively for the benefit of both individuals and the organization. Our findings also highlight the need to consider the motivations and abilities of individuals when introducing new environments, job responsibilities, and career prospects.

However, this investigation has some limitations. Most significantly, a wider sample of managers would be necessary to make the findings more generalizable and applicable to other contexts. Additionally, the use of cross-sectional data to predict intentions and behaviors makes it methodologically difficult to establish the future evolution of causal relationships between variables. Future research should also consider a longitudinal study design to analyze how perceptions change over time. Furthermore, the influence of other competencies, apart from e-communication and e-team building, should also be studied.

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Article

Building resilient leadership: A study exploring leadership development during uncertainty

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Abstract: Effective small and medium enterprise (SME) leadership demands creative solutions to ensure organisations survive and thrive during the turbulent times that COVID-19 continues to bring. This paper explores how SME leaders (in micro and small organisations) prioritise and access the skills and development needed to provide effective and sustainable leadership to organisations, focusing on the role of resilience and the benefits it provides. Participants were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling. Online surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted and provided qualitative data that contributes to an understanding of the role of resilience and the view of participants as to what is needed to effectively respond to a dynamic environment. Evidence shows that SME leaders prioritise learning and development opportunities that provide demonstrable benefits throughout the organisation. Building business resilience remains a fuzzy concept; however, viewing resilience as a multi-level construct offers benefits when designing and delivering development opportunities. It has been found that networking, partnerships, and relationship building promote resilience and may offer a solution to how to embed resilience building into development opportunities that SME leaders value and wish to engage with. This article contributes by illustrating and exploring leadership development within SMEs during a period of unexpected and untested uncertainty. The pandemic caused major shock waves within business communities, and SMEs were significantly affected. The research is limited in that it is expected to be a once-in-a-lifetime event, and as such conditions may not be replicable, learning opportunities for other ‘shock’ events are possible. The findings of this paper have relevance to practice in that, while the event may be one-off, shocks to the business environment are not.

Keywords: leadership; SMEs (small medium enterprise); learning and development; resilience

1. Introduction

There has been much consideration, research, and writing regarding the leadership challenge since March 2020, when the UK (United Kingdom) faced the first COVID-19 lockdown and the world began to seek answers to the challenges that the pandemic brought. While it may be accepted that the leadership requirements of the current environment may be different from those required in years gone by, are the drivers of these new leadership requirements actually something new and unprecedented? This paper views the leadership requirement as not being as radical or diverse as has been suggested, but rather that the world and the economic landscape have always faced change and disruption. The world has faced war, natural disasters, and numerous man-made crises throughout the centuries that have resulted in disruption, change, and impact on daily lives. While this research acknowledges the

global impact of the pandemic, it also recognises that various sections of the global population have previously experienced significant disruption and developed strategies to manage such disruption. By viewing disruption as unplanned change and accepting that successfully managing change is an integral part of leadership, the perspective of the leadership requirement is narrowed, and the contribution of resilience as a key skill can be considered.

Therefore, if leadership can adopt the perspective of an ever-changing environment as the norm, then the focus required is one that encourages a consideration of what lessons were learned from the key events of the past and how leaders can equip themselves, building resilience, to meet the challenge of the VUCA world. It is widely recognised that effective leadership within SMEs positively influences organisational outcomes; however, what is less certain is the skillset required of leaders to be 'effective' and respond to the complexity of the contemporary business environment. This research identifies the impact of on-going challenges for SME business leaders in the North of England and considers the increased need for a responsive skillset to address these challenges. It was reported that 3.7 million SME owners experienced stress during the first 12 months of the pandemic, with 3.3 million suffering from anxiety and 1.8 million having depression (Simply Business, 2021). The local government agency (LGA) and the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) (Public Health England, 2021) reported similar short-term impacts with recommendations that mental health be considered in designing service responses to the pandemic.

Business leaders were required to provide creative solutions to ensure businesses survived the turbulent times that COVID-19 brought and continues to bring. This paper provides insight into how SME leaders (in micro and small organisations) prioritise and access the skills needed to provide effective and sustainable leadership to organisations. The importance of a thriving SME sector within economies is critical to economic health and prosperity. This empirical study provides a lens into the SME sector and asks, "What skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times."

2. Literature review

This review of the literature considers the challenges of delivering effective leadership development that produces sustainable and effective leadership. Leadership training is focused on developing "members to effectively engage in leadership roles and processes (Day, 2000, p. 582, cited in Lacerenza et al. (2017)), and this literature review will consider leadership development and training rather than management training. The managerial, practical nature of leading a SME and the mix of managerial and leadership tasks involved (Kotter, 1990) are recognised, as is the distinction between managerial and leadership development. The review will consider perspectives on effective leadership, leadership training and development, and how leading a SME may produce distinct challenges and provoke debate when considering the traditional view of leadership development. The requirement for resilience at multiple levels within organisations is discussed, with a focus on what qualities and skills may contribute to resilience.

2.1. Effective and sustainable leadership in 2023 and beyond

SMEs provide employment for three-fifths of the UK private sector and account for around half of all UK economic turnover (Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, 2021). However, this valuable sector was disproportionately affected by the pandemic, with more SMEs forced to pause or cease trading than larger businesses (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, it is widely reported that many SMEs fail within the first 12 months of trading, suggesting a low level of success and sustainability in responding to change that may be influenced by the skillset present in management and leadership (Imran and Aldass, 2020). The requirement to meet the challenges that SMEs face demands that leaders of these organisations to be adaptive and flexible to effectively respond to a rapidly changing environment (Husti and Mahyarni, 2019).

Effective leadership during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown was found to demonstrate authenticity, provide vision, and deliver a shared purpose through a collaboration that harnessed the skills and abilities within the organisation (Walsh and Johnston, 2022). Kotter (1990) observes that effective leadership is viewed as the ability of leaders to facilitate “adaptive change” (p. 5) and the moving of people to a place where the impact is favourable for those affected, ensuring that others are not negatively affected by these actions. Effective leaders create vision and can encourage and empower the members of an organisation to commit to that vision (Conger, 1999), and by doing so, effective leadership increases the commitment, motivation, and performance of the workforce (Lowe et al., 1996). The creation and communication of vision and the impact of this shared vision on performance are viewed as effective leadership by Drucker (1985). SME leaders, often referred to as entrepreneurs, create organisations from their own creativity, ideas, passion, and drive and are often viewed as innovators or problem-solvers, which correlates to many of the perspectives on leadership that research has provided. Drucker (1985) viewed entrepreneurship as innovation that invests in existing resources to create new wealth-making capacity (Fontana and Musa, 2017).

While entrepreneurship and leadership are used interchangeably to describe the qualities of a SME owner, according to a view shared by Vecchio (2003), entrepreneurial leadership is a specific style of leadership that presents as “a combination of entrepreneurial approach... with the capability... to deal with vulnerable market situations” with their response to change being found to be higher than other leadership styles (Imran and Aldass, 2020, p. 380). The ‘hands on’ nature of leading an SME reflects many of the qualities of entrepreneurial leadership; therefore, SME leaders could be viewed as possessing an organic mix of skills present in managerial leadership and entrepreneurial orientation leadership (Musa and Fontana, 2014).

A dynamic and demanding environment requires leadership that can adapt and flex to respond to the challenges that are presented. However, evidence suggests that this may prove challenging, with over half of leaders (54%) only ever implementing one style of leadership regardless of the demands of the situation, organization, or changing environmental context (Blanchard, 1997, cited in Price-Dowd (2020)). While the research of Blanchard could be considered pre-pandemic or dated, it is

pertinent to restate the view of this paper that a VUCA world is not confined to a post-pandemic environment.

However, when the environment is evolving and responding, the challenges are unknown, and organisations and individuals must begin to identify a skillset that may respond effectively. An effective leader is required to respond (and to respond again) as the wider environment demands.

2.2. The need for resilience in uncertain times

Definitions of resilience offer explanations that include buoyancy, the ability to spring back, rebound, and the ability to recover and return to an original state, and therefore it has become a much sought-after commodity for leaders and organisations. It appears that ‘the quest for resilience’ (Hamel and Välikangas, 2003) could return a valuable treasure, but the question remains: what is resilience, is it innate or can it be developed, and if so, where can it be found? Bhamra et al. (2011) define resilience as the capability to return to a stable state after disruption. It is suggested that resilience can be built using networks, relationships, and interactions and therefore can be developed through established strong and meaningful connections with others that are built selectively and take time (Cross et al., 2021).

As part of a wider endeavour to introduce ‘positive organisational behaviour’ Luthans explores confidence, hope, and resilience in his paper ‘The need for and meaning of positive organizational behavior’ (2002), arguing both its relevance and potential for effective leadership and acknowledging the capacity of resilience to deal with adversity, uncertainty, and change (p. 702). Furthermore, it is identified that resilience can offer effective responses to the ‘fuzzier’ (p. 702) environment through “social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future” (Benard, 1991, p. 7). However, the work of Benard (1991) was intended to inform prevention strategies in children and young people and so raises questions regarding the ‘learning’ of resilience and how, as adults, these skills and competencies can be acquired if they are not already present. However, what may be clearer is the observation that resilience is considered a skill required in response to events, situations, and changes. Resilience may be considered a crucial component of a leadership contingency toolkit, presenting further opportunities for sustainable and effective leadership in the workplace when the capacity to ‘bounce back’ (Luthans 2002, p. 702) is required. Alongside this is the leadership crisis wheel (Walsh and Johnston, 2022), which identifies authenticity, ethical practice, and leadership by example as key components during times of uncertainty.

Resilience is required (and is arguably more effective) at an individual, socio-ecological, and organisational level, creating a multi-level framework that promotes resilient behaviours in employees that improve outcomes at each of the levels (Visser and Jacobs, 2019, p. 4). This offers a pragmatic solution to the acquisition of resilience in leaders, as resilience is being developed and improved within the leader, within the organisation and within the wider environment, therefore offering multiple levels of resilience to draw from should one level be weaker due to challenge and circumstance. Greene et al. (2002) suggest that the relationship between organisational and individual resilience is formally arranged and that organisations that display resilience

employ resilient individuals to create a culture that responds effectively to change and uncertainty. Furthermore, by influencing individuals and immersing them in a resilient culture, it is suggested that their leadership development is positively impacted and resilience is fostered (Ledesma, 2014).

2.3. Leadership development, skills, and learning

The positive impact of implementing a multi-level approach to resilience has been explored in the previous section (2.2) within this review; however, when considering how leadership development and learning can be implemented, further exploration of elements of a multi-level approach is necessary. The value and significance of support networks and developing resilient cultures must be considered when designing opportunities for leaders to learn (Ledesma, 2014). Learning can be found through collaboration and partnerships that not only promote resilience but also reduce feelings of isolation, hardship, stress, and failure, therefore producing positive and sustainable outcomes for individuals (leaders) and the organisations (Ledesma, 2014), thus contributing to the development of organisational culture.

Organisations are increasingly investing in leadership training and development opportunities (Gibler et al., 2020; Ho, 2016), and whilst many perceive these training opportunities and programmes as ineffective, there is evidence to suggest that this perception may be inaccurate and that most leadership training provided leads to improvements and positive outcomes at organisational, individual, and subordinate levels (Lacerenza et al., 2017, p. 1707). Furthermore, the research from Lacerenza et al. (2017) provides eight evidence-based best practices for “Designing a Leadership Training Program” (p. 1704) that include the acknowledgement that development should not be viewed as training because effective leaders develop rather than are trained, and highlight the importance of consultation to ensure the relevance of the programme matches and meets the needs of the leaders, therefore avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. (Lacerenza, 2017, p. 1704).

Delivering bespoke leadership development programmes is not without challenges, as it suggests a higher level of resource investment from organisations. There are also implications for how training needs are identified and the use of training needs analyses to identify the needs and seek a programme able to align with those needs (Arthur et al., 2003). There is little research available that provides insight into who identifies needs and if tension exists between the priorities and preferences of organisational and individual needs. If such tension is present, consideration is required as to the implications of such decision-making. However, if a multi-level response can be woven into the analysis of needs, this has the potential to reduce tension in identifying needs and improve individual and organisational alignment through improved communications and alignment of expectations.

Much leadership development research has adopted a functionalist perspective, which seeks to identify how development opportunities can improve both individual (leader) and organisational effectiveness (Carroll, 2019). Leaders are formal and legitimate, appointed within an organisation that assumes that by improving skills, competencies, and abilities, the leadership function will more greatly affect and positively impact, with leadership development notably defined as “an expansion of a

person's capability to be effective in a leadership role and process" (Van Velsor et al., 2010, as cited in Kjellstrom et al. (2020, p. 437)). The development of entrepreneurs and SME leaders requires a broader consideration beyond the formal parameters of the functionalist perspective. It becomes necessary to consider the context and complexities that may be present in the diverse SME community, including the industry sector, available resources, access to funding and support, and the need for the SME owner to benefit from understanding and identifying their own learning needs and preferences.

2.4. The significance of resilience in mental health wellbeing

In 2020, as the UK entered the first lockdown, it was reported that business owners and entrepreneurs were struggling to mentally deal with the impact of COVID-19 (Van Bortel et al., 2021). These findings are unsurprising when considering several publications in the British Medical Association (BMA) that highlighted the potential consequences of the impact of COVID-19 on the general population, with many people developing mental health symptoms and illnesses for the first time in 2020. The UK government made a range of financial resources available to support organisations within the business community in March 2020; however, it took longer for support to be offered to those whose mental health was impacted by the changes that were covered in 19. YouGov opened a survey in March 2020, with over 4000 participants taking part in regular and repeated surveys. The YouGov survey reported that a third of all participants were worrying regularly about finance and debt, with 'middle-aged participants' expressing the most concern about their financial situation (Van Bortel et al., 2021). Of those whose mental health was affected during this time, 3.7 million SME owners experienced stress in the first year of COVID-19 restrictions, 3 million reported anxiety, and 1.8 million experienced depression (Simply Business, 2021). Similar impacts were also reported by research conducted by the Local Government Agency and Public Health England (2021).

A lack of resilience has been "associated with burnout and other health problems" (Visser and Jacobs, 2019, p. 4) and compassion fatigue (Rees et al., 2015), establishing the relationship between the absence or lack of individual resilience and negative outcomes for mental health wellbeing. A strong link between well-being and productivity in SME workers was reported by Chowdhury et al. (2021), who found increased job satisfaction resulted in increased productivity. 82% of SME owners reported mental health issues similar to those within their workforce; however, SME leaders were reluctant to seek support, with the reluctance emerging from self-perceptions of decreased value, weakness, and incompetence (Calvert and Tehrani, 2021). Other factors that present a barrier to accessing appropriate support that may be relevant to this paper include technological barriers and being ill at ease with using phone and online sources of support. De Angelis et al. (2020) discuss the EU's H2020 H-Work project's aims of promoting mental health to SMEs recognising the lack of resources available to SMEs can make them the most susceptible for mental health wellbeing issues. The EU H2020 H-Work Project provides multi-level interventions for mental health and public organisations and SMEs (H-Work, 2023), reporting

benefits in implementing support through a multi-level response that combines theoretical knowledge with practical solutions (De Angelis et al., 2020).

A multi-staged approach to mental wellbeing is also offered by the work of Cinar and Bilodeau (2022) and delivered through the creation of a 5-staged Resilience and Agility Building model for Health and Mental Wellbeing (Cinar, 2021). This research considers the requirement for wellbeing, agility, and resilience to be intertwined and presents the findings of Cinar (2021), who offers self-awareness, self-management, lifestyle management, social awareness management, and a high level of fulfilment as the five elements required for building resilience and agility. Of interest to this research is the acknowledgement that learning and development must be sustainable and tailored, with 'mental resilience and agility' delivered through collaboration and inclusivity recognised as being effective in responding to 'unexpected and complex' events (Cinar and Bilodeau, 2022), which is pertinent in 2023 and beyond.

Research by Jayawardana and Gannon (2021) into the Australian Better Access Initiative Programme provides an insight into the issues surrounding the use of technology and the different preferences of differing demographic groups when accessing services, which is of interest to this research paper. The research found a variance in the uptake of appointments that related to gender, age, and geographical area differences, and while further research into these variables would be beneficial, what is implied is that differences are present and have an impact on engagement with services. A clear and current insight into these preferences resulting from consultation would increase the likelihood of successful engagement with support and development opportunities and therefore provide a valuable insight into a contributing factor for how leaders may prioritise opportunities for development and support and understanding "what skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times."

2.5. Conclusion

As such, the literature suggests that it is important to recognise the ongoing and ever-evolving nature of turbulence and change. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while catastrophic in many ways, was and is another period of turmoil and instability that impacted the business environment. Born out of it remains a need to consider sustainability, resilience, and well-being within organisations. The need to adopt a multi-level approach is well highlighted, as are mechanisms to support the development of leaders and leadership in SMEs.

This paper addresses the recognition of this need to understand how this is achieved within the SME environment.

3. Methods

This small-scale, exploratory research sought the opinions and views of small medium enterprise (SME) owners (also referred to as leaders for the purpose of this paper) in Northern England to inform a planned delivery of support services to the SME owners by local partnership agencies. The partnership between a unitary authority council and a local university was created to identify the needs of small business owners and deliver a bespoke range of support services, including a wellbeing

offer, to the SME community. The data was collected during a three-month period in the spring of 2021, a year after the first UK pandemic lockdown. The research design of this paper is influenced by the recognition and understanding of the unprecedented circumstances that influence the research and the research question:

“What skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times.”

Furthermore, the following issues are of significance and have influenced the design of the research: the ongoing restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 global pandemic in the UK, including social movement restrictions and legislation; the diverse range of challenges and priorities for a diverse range of SMEs (Bacon and Hoque, 2005); the requirements of the research funding organisation, and the range of development opportunities available that could be delivered online or as a hybrid model of delivery.

A qualitative, interpretivist approach is adopted, offering the opportunity to understand “real-world settings” (Patton, 2002, p. 39) and reflecting the importance of the participants experiences and the context in which the research is conducted. Numeric data is collected to establish an understanding of the key characteristics of the SME owner, such as the age and gender of the participant. The purpose of this data is to provide context and background to the research findings, and while the research may be considered mixed-methods in design, it is firmly rooted in an interpretivist approach and the development of an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The value of this approach is best summarised as allowing us to “focus not just on ‘what’ but on ‘how’” (Teti et al., 2020, cited in Vindrola-Padros (2020)).

Two semi-structured interviews were held online (via Teams) with key members of staff within two of the gatekeeper organisations. These participants were identified by the formal position that they held within each of the gatekeeper organisations (for example, coordinator or manager). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews encourage a retelling of the participant's story and provide insight into their knowledge (Demarrais, 2004).

The SME sector is diverse, and there are a broad range of variables to consider when attempting to categorise organisations. This research has collected data from a range of businesses that are early stage innovative, established early start-ups, or established businesses, which are all locally focused and considered micro (less than 10 employees) or small (less than 50 employees) businesses within the SME sector (Albaz et al., 2020).

A purposive, snowballing approach (Goodman, 1961) was adopted to enable the online survey, containing a mix of quantitative and qualitative, to be delivered through three gatekeeper organisations that distributed the survey to their members via email. Each of these gatekeeper organisations provides membership services to entrepreneurs and small business owners through a programme of support, guidance, and networking. This approach aimed to be effective in managing the limited resources available while reaching a targeted audience and offering a high level of anonymity to participants, which is of significance when researching potentially sensitive topic areas (Parker et al., 2019).

Online surveys have success when the questions being asked can be potentially sensitive to the participants, and this method was chosen as it can result in higher

participation (Wright, 2005). The survey was designed to capture the lived experiences and opinions of the participants during a challenging and emotive time in many people's lives. Therefore, care was taken to ensure that questions were clearly worded to avoid leading participants, reduce the capacity for any misinterpretation, and ensure that the expectations of participants regarding the purpose of the research and the intended outcomes were managed. While the use of a gatekeeper provided participants with potential reassurance regarding their anonymity when taking part in research regarding their mental health and wellbeing, it also presented challenges to the recruitment of the sample. However, this method restricted the ability to encourage take-up of the survey and may have contributed to the low rate of completed surveys. However, the survey approach was designed to produce rich qualitative data and enable the sharing of experiences, so the design remains both suitable and beneficial. The credibility of data findings is increased using multiple data sources (surveys and interviews), contributing to accuracy and a truthful reflection of the findings (Yin, 2003).

The data collected from the two semi-structured interviews and 45 survey participants was analysed to provide valuable insight into the research question, "What skills and development do leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times." The initial findings were shared with the funders according to the agreed-upon prompt time limits to facilitate an appropriate and responsive range of services to be offered to the SME community within the local geographical area.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data sets to identify themes and patterns that were relevant to the overall research aim, seeking links between the variables (such as age and gender) and the data provided. The interview and survey story data were also analysed using a thematic approach with consideration for the prominent issue raised by Braun and Clarke (2006) regarding the creation of themes with reference to size or frequency. This research adopts a flexible approach to the determination of themes and seeks to provide themes rooted in the significance of the data rather than the prevalence.

4. Findings

The purpose of this research was to discover "what skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times" by implementing an online survey for SME owners and conducting two interviews with staff members of gatekeeper organisations. The following section presents the findings of the online survey, and this data is represented by the code SME, followed by a number (SME 1, SME 2, and so on), when the survey participants have chosen to share their stories and experiences through providing answers to open-ended questions included in the survey. The code G1 or G2 is used to identify the data provided from the two semi-structured interviews.

4.1. Participant characteristics

Of the 45 survey respondents, 59% identified as male and 41% identified as female. Participants were invited to identify their age using age banding that reflected some of the funding opportunities available to business startups, with 1 participant

identifying as belonging to the 18–30-year-old group. 23% of participants were from the 31–45-year-old band, and over half (53%) were aged 46–60 years. Almost a quarter (23%) of the participants were over 60 years old.

Participants were then asked to identify the industry that best represented their business. Service organisations made up almost half of the data returned, and retail accounted for a third of responses. Hospitality was 11%, and leisure businesses made up 7%. G2 confirmed that the “majority of members (participants)... a high percentage” employ others.

Participants were invited to identify what had motivated them to be self-employed (to lead an SME), and the results are shown in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Motivation for running own business.

My skills, qualities and experiences influenced me to run my own business	27% (30)
I have always wanted to run my own business	20% (22)
I am self-employed because it fits with my work life balance	19% (21)
I am self-employed because it allows me creativity	18% (20)
I haven't really thought about why I am self-employed, it is just 'what I do'	7% (8)
It was the only opportunity available to me, with my skills, in the local job market	3.5% (4)
I am self-employed because my family commitments require it	3.5% (4)
I am self-employed because I am unable to access available and/or affordable childcare	1.75% (2)

4.2. Mental health wellbeing

The survey asked if, in the previous 12 months, the participants had experienced any mental health issues because of the changes that COVID-19 brought. The question offered the following suggested changes: appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood. 69% of respondents stated they had experienced a mental health or wellbeing issue.

66% of respondents reported that the mental health or wellbeing issue had impacted aspects of their working lives, such as their ability to work, their ability to support colleagues and/or employees, their concentration, and their motivation. G2 said that the leaders have “concerns about employees mental health... and at no point refer to their own mental health... you are way down the list... it's about keeping the show on the road”.

4.3. Working lives during a pandemic

Participants were invited to share aspects of their stories, and the survey asked, ‘Tell us about the issues affecting your working life that you have experienced as a result of COVID-19’.

SME1 runs a consulting business and shared that “I have of course pivoted and developed innovative new products, but... there has been no real help... there is no let-up as I have to keep going”.

SME2 reported that their managerial judgment had become “clouded” because of stress and “emotional swings” which had resulted in “difficult decisions with staff... being unable to support my manager fully or in a timely manner”.

Other participants reported issues with “focus,” “feelings of or being overwhelmed,” “uncertainty” and “juggling responsibilities.”

However, some participants had stories of optimism to share, with SME3 reporting that “resilience helps me find a way forward, and things now are very much brighter”. SME4 shared, “I chose ‘to get rid of the old’ and so have a new website, and new printed material... I took the three lockdowns as opportunities to clear out and sort through my business, which had COVID-19 not happened, I would not have been able to do. Always look for the positives, particularly in negative situations! Perhaps that’s why I didn’t experience mental health issues.” G2 reported that some of their membership “within a period of 3 days (in March 2020)... they had pivoted and diversified” and that the sector had demonstrated “huge amounts of creativity.”

SME5 acknowledged the demands of running an SME without additional challenges of COVID-19 and said, “Running your own business is immensely stressful, and it’s not easy to apportion responsibility for diminished wellbeing to just COVID-19.”

4.4. Accessing support

Participants were asked, “Have you sought mental health support during the last 12 months for issues relating to, or because of, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic”. 91% of all respondents said they had not sought support, and only 9% (representing 4 participants) had sought mental health support for issues relating to appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood.

G1 explained that SMEs and entrepreneurs often face a range of barriers to accessing support that can be complex and “often more complicated than a larger business... there is an attitude towards then that increases the pressure, as there is a presumption that they (SMEs and entrepreneurs) don’t have the big challenges that big business does,” when the reality can be that they have fewer resources, time, and support and access to specialist support than larger businesses. G1 also expressed that many of the entrepreneurs they had talked with were “resigned to the difficulties after six months... and lived under pressure for so long...”. This view was shared by G2, who shared a story of a SME leader who had chosen not to access support for a situation because they prioritised the needs of the business and suggested that leadership development in SME leaders requires a recognition that there needs to be “an investment in self to invest in the business”.

4.5. Identifying development and support

Participants were invited to select from a range of support services that they would be interested in accessing, and they were able to select more than one service. The total responses are shown in **Table 2** below and show that acquiring new business skills such as diversification training, digital marketing, and data analytics was the highest priority for 26.32% of responses. In contrast, counselling, stress management, and anger management, all services that directly focus on providing emotional support services, received a combined response of almost 16%.

Table 2. SME owners self-selected development needs.

Business skills e.g., digital marketing, data analysis, marketing, diversification, mentoring employees	26.25% (15)
1 to 1 mentoring	22.75% (13)
Coaching	21% (12)
Group Work and Support	12.25% (7)
Counselling	8.75% (5)
Stress Management	7% (4)
Anger Management	0% (0)
Other (not specified)	1.75% (1)

This finding was supported when talking with G1, who reported that despite the fact that “people who ask for support do better in business,” many entrepreneurs do not view the support available as “for them” and instead view development and training opportunities as something that “executives and the c-suite” engage in. G1 also suggested that participants may not recognise their experiences as ‘stress’ and instead “may identify fatigue and certain troubling issues but not necessarily identify them as stress”. G1 was asked how engagement with support and development opportunities could be encouraged, and the use of third-party intermediaries was suggested, such as accountants, business growth advisors, and groups such as the Federation of Small Business. In the words of G1, “get others to sell it” and focus on how it will benefit the business, something that will improve their business - “a bottom-line benefit”. G2 discussed how their gatekeeper organisation had been able to offer business coaching to the membership and said that “we had 12 out of 210 members take up free business coaching over a 9-month period.”

Participants were then invited to contribute anything that they felt would be useful to aid understanding of what may be required to support SME and the impact of the pandemic on working lives. SME 6 shared, “Access to business/networking/introduction etc. There are too many coaching/unhelpful webinars around when what we need is to get access to people who want to get work done.”

5. Discussion

5.1. SME leader characteristics

While the gender and age of the participants in the sample are not explored in depth as part of this research, it is recognised that differences in training and development needs may exist that may be attributable to gender. Previous research has indicated that gender is one of the variable factors that can impact the uptake of online services (Jayawardana and Gannon, 2021) and is identified as a key consideration when discussing learning and development delivery methods.

The participants are leaders in SMEs that offer goods and services (the range of services is diverse and can include accounting, finance, personal trainer and fitness coaching, dog walking, and many more), run retail outlets, hotels, bed and breakfasts/guest houses, pubs, cafes and restaurants, and events and experience organisations. The training needs within each of these businesses may be considered diverse due to the nature of the organisation. The research question considers the skills

needed to lead these organisations in uncertain times, and so while the data is useful to provide context and an overview of the participant characteristics and confirm the diversity and complexity of the organisations that make up the SME sector (Bacon and Hoque, 2005), it will not be discussed in depth. Service organisation leaders made up almost half of the survey data returned, and retail leaders accounted for a third of the survey responses. Hospitality organisations returned 11% of the survey data, and leisure businesses made up the remaining 7% of the survey data.

All survey participants were asked about their motivations for ‘running their own business.’ The question was developed following comments made by G1 in their interview. G1 had discussed the complexity of the reasons that people choose to become self-employed and that, because of some of these motivators, not all entrepreneurs view themselves as leaders. The question was not phrased to include leadership or entrepreneurship to avoid leading the participants responses. The question invited respondents to select all that apply, and of the 45 total respondents, two-thirds (30 participants) felt that the skills, qualities, and experiences that they had influenced them to run their own business. 22 participants stated they had always wanted to run their own business. These findings contribute to the work that considers the importance of understanding leadership style, developing one’s own understanding of leadership when leading, and the implications this has for personal development (Price-Dowd, 2020).

Leaders that can recognise and candidly identify their skillset demonstrate an awareness of the importance of leadership style and delivery that could be considered important in meeting both organisation and individual needs. Knowing who leaders are and developing an understanding of how this approach to leadership impacts those around us could be considered a key skill in contemporary organisations (Price-Dowd, 2020, p. 166), with research suggesting that over half of leaders (54%) only ever implement one style of leadership regardless of the demands of the situation, organisation, or environmental context (Blanchard, 1997, cited in Price-Dowd (2020)). A pragmatic view of self, competencies, and leadership skills may have implications for the development of resilience (Benard, 1991) and multi-level resilience (Visser and Jacobs, 2017) through the consideration that individuals who possess self-efficacy and social awareness may also have the capabilities to develop resilience.

5.2. Resilience, mental health wellbeing and working lives during the pandemic

Asking participants to share their experiences of their working lives during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic hoped to identify skills shortages through a process of self-identification. Mental health and wellbeing issues were narrowed further to include appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood, in addition to the more recognisable issues of stress, depression, and anxiety. 69% of respondents stated they had experienced a mental health wellbeing issue, which reflected the findings of research discussed earlier in this paper and within the literature review (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). 66% of respondents reported that the mental health or wellbeing issue had impacted aspects

of their working lives, such as their ability to work, their ability to support colleagues and/or employees, their concentration, and their motivation. Participants had stories of optimism to share with SME3 and SME4, who both reported positive stories that included references to “looking for the positives” and “resilience helps me”. There was also an acknowledgement that, with or without the presence of a pandemic “Running your own business is immensely stressful, and it’s not easy to apportion responsibility for diminished wellbeing to just COVID-19.”

Some of the positive responses returned to this question suggest the presence of resilience in some of the participants and will be discussed further in Section 5.3 that follows. These findings have significance for considering the training needs of the SME leader. It is not suggested that training or development can prevent mental illness or ill-health, but rather that development opportunities may exist that are able to incorporate elements of well-being and self-care activities that reduce stress and promote mental health wellbeing and resilience. Furthermore, as discussed in the research presented by Cinar (2021), a staged approach to developing personal competencies, crucial to the development of resilient and agile leadership, suggests that offering multiple development opportunities may be beneficial. These findings support the work of Cinar and Bilodeau leaders, who found that sustainable, tailored learning and development can be viewed as effective in meeting the needs of leading in uncertain times.

5.3. Accessing and identifying leadership development and support

A small proportion of participants expressed views, stories, and opinions that suggest the presence of individual resilience, a view shared by G1, who discussed that many SME leaders live with pressure as part of their daily lives and believed that many SME leaders prioritised the needs of the business before their individual needs, recognising the challenge of ensuring that leaders see the benefit of an “investment in themselves to invest in the business.” If resilience is viewed as the ability to bounce back and return to a stable state after disruption (Bhamra et al., 2011), these findings suggest some SME leaders possess individual resilience, which is demonstrated through their responses to daily pressures and challenges. Indicated in these findings is a reluctance to seek support from others, which has implications for the development of organisational resilience and multi-level resilience. SME leaders who choose not to seek support opportunities therefore face greater barriers to establishing the meaningful connections (Cross et al., 2021) that can form the basis of developing a multi-level resilience that is beneficial to the leader, the organisation, and the employees.

Participants were invited to select from a list of courses that would be available to them to support them in developing business resilience. The list provided included: business skills, e.g., digital marketing, data analysis, marketing, diversification, mentoring employees, 1 to 1 mentoring, coaching, group work and support, counselling, stress management, and anger management. When participants were asked to identify support and development opportunities that they may want to access, it was identified that business skills, coaching, and mentoring were most sought after, suggesting that in times of challenge and difficulty, SME leaders prioritise

development opportunities that can offer tangible and wide-spread results, and this was also highlighted through the semi-structured interview discussions. SME6 stated, “What we need is to get access to people who want to get work done” and this was a theme that also emerged from the interviews. Leaders in this sector appear to accept a level of change and challenge that they view as requiring immediate action. The reasons for this focus on “bottom line benefit” (G1) are worthy of further research to gain an insight into the urgency for immediate results and potential links to the high failure rate in start-ups (Office for National Statistics, 2022) in the UK. Further research would provide benefits to support the development of strategies that support sustainability in SMEs.

These findings have implications for the development of multi-level resilience, as the opportunities to build resilience through networking and collaboration may be overlooked and undervalued. Future research should also consider the barriers faced by SME owners in accessing training opportunities.

The key issues emerging from this discussion that contribute to an understanding of “what skills and development do SME (micro and small business) leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times” have been discussed. These findings are somewhat limited due to the small sample size; however, the research design has allowed an insight into the views and experiences of 45 small businesses (and two members of business support organisations) who had experienced 12 months of social restrictions and disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is of value to further research that considers learning and development within this sector and the impact of resilience.

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided insight into how SME leaders prioritised skills development to provide effective and sustainable leadership in their organisations. The research has shown that leaders were not concerned with accessing services that were designed to increase mental health and wellbeing. Leaders sought self-development with the potential to produce tangible results for the organisation. The discussion of the findings identifies the importance of leaders developing an awareness of self-identity. The research supports the work of Price-Dowd (2020) in recognising that leaders who have a strong and candid understanding of themselves enable them to identify their skillset and therefore identify the gaps that may exist.

Leaders that participated in this research identified mental health and wellbeing issues that may present barriers to their effectiveness as leaders but did not always consider these issues to be significant enough to seek support or intervention. While further research is needed to consider the implications of this finding, it provokes a consideration of how to best support SME leaders to avoid an escalation of these symptoms and to enable leaders to effectively manage the pressures of SME leadership. This finding also suggests the existence of resilience within this sector.

SME leaders in micro and small businesses identified development and support opportunities that offered practical interventions. This supports the findings of Lacerenza et al. (2020), who found that the most effective leadership development opportunities offer practical options underpinned by academic knowledge (through

multiple delivery methods). Therefore, designing training and development opportunities that offer the practical and tangible skills that SME leaders prioritise such as diversification, marketing, analytics, and funding, and incorporating some elements of mental health and wellbeing support, may be a consideration worthy of further exploration and research. Communicating the multi-level benefits of building business resilience to SME leaders may be vital to improving opportunities and outcomes for employees, organisations, and leaders.

Building resilience remains a fuzzy concept. Viewing resilience as a multi-level construct (Visser and Jacobs, 2019) offers benefits when designing and delivering development opportunities. Networking, partnerships, and relationship building promote resilience and may offer a solution to how to embed resilience building into development opportunities that SME leaders value and wish to engage with. Engagement with programmes that provide leaders with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to build business resilience was received positively by the SME leaders who engaged with this research and may offer further opportunities to enhance resilience on an individual level. The ability to respond, and to respond repeatedly, as the wider environment demands, requires what this paper views as ‘sustainable resilience.’

6.1. Managerial and practical implications

The focus of the research has been to explore the impact of SME leaders’ views on the development needs they required 12 months from the beginning of the pandemic. As such, the research outlines the reflective learning that has been undertaken and developed that prepares current or future leaders for any future shock situations. While it is unrealistic, yet not impossible, to expect the same conditions in the future, it is evident that resilience amongst leaders is a significant need, and preparation should and could be enhanced to promote a level of preparedness. Regardless, shocks to the business environment are not uncommon, and as such, this paper outlines developmental areas for consideration following on from shocks, highlighting the importance of resilience development within leaders. Due to the characteristics of micro and small enterprises, it is increasingly imperative for resilience to be central to leadership development, as the impact of shocks can be felt more heavily in these environments. Within micro and small organisations, it is often individuals’ own responsibility to ensure self-development. Therefore, individuals need to recognise their own frailties and develop resilience through their own learning and development.

6.2. Theoretical implications

The research crosses a number of theoretical boundaries in that it transcends the disciplines of leadership, HRD, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and makes a major contribution to key elements to the development of theory around resilience and leadership and how individuals and firms can prepare for future events and shocks. The paper adds to the literature and knowledge base by identifying the importance of resilience in the small business manager’s toolbox.

6.3. Limitations and future research

The research acknowledges the small-scale nature of the research, which is based on a ‘once in a lifetime’ event and, as such, is not replicable nor is it statistically generalisable. However, Yin (2003) emphasises theoretical generalisability and Tsang (2014) analytical generalisability as key features of small-scale research. Subsequently, key learning is presented and identifies that the development of resilience in leaders is crucial as an area of study and investigation. The learning can be transferred to other uncertain and unexpected situations and crisis events, which allows for further investigation and consideration of leadership development and resilience. This provides scope for the development of areas of research within the field, perhaps broadening the scope of business environment shocks, increased numbers of organisations (and types of organisations), and consideration of a global perspective.

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Article

Organizational change: Implications of directive change management

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Abstract: This article explores the implications of directive change management, characterized by top-down leadership and minimal employee involvement, on organizational dynamics, employee morale, and job security. This approach's psychological and operational impacts are underscored, emphasizing the imperative of addressing employee perceptions and fostering trust. Strategies for rebuilding trust and enhancing morale post-directive change management are presented, including transparent communication, participative decision-making, and recognition of employee contributions. The significance of enhancing job security through clear policies, open dialogue, and robust mental health and well-being support systems is highlighted. Practices that encourage job dedication are introduced, emphasizing goal alignment, meaningful work design, and a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. Long-term strategies for cultivating a healthy workplace, such as establishing feedback mechanisms, investing in leadership development, and maintaining organizational adaptability, are also discussed. This brief article is an introductory resource for business leaders, managers, and change practitioners seeking to be better equipped with the necessary tools and strategies to navigate the post-implementation effects of directive change management. It is anticipated that this information can assist leaders and organizations in navigating the challenges of directive change management, promoting resilience, employee well-being, and sustainable organizational success.

Keywords: directive change management; coercive strategy; directive strategy; organizational dynamics; employee morale; job security; trust rebuilding; participative decision-making; organizational adaptability

1. Introduction

Change management practices can be used to help guide organizational transitions and transformations. Organizational change management practices include structural approaches to align organizations and their stakeholders with change (Hubbart, 2023a, 2023b; Kotter, 2012; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979; Udofia and Stanley, 2021). Despite guidance from well-accepted methods, organizational change initiatives can be complex and ongoing, requiring specialized skill sets and talented leadership (Ha, 2013). Said differently, implementing change initiatives can be highly challenging, and success often depends on the abilities of leadership to guide employee perceptions, attitudes, and activities toward change in positive ways (Ololube and Ololube, 2017). Ultimately, strategically administered change management best practices are critical if the goal is to refocus an organization's outcomes and outputs while retaining current employees. Despite this, best (or better) change management practices are sometimes overlooked amidst change initiatives (Davidson, 2015).

Directive strategy (sometimes termed coercive strategy) in change management is characterized by top-down leadership and rapid implementation and can be highly

effective when coupled with talented strategic thinking and a willingness for swift adaptation. Al-Kadri et al. (2015) demonstrated this process through a clinical institution's successful transition to an academic entity, highlighting that directive strategies can facilitate quick implementation, thereby overcoming what otherwise may be transitional setbacks. Dunphy and Stace (1993) further supported this perception by showing that many organizations prefer a directive style over traditional incremental and participatory methods of rapid transformative change. Additionally, Ludvig et al. (2013) emphasized the critical role of effective communication in executing strategic changes, particularly in contexts involving compliance with directive change management. Previous studies collectively suggest that while directive strategies in change management may challenge conventional models, they can lead to successful organizational outcomes when combined with strategic management, effective communication, and the ability to swiftly and productively adapt to changing situations (Al-Kadri et al., 2015; Dunphy and Stace, 1993; Ludvig et al., 2013).

Regardless, in the wake of directive management-implemented changes lacking strategic personnel management best practices, employees commonly feel alienated and disconnected from the organization's goals and visions. Kotter (2012) emphasized that successful change involves guiding people through acceptance and commitment, which is often overlooked in directive approaches. Research by Burke and Nanus (1985) highlighted the importance of transformational leadership in contrast to transactional leadership in times of change, suggesting that inspiring and involving employees leads to more successful and sustainable outcomes. The consequences of such unilateral change strategies are multifaceted. A study by Herold et al. (2008) showed that directive change management could increase resistance and decrease employee commitment. These findings are echoed in the work of Armenakis and Harris (2009), who argued that employee buy-in is crucial for the success of any organizational change, a sentiment shared by many previous authors (Hubbart, 2023c; Kotter, 2007; Shtivelband and Rosecrance, 2010; Thomson et al., 1999). Thus, while the directive change management method may be expedient, avoiding employee involvement may lead to unintended consequences, including diminished morale, heightened job insecurity, and a pervasive sense of being underappreciated.

This article explores the adverse effects of such a management style, underscoring the critical need to address and rectify related challenges associated with the method. The article focuses on rebuilding trust, enhancing morale, ensuring job security, and fostering a culture where employees feel valued and integral to the organization's success. Addressing these areas is vital for organizations to recover from the potential challenges of directive changes and thrive in a continually evolving business landscape. This article provides an expediently navigable overview of directive management and approaches to rebuild trust and morale following this change management approach. The goal is not to review all possible literature or methods but to serve as a helpful road to further inquiry for learners, leaders, and organizations.

2. Understanding the effects of directive change management

Directive change management is characterized by a top-down leadership approach and minimal employee involvement, often leading to significant organizational, psychological, and operational impacts. Directive change management can be considered an antithesis to participative change management, which includes, involves, and engages individuals in an organization who assist in diagnosing and improving the organizational change process, fostering shared decision-making with leadership (Tichy et al., 1976). A participative approach reduces resistance to change and enhances performance by emphasizing inclusive and equitable management styles (Pardo-del-Val et al., 2012). As Eisenberger et al. (1986) identified, employees who feel excluded from decision-making tend to experience reduced job satisfaction and commitment, leading to a sense of alienation and decreased morale. Communication challenges, or a lack of communication, often worsen these symptoms. Previous authors repeatedly noted that effective communication is crucial in such moments of change, influencing employee perceptions, attitudes, and outcomes (Elving, 2005). Lack of transparency and rationale in communication during directive changes fosters misunderstanding, mistrust, and resistance among employees (Wanberg and Banas, 2000). Employees may, therefore, feel disconnected from the decision-making process and undervalued. Additionally, the approach can heighten job insecurity because employees may perceive changes as being imposed without consideration for their well-being or job stability. This approach can foster a pervasive sense of being underappreciated as employees feel excluded from contributing to organizational decisions, leading to feelings of alienation and reduced morale (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Ultimately, the long-term effects of directive change management can harm organizational culture, employee well-being, and outside (stakeholder) perceptions. Kotter (2007) argued that neglecting the human side of change management, such as failing to build a supportive company culture and ignoring employee buy-in, is a primary reason many change initiatives fail internally and externally through reduced public opinion. Griffeth et al. (2000) similarly noted a link between organizational change practices and employee turnover. Thus, directive change management's inherent disregard for employee input and value can lead to increased turnover rates, impacting the organization's stability and incurring additional costs. It is worth noting that directive change management may be a tactic organizational leaders use to coerce employees into voluntarily leaving an organization (Fugate et al., 2012). However, using directive change management to encourage employees to leave should be approached cautiously, considering the ethical, legal, and practical implications. It is often more beneficial to engage in transparent, ethical practices that respect the rights and dignity of all employees. Ultimately, the impacts of directive change management are deep-rooted, affecting the immediate operational changes and the long-term health and functioning of an organization and its employees. Recognizing these effects is crucial for leaders aiming for effective and sustainable organizational change outcomes.

3. Restoring trust and enhancing morale

Reestablishing trust in an organization following directive change management requires a focused and sensitive approach. Leaders must practice transparent and authentic communication (Mayer et al., 1995). Leaders must also commit to clear and consistent communication, acknowledging past missteps, and setting realistic expectations for the future. This approach helps alleviate employee uncertainty and anxiety, laying the groundwork for a more trusting relationship. Another vital element in rebuilding trust is including employees in decision-making processes. Lawler (1992) described the benefits of collaborative decision-making, noting that it enhances the quality of decisions and strengthens employees' commitment to these decisions. By valuing employee feedback and incorporating employee insights into plans, organizations demonstrate respect for their expertise and perspectives. This participative approach is essential to restoring employees' sense of control and value within the organization. In addition, the establishment and maintenance of consistent and fair policies are crucial for regaining trust. Multiple authors have stressed the importance of organizational justice, emphasizing that fairness in processes, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment is fundamental in shaping trust (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Policies that ensure equitable treatment and avoid arbitrary decisions reinforce a sense of security and fairness among employees, further aiding in rebuilding trust (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990).

Boosting employee morale in the wake of directive change management is essential for transitioning towards a positive and productive work environment. A vital aspect of this involves recognizing and appreciating employee contributions. Grant (2008) noted the significant impact of acknowledgment on employee motivation and job satisfaction. Implementing recognition programs, or even small gestures of gratitude, can help employees feel valued and acknowledged, thereby enhancing morale. Team-building activities and social events also play a crucial role in morale enhancement. Tannenbaum et al. (1992) emphasized the importance of these activities in improving group dynamics and fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Regular team-building exercises and social gatherings can strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a more cohesive and supportive work environment. Furthermore, providing opportunities for personal and professional development is critical for morale. Noe (1986) articulated that employees are more engaged and committed when they feel their growth is supported. Offering training programs, skill development workshops, and career advancement opportunities not only boosts morale but also contributes to the overall skillset and effectiveness of the workforce.

4. Fostering job security and safety

Some of the best practices to restore trust and improve morale can also improve job security and safety. For example, investing in activities that create a sense of job security and safety is critical to stabilizing the workforce after directive change management. Central to this is the need for transparent communication about job stability, which can significantly mitigate employee anxiety and uncertainty. Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) underscored the importance of perceived job security in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. Employers can alleviate fears

and foster a sense of stability by openly discussing job roles, future opportunities, and organizational plans. This transparency helps employees understand what they can expect for their position(s), reducing speculation and rumors that often lead to insecurity and stress. Equally important are the policies and procedures that protect employees from arbitrary dismissal. Brockner et al. (1992) demonstrated that perceived fairness in employment practices significantly impacts how employees react to organizational decisions. Establishing clear, fair, and transparent policies regarding layoffs or dismissals can give employees a sense of security, knowing their employment is not at whimsical risk. Such policies should be communicated effectively and applied consistently, ensuring all employees are treated equitably. This sense of fairness is reassuring for employees and crucial to maintaining organizational trust. Moreover, providing robust support systems and resources for mental health and well-being is essential to fostering a safe and supportive work environment. Iverson and Maguire (2000) showed that organizational support mechanisms significantly influence employees' perceptions of job security and overall well-being. Access to counseling services, mental health programs, and stress management resources is critical to helping employees navigate through periods of change and uncertainty. These resources demonstrate the organization's commitment to its employees' well-being, further reinforcing a culture of support and safety.

5. Encouraging employee job investment and dedication

Encouraging employees to invest fully in their jobs in the wake of directive change management requires a multifaceted approach that aligns individual aspirations with organizational goals (i.e., a space to pursue mutual affinities). According to Locke and Latham (1990), success lies in mutual goal-setting, underscoring the importance of specific and challenging objectives. By aligning employee goals with the organization's broader objectives and ensuring these goals are clear and attainable, employees can see the direct impact of their work on the organization's success. This alignment can be achieved through detailed performance reviews, personal development plans, and transparent communication about the company's direction and objectives. When employees understand and buy into organizational goals, their engagement and commitment to their roles are significantly enhanced. Providing meaningful and challenging work is another critical aspect of fostering full-time job investment. Hackman and Oldham (1976) demonstrated that job satisfaction and motivation are higher when employees are engaged in varied, significant, autonomous work and provided clear performance feedback. Organizations can create a more engaging and fulfilling work environment by designing jobs that incorporate these elements. This involves assigning tasks that challenge employees' skills and providing the autonomy to approach and solve problems creatively. Encouraging this level of engagement ensures that employees feel that their work is not just a series of tasks but a meaningful contribution to the organization. Developing a culture that values innovation and continuous improvement is essential to encouraging complete job dedication. Amabile (1997) emphasized the role of a supportive work environment in fostering creativity and innovation, noting that organizations that encourage risk-taking, acknowledge and

learn from failures, and celebrate successes create an atmosphere where employees feel motivated to contribute innovatively. Such a culture stimulates creativity and encourages employees to invest fully in their roles, driven by the belief that their ideas and efforts are valued and make a difference.

6. Long-term strategies for a healthy workplace

Establishing long-term strategies for a healthy workplace following directive change management involves creating sustainable practices that support continuous improvement and adaptability. A critical component of this is the establishment of regular feedback mechanisms (Rogelberg et al., 2002). Surveying employees and encouraging consistent feedback channels are instrumental in understanding the workforce's evolving needs, sentiments, and reactions to changes. This ongoing dialogue allows organizations to stay attuned to their employees, identifying and addressing issues proactively. Such responsiveness not only aids in promptly tackling emerging concerns but also demonstrates a commitment to employee well-being and organizational improvement. Leadership plays a pivotal role in cultivating a healthy workplace; thus, investing in ongoing training for managers is vital. Bennis and Thomas (2002) pointed out the significance of emotional intelligence in leadership, underscoring the need for empathetic, communicative, and understanding leaders. Training programs focusing on these aspects, including leadership skills, can equip managers to better support and engage their teams. Managers may need to develop leadership acumen beyond conventional management skills. This implies that ongoing development is crucial, given that effective leadership can significantly influence employee satisfaction, engagement, and the overall health of the workplace. It ensures that managers are adept at handling day-to-day tasks and can foster a positive, inclusive, and supportive work environment. Additionally, continuously revisiting and adjusting organizational policies and practices is essential for a dynamic and healthy workplace. Worley and Lawler (2006) emphasized the importance of adaptability and flexibility in organizational design. Regularly reviewing and updating policies to align with current and evolving employee needs and external conditions ensures that the organization remains relevant and responsive. This approach requires an openness to innovation and a willingness to experiment with new methods and practices that may better serve the evolving dynamics of the workforce and the market. Such adaptability enhances the organization's resilience and creates an environment where employees feel their needs and voices are valued and respected.

7. Conclusion

The journey to rebuild and revitalize an organization following directive change management is multifaceted and demands a strategic, empathetic approach. Various strategies can assist in restoring trust, enhancing morale, fostering job security, encouraging full job investment, and establishing long-term practices for a healthy workplace. Implementing these strategies is not a quick fix and requires an investment of time and resources in an ongoing process that also requires commitment and adaptability from organizational leaders.

Restoring trust depends on transparent communication and the genuine involvement (empowerment) of employees in decision-making processes. Enhancing morale is rooted in recognizing employee contributions, fostering strong team dynamics, and supporting personal and professional growth. Ensuring job security and safety involves clear communication about job stability, fair employment policies, and accessible mental health resources. Full employee job investment is encouraged by aligning individual and organizational goals, providing meaningful and challenging work, and nurturing a culture of innovation. Finally, long-term positive cultural enhancement of the workplace following directive change management requires clear workload expectations, regular feedback, continuous leadership development, and adaptable policies and practices. Ultimately, the path to a healthier organizational environment post-directive change is an ongoing journey. It demands an understanding of the profound impact such changes have on employees and a commitment to cultivating a workplace culture that values, supports, and motivates its workforce. The strategies discussed herein provide a roadmap and a springboard for further information for organizations looking to recover from directive changes, thrive, and foster a resilient, engaged, and committed workforce.

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Article

Challenges and implications of microwork in the age of artificial intelligence: A global socioeconomic analysis

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Abstract: This study adopts a discursive and analytical perspective to explore how technological advances are reconfiguring the dynamics of the global labour market, with special attention to the phenomenon of microwork. Microwork, characterised by short, fragmented tasks carried out through digital platforms and geographically distributed, has seen exponential growth, particularly in nations with lower economic development. This type of work shows a growing distinction between tasks of a complex and creative nature and those of a repetitive and monotonous nature that do not require advanced skills to perform. This differentiation can intensify wage disparities between developed and developing countries, as well as contribute to the precariousness of work in activities considered less complex and valued. The article highlights the emergence of unstable and poorly paid jobs that do not require specific qualifications and discusses their impact on social security systems in countries where labour regulations are insufficient. Using a theoretical-methodological approach, the research examines the role of artificial intelligence in the rise of micro-labour and its socio-economic implications. It concludes that despite the flexibility and short-term earning opportunities offered by microwork, it poses considerable challenges in terms of income security, workers' rights, and social protection, emphasising the need for regulatory measures to mitigate its adverse effects on vulnerable communities.

Keywords: microwork; artificial intelligence; pension systems; workers

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the working environment has undergone profound changes, catalysed by technological progress and increased globalisation. Of particular interest is the way in which globalisation and growth in software development have enabled the advent of remote working, especially in technology-related activities.

This article sets out to analyse the concept of micro-work, defined as a form of employment that involves carrying out specific tasks or short-term projects, usually through digital platforms. We also seek to problematise micro-work from the perspective of deepening inequalities between workers, as well as the problems that can emerge from the point of view of the social benefits offered by the state, such as pensions and financial support for people in need.

One problem we face is the possibility of further deregulation of labour, now no longer just linked to informality, but also to a process in which the contractor is not bound by the labour laws of the country in which he employs the workers (Casilli, 2017).

A notable area of demand in this context is assistance in the development and revision of generative artificial intelligence systems, representing a significant field of interest within contemporary technological occupations.

The expansion of micro-labour, especially in poor regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and, to a lesser extent, South America, has been documented by Grahan et al. (2017).

This study highlights concerns not only about the emerging nature of work in the context of microwork, which often lacks specific professional designations and specialised qualifications, but also about working conditions characterised by extremely low pay and employment instability.

Unlike a perspective of building careers in which there are no boundaries and which can, within their fluidity, be developed in formats that meet the demands of companies and also the individual needs of workers (Kost et al., 2020), we are starting from a hypothesis in which there is a real risk that this micro-work movement will not be supported by career development or fostering new work activities and training, but will instead foster jobs that do not require educational qualifications, thus leading to greater job insecurity, especially in countries with fragile economies (Webster, 2016).

The present analysis suggests that such a scenario could result in significant long-term impacts for countries where micro-work becomes a consolidated practice, particularly in view of the absence of labour regulations or mechanisms to integrate these workers into national social security systems.

This would not only be due to the expansion of micro-work opportunities, but above all because they are predominantly repetitive jobs with little or no creativity (Ettliger, 2017), strengthening the differences between the types of workers needed in the field of technology and effectively devaluing those linked to micro-work. These conditions, when combined, can lead to a process of impoverishment in the country with limited prospects of reversal, especially considering the aging population (Grusin, 2022).

Online micro-work, shaped by the distribution of micro-tasks to workers scattered all over the world, presents itself as what Hayek (1994) claimed was the pinnacle of neoliberalism, in which knowledge is dispersed and everyone possesses knowledge that is disconnected but can be used to develop contextualised activities.

Microwork can be considered a new stage in what was previously known as the expansion of outsourcing in the labour production process, which had already led to a reduction in labour rights and an increase in occupational illness (Quinlan et al., 2001).

In addition to concerns about pay and social security, there has been a reconfiguration of labour dynamics, particularly in what can be described as a continuous cycle of waiting. In this context, workers are often connected to the internet in a state of readiness that varies from seconds to days, waiting for opportunities to engage in intermittent activities (Irani, 2015). This phenomenon reflects a significant transformation in the structure and experience of work, marking a clear distinction from traditional forms of employment (Standing, 2011).

Microwork, recognised as work offered on digital platforms on demand, appears from one perspective as a job opportunity in poor countries that have little scientific and technological development, with payment made in hard currency (dollars) and greater purchasing power. At the same time, it is extremely advantageous work for the

companies that provide it, since it costs relatively little (pay in cents to a few dollars per activity), and these companies completely bypass the social security system and labour regulations of the countries in which they hire (Kathuria et al., 2017).

This is because, unlike platforms like UBER, the services provided are generally linked to digital products, mainly teaching and correcting machines (artificial intelligence), promoting corrections in automated systems, or moderating offensive content on social networks. According to a report by the BBC (2019), this is recognised by users as extremely convenient, as it apparently improves the supply of digital services.

But this apparent convenience leads us to the main problem of this theoretical work: how the growth of micro-work could impact the future welfare systems of the countries affected and how the lack of regulation could promote an increase in wealth for the technology-producing countries and a deepening of poverty in the countries with the largest numbers of workers (Todolí-Signes, 2017).

1.1. Research problem

Microwork in the gig economy reconfigures and fragments labour relations. The deregulation caused by big tech companies, especially with the expansion of microwork as the main element in artificial intelligence training, could create a future problem for countries, especially poorer ones, that don't have solid regulations to incorporate workers and contracting companies so that they can pay into the national social security system. There is a risk that these countries will soon find themselves with a contingent of elderly people who have never paid into the social security system, which could lead to further impoverishment of the countries.

1.2. Hypotheses

The companies that provide global micro-labour operations, by creating mechanisms to seek out the cheapest workers, create a lack of control by states over the work activities that their citizens carry out, as well as the social and welfare conditions offered to these citizens.

Countries, including the richest, do not have mechanisms to control and monitor the supply of micro-work, so they are unable to regulate and create the conditions to incorporate workers into the social security system.

The immediate effect is that the state doesn't know how much domestic wealth its citizens generate (or don't generate), which leads to an imbalance in services to the population, tax collection, and social security planning.

2. Method

This work is theoretical and exploratory, presenting provocations and analyses about the impacts that workers in poor countries may have with the expansion of the deregulated supply of digital micro-work.

Our aim is to make a provocation about the need to expand empirical research to find out the real size of the GIG economy (Tubaro et al., 2020) so that national states have more concrete data to understand the impact of deregulation and the transnationalisation of work activities.

Based on the references used, our aim is to promote a critical theoretical debate that seeks to problematise the need to better understand the impacts of micro-labour and the gig economy in the context of the economies of countries, especially the poorest ones.

Artificial intelligence (AI) emerges as the main driver of the rise of microworking, as identified by Sewpersadh (2023). This impact is not only due to the expansion of its use following the popularisation of ChatGPT at the end of 2022, when it was made available to the public, but also to the long-term corporate engagement in the development of automatic response systems. Such systems aim to give users the perception that music, video, and simultaneous translation services are offered by means of advanced AI technologies. However, these systems depend on constant human intervention, including reorganising and correcting the work done by the AI. These human activities are essential to improve the interaction between users and services, seeking to increasingly simulate a human-human interaction experience.

In this way, a view is created that intelligent software does all the work by itself, but it relies on human support at numerous stages of its responses. However, this support does not require higher qualifications from the workers and is therefore offered for extremely low wages (Muldoon and Apostolidis, 2023).

We carried out an essentially theoretical study, based on approximately 35 scientific articles that were within the scope of a more critical position on the development of micro-work, to understand the possible impacts and challenges of micro-work for the economies of national states. The results could lead to further empirical research to understand the future impact of micro-work on countries' welfare systems, as well as the implications of this type of work for workers' quality of life and their identity as workers.

The papers selected were those with the greatest impact on the academic community, measured by the number of citations, demonstrating scientific relevance.

3. Theoretical discussion

The history of microworking dates to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when companies like Amazon and Microsoft began offering simple tasks to remote workers around the world.

These tasks included things like categorising images or transcribing audio. Amazon launched Mechanical Turk in 2005, which is a microwork platform that allows workers to perform simple tasks in exchange for payment.

Microwork is a type of work that consists of carrying out small remote information processing tasks, such as transcribing a piece of handwritten text, classifying an image, or categorising the sentiment expressed in a comment, according to Lehdonvirta (2016).

Work is carried out on online platforms that connect workers and employers and generally establish very simplified labour contracting relationships with little opportunity for more complex negotiations or discussions. In addition, the dimension of time and the speed with which jobs are distributed is noteworthy—due to the “uberisation” of workers around the world, companies make significant gains in setting labour prices, as essentially any value set on the platforms finds people willing

to do it (Irani, 2015).

With the current development of information and communication technologies, which see themselves in processes of automation of responses to services aimed at users who increasingly demand that applications offer options that result in experiences that generate more and more added value for the technology brand, we realise that companies are making use of millions of workers around the world to improve their applications at low cost (Fort et al., 2011).

The term micro-job comes from the fact that the contracted worker doesn't know what they will be doing when they are hired. Generally, the platforms present the task and wait for people who are qualified to do it. It could be, for example, training an artificial intelligence, analysing offensive images, helping to test a system, helping to choose colours or any other random task that might come up. Microwork is a form of flexible working and can be done anywhere and at any time (Lehdonvirta, 2016).

Each task completed earns the user-worker a small fee, usually ranging from a few cents to one or two dollars. As this is payment in international currency on a platform located in foreign countries, these workers are generally not regulated by Brazilian law, which creates a gap in legislation and monitoring of this type of work (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2018).

The fragmentation of labour relations, driven by microwork, is reflected in the transition from stable, long-term jobs to more flexible but also more precarious forms of employment. Microwork, by allowing tasks to be fragmented into smaller components, displaces the traditional nature of employment, challenging concepts such as the workplace, working hours, and formal employment relationships (Lehdonvirta, 2016). This fragmentation contributes to the erosion of consolidated labour rights such as job security, social benefits, and legal protections since many micro-workers are classified as independent contractors or freelancers rather than employees.

Online micro-work platforms have evolved over time, including new features and functionalities. For example, some platforms have started to use matching algorithms to connect workers to the tasks best suited to their skills and experience (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018). In addition, platforms specialising in specific sectors have emerged, such as graphic design, copywriting, programming, and digital marketing.

Lehdonvirta (2016) argues that this flexibility, despite having an apparently positive prospect of freedom, results in a lack of territoriality and sense of belonging for workers, which can make it difficult for them to form a common identity and, consequently, to organise collectively.

However, she also points out that information and communication technologies can be used to build "sites of resistance" that bring together people prevented from organising by conventional means.

Microwork involves the execution of low-complexity tasks that require minimal qualification on the part of the workers. It also highlights the impersonal nature of microwork, where workers are rarely aware of the identity of the requester or the specific purpose of the tasks assigned. This characteristic is contrasted with the operational advantages of platforms, such as high profit margins, recurring business, low tax burdens, and scalability, accompanied by low marginal costs for providing services (Irani, 2015).

As far as workers are concerned, they are paid exclusively based on the tasks completed, with no room for negotiation, no commissions, and, crucially, no access to social protections or labour rights (Fieseler et al., 2019).

In the context of the sharing economy, companies operating through apps position themselves as intermediaries between the supply of labour and the demand for services, seeking profitability through this mediation, as identified by Howcroft (2019). Although this model has parallels with historical production practices, including similarities with outsourcing, work facilitated by digital platforms is distinguished by its innovations in labour organisation and management. These innovations include the application of algorithms to supervise tasks and the presence of information asymmetries and social inequalities. These inequalities often manifest themselves in the predominance of workers from racial groups and lower socioeconomic classes (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017).

There are different proposals for regulating work mediated by digital platforms. Some defend the absence of labour regulation, while others suggest classifying it as a new category of dependent work, which requires specific protection in line with constitutional principles (Colier, 2017).

This is a type of work in which the identity of those taking part in the process is not known or shared, which makes any resistance by workers or prospects of a national or international organisation impossible.

These technological transformations could lead to unprecedented changes in the global labour market, with people no longer needing to be physically distributed across territories, but technologies being available for them to access different forms of work instantly.

Added to this is an invisibility that doesn't allow governments to detect who is working for digital companies, how much they earn, and how to build mechanisms to include these people in the social and welfare systems.

On the one hand, this may seem interesting, but it could also lead to a process in which humans become more and more like machines because job opportunities are scattered around the world at different times, so people need to be "switched on" almost 24 h a day to accept opportunities for remuneration.

In addition, the lack of global regulation means that companies make derisory payments for various jobs and countries lose much of their control over labour processes that will have fundamental impacts on the future of a nation, especially when these people reach retirement age, without government support generated over the years through social security contributions.

3.1. Micro-labour in terms of low qualifications and expanding opportunities

Casilli (2021) argues in his study that where there was an idea that technology would lead to job losses, recent studies have shown that the development of complex technology (high-tech) is accompanied by the generation of even more low-tech jobs. From this perspective, the author shows that artificial intelligence is beginning to be the main demand for this type of employment, above all because it requires the generation, training, and verification of large quantities of examples from which

machines must learn, and those who carry out this human-machine dialogue are generally these low-paid workers.

Digital labour is defined as dativized human activities and can be divided into three types: micro-work based on social networks, on-demand work, and micro-work. The first is perhaps the most specialised, which is like the work carried out by tutors or English teachers on large platforms. In general, micro-work is characterised by activities that require little or no qualification. Work on social networks, on the other hand, is characterised by involvement and engagement on contracted pages.

According to Casilli (2021), on online microwork platforms, workers are generally not formally contracted and are considered a disposable workforce without effective and paid contracts. According to Schussler (2021), in models like Amazon's, workers are not even paid, as they are treated as "consumer workers" and receive a "reward" rather than a salary, with their only bond being agreement to the platform's Terms of Service.

These platforms often portray the workers who accept these precarious conditions and low wages as young, educated, and coming from countries considered to be developing, but the reality is that they mostly come from low-income countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where average wages are lower and the informal economy is more prevalent (Webster, 2016). Outsourcing these workers is relatively easy, as it is not necessary to establish any formal ties with the country to hire the service (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2016).

The model implemented by Amazon makes it even more difficult to detect at what levels employment and income are being generated, especially since the relationship established between the company and the micro-workers is a consumer relationship, or a barter/exchange based on the value determined by the service that is reconfigured into consumption within the platform itself.

In the same vein, Irani (2015) states that from the perspective of the widespread development of artificial intelligence, jobs performed by human beings are being undermined in ethical and social terms—in addition to the lack of national or global regulations, micro-labour deconstructs the human function of the worker, turning them into a kind of machine that responds to the stimuli of the apps that determine the job offer.

Oliveira (2021), on the other hand, problematises the practice of gamification in microwork, which presents an apparent situation of entertainment and fun in microwork but is configured as elements of game mechanics that seek to encourage and control the work of employees. Under the gamification technique, workers are evaluated for their services, which can lead to their position on the micro-job vacancy list. It's a completely closed system in which there is no transparency about how people are evaluated or how they obtain job opportunities.

Sundararajan (2017) states that labour platforms, as well as their employer companies, gain twice as much from their business model. They win when they collect and process large amounts of user and worker data, using algorithms to generate insights and make decisions. This datafication allows companies to price labour, creating predictions about how much they can pay according to the prospects of economic dependence on workers. It's something like this: the system makes several requests and analyses which are the most popular and competitive and their respective

prices, to create the conditions for repeatedly lowering values and creating more competition between workers—which leads us to the financialization of the platforms, which want to maximise profits and market value.

On the other hand, they are winning through liberal rationality, which involves the flexibilization, individualisation and deregulation of work. Only on a global scale, far removed from the restraints and controls of nation-states, making the lack of social protection wide open.

3.2. National regulations and social security dimensions

The speed with which microwork is being transformed, as well as the flexibility that makes it constantly transform and change the places where it offers microwork on a global level, is possibly based on artificial intelligence applications that define, from robust data and business simulation perspectives, which worker profiles are best and in which countries they are located in order to define, in a closed way, where and who can receive the job offer.

This movement deconstructs the whole discourse of flexibility and autonomy presented by micro-work platforms since the distribution of labour is unknown to the working users, and their financial and emotional instability puts them in an extremely fragile situation to make any demands or resist.

Webster (2016) points out that the lack of global clarity about the type of work offered by the platforms, the speed of their insertion, and the slowness of political and regulatory decision-making lead companies to make occasional migrations to places where legislation is more permissive. However, it is possible to detect that in a context in which the user-worker establishes a working relationship with an international company, it is difficult, in terms of labour legislation, to establish minimum control criteria over these working processes since they take place via the World Wide Web—therefore, outside the conventional economic legislative spheres.

For Berg et al. (2018), the problem of the gig economy is addressed. However, it is a relatively superficial approach in which they point out possible problems with digital jobs and list the need for shared conversations between society, governments, and employers.

However, in a hyper-capitalist context with a high concentration of income, especially among digital technology companies, this kind of apparently conflict-free relationship is difficult to observe, especially when we realise the immense efforts made by digital technology companies to ensure that countries interfere as little as possible in their business models.

Despite this, Berg et al. (2018) highlight the importance of adapting social protection systems to address the challenges brought about by digital labour. He suggests implementing policies that guarantee income security and access to social benefits for workers in non-traditional work arrangements, including freelancers and those in the gig economy. But, as presented above, the great difficulty is getting governments to find these workers on their own territory, given the obscurities in the hiring processes of the gig economy.

Country regulations, mostly designed for a more traditional labour market, face significant difficulties in addressing the new dynamics presented by microwork. The

global nature of microwork, with workers and contractors often located in different jurisdictions, further complicates the application of local labour laws. In addition, the classification of workers as self-employed allows companies to avoid responsibilities such as minimum wage, regulated working hours, and social security contributions, challenging efforts to ensure fair treatment of workers within this model.

It's also important to consider that in most cases, workers don't know who they're providing services for—the contracting company being a small element in the complex web of big techs involved in micro-labour outsourcing.

We can see that some countries have begun to discuss ways of tackling the micro-work dilemma, albeit in an incipient way. This is mainly because it has already been detected that maintaining this deregulated model tends to promote a significant deficit in the social security systems, which will soon have an impact on the economies of the countries involved.

The European Union has been discussing the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions (EU, 2019) to offer greater protection to workers on digital platforms, including those involved in micro-work. It should be noted that, as explained throughout the text, it is easier to locate digital platform workers who provide services with a direct physical impact, such as deliveries and car journeys. However, it is still a mystery to locate micro-labour workers who carry out activities directly related to improving software and digital services—due to the apparent invisibility of these processes.

Anthonay et al. (2021) and Gamesh (2023) consider it important to deepen discussions on social protection for workers. However, there is a gap as to how countries should tackle this movement towards fragmentation and informality, which will lead to workers simply leaving their official social security systems without migrating to something parallel or that provides minimal conditions for survival in their old age.

What is most expected in this process is that these workers, when they reach retirement age, will be completely uncovered and will have a direct or indirect impact on poor countries. Although the legislation of countries such as Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia indicates the need for social contributions to obtain social security rights, the existence of thousands or millions of informal workers dedicated to the gig economy will come to light and will have a significant impact on these countries when their active working population ages.

Therefore, what we can expect is a movement in which these countries will need to incorporate the costs of workers who have been exploited by GIG economy companies, whose profits have been directed to their headquarters in countries with advanced technological development—serving as financial support for these countries' welfare systems or over-riching the shareholders of these companies.

Acting against this business model, which will have a negative social security impact on countries, is not an easy task for countries to carry out in isolation, especially since the pressure mechanisms of GIG companies tend to make it difficult or substantially delay any movement that seeks to bring minimum regulations to their operations.

Furthermore, the literature shows us that this is a highly complex problem and that, therefore, only an analysis at a global level can be more efficient since the control

of a country depends on the existence of similar or interconnected controls in order to detect the forms of tax evasion or flight of GIG companies from economies that impose some kind of labour and social security control on them (De Stefano, 2015).

At a global level, it is a question of determining that the transnationality of these companies requires different ways of dealing with the problem created. In terms of labour and social security, countries will increasingly need to work in a collaborative and shared manner to boost their tax collection and thus minimise the damage caused by labour deregulation, which not only affects the precariousness of workers but can also increase a country's poverty in the medium or long term.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we take a deep dive into the transformations that are reshaping the world of work globally, driven by the technological revolution and the emergence of micro-work. The latter is characterised by short, segmented activities carried out via online platforms. The theoretical reflections and analyses conducted seek to shed light on the socio-economic consequences of this emerging form of employment, with a special focus on developing economies, where both potential opportunities and challenges stand out.

Microwork, as a global phenomenon, exposes a clear contrast between, on the one hand, the promise of flexibility and opportunities for short-term income generation and, on the other, the challenges linked to income security, workers' rights, and social protection. This employment model has led to a precariousness of work, marked by job instability, low wages, and a lack of fundamental social protections. Although it offers the possibility of connecting workers from all over the world to a wide range of tasks, the impersonal and fragmented nature of microwork tends to erode conventional labour relations, placing workers in a position of significant vulnerability in the face of contractors and market fluctuations.

The rise of this work model reflects and drives profound changes in economic structures around the globe, revealing the tension between market logic—which aims to maximise efficiency and minimise costs—and the urgent need to protect workers' dignity and rights. The predominant influence of artificial intelligence on the advancement of micro-labour highlights both the opportunities for technological innovation and the ethical and social dilemmas associated with replacing and complementing the human workforce with automated systems.

Our theoretical discussion emphasises the need for a critical perspective on microwork, questioning not only the conditions in which it is carried out but also its far-reaching implications for social cohesion and wealth distribution. Specifically, the lack of appropriate regulation and the evasion of social security contributions emerge as significant threats to social security systems, especially in countries with more vulnerable economies.

Considering these reflections, we conclude that although micro-work opens new avenues for employment in an increasingly digital age, it presents substantial challenges that demand keen regulatory attention and a critical review of current labour regulations. It is essential that policymakers, in collaboration with the international community, seek a balance between the benefits of labour flexibility and

the imperative need to protect workers, ensuring that the transition to new forms of employment does not result in increased precariousness and inequality.

Finally, we advocate a collective reflection on the future shape of work in the context of the digital economy, underscoring the importance of developing inclusive strategies that value the dignity of human labour and foster a fairer distribution of wealth arising from technological innovations. With this article, we aim to enrich the academic and political debate on micro-labour, encouraging further research and the development of policies that effectively tackle the challenges posed by this ever-changing phenomenon.

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Article

Examining the impact of generative artificial intelligence on work dynamics

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper was to examine the impact of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on employee well-being and work dynamics. Using qualitative methodology, three semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the implications of generative AI on employee outcomes such as efficiency, job satisfaction, ethical considerations, and work-life balance. The findings highlighted the potential benefits and risks associated with generative AI implementation in the workplace. The study contributed to the literature by adopting a qualitative approach, allowing in-depth exploration of individual experiences with generative AI in the workplace. The study discussed the implications for employers, employees, and society.

Keywords: employee well-being; generative AI; human resource management; work dynamics

1. Introduction

Global organizations are navigating a significant technological shift known as the fourth industrial revolution. Schwab (2017) is driven by the swift evolution of artificially intelligent (AI) technologies. AI, a cluster of interconnected technologies for advanced problem-solving (Walsh et al., 2019), includes generative AI, a subset crafting original content based on textual prompts (Stanford University, 2023). This technological transformation, labeled the second machine age (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014) or the algorithmic age (Danaher et al., 2017), is reshaping the nature of work by integrating AI, including machine learning and natural language processing, into various facets of organizational functioning. The implications of this shift extend beyond current narrow AI applications, like image classification, signaling a profound impact on work dynamics (Boden, 2016).

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools and digital platforms, or at least tools and platforms that claim “intelligent status” have become an indispensable part of business organizations and society over the past decade. This stems from AI algorithms’ ability to automate business processes, extract knowledge from big data, provide predictions and recommendations, and have superior analytical and computational capabilities compared to human beings (von Krogh et al., 2023).

There is existing literature on how technology adoption impacts worker productivity and work dynamics. Many of the studies, particularly those focused on information technologies, find evidence that IT complements higher-skill workers (Akerman et al., 2015). Bartel et al. (2007) show that firms that adopt IT tend to use more skilled labour and increase worker skill requirements. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019) study the diffusion of robots and find that the negative employment effects of

robots are most pronounced for workers in blue-collar occupations and those with less than a college education.

The objective of this paper is to examine the effects of generative artificial intelligence on work dynamics. This study makes several contributions. Firstly, this research seeks to build on the current growing literature by adopting a qualitative lens to analyze the practical implications of generative AI. While existing studies provide theoretical frameworks, a qualitative approach allows for a more in-depth exploration of individual experiences. The principal rationale is to uncover not only the gain in efficiency with generative AI but also the challenges and ethical considerations that accompany the integration of generative AI into diverse professional work dynamics. Secondly, this study considers the practical impacts of generative AI across diverse professional domains and aims to shed light on the experiences of individuals working in different work settings. Thirdly, as the integration of generative AI tools becomes increasingly prevalent, understanding how these technologies influence various aspects of work dynamics is crucial. Through qualitative interviews, this study delves into the motivations, challenges, and outcomes associated with the adoption of generative AI, providing a nuanced understanding of its effects on efficiency, job satisfaction, and ethical considerations. Our curiosity drives us toward the optimum possibilities for finding answers to the following research questions: *To what extent can generative artificial intelligence contribute to employee well-being? What are the potential risks and hazards associated with its implementation in the workplace, especially considering the impact on mental health and job security?*

2. Literature review

AI in the field of human resource management (HRM) is here to stay. Schmidt et al. (2020) define AI in organisations as the ability of organisations to use data, methods, technology, processes, and people in a way that creates new possibilities for automation, decision-making, and collaboration for achieving organisational objectives that would not be possible by conventional means. This definition includes not only data and methods but also the people and processes required to orchestrate and leverage AI into action (Enholm et al., 2021). Notably, the antecedents of AI adoption generally include personal, technical, organizational, and environmental subsystems, whereby a greater understanding of artificial intelligence for HRM has a direct impact on the culture of an organization and the treatment of employees, thus, enhancing employee relations (Yu et al., 2022).

2.1. The integration of generative AI in HRM

Since its invention, the adoption of artificial intelligence tools has been slow to gain widespread momentum in the HR space, but generative AI technologies that can create content from disparate sources and quickly summarize multiple data sets, offer the HRM discipline several compelling capabilities (Bedard et al., 2023).

2.2. Types of generative artificial intelligence for HRM

There are various types of generative artificial intelligence for HRM, from ChatGPT by OpenAI to Bard AI by Google (Kaur and Gandolfi). Below, we elaborate on the most commonly used generative AI in the workplace (Kanodia, 2023).

ChatGPT: This generative AI is a realistic one that generates human-like text responses in the form of conversation. It utilizes a chat interface and incorporates the history of its conversation with a user to provide interactive and fine-tuned text responses. From crafting job descriptions and developing personalized career development plans to providing employee self-service (Navarra, 2023), ChatGPT takes centre stage in this aspect of human resources and work dynamics.

Dall-E: Dall-E, another groundbreaking AI tool from OpenAI, generates realistic images and art from simple textual prompts. DALL-E uses a state-of-the-art deep learning model to produce high-quality, detailed images (Zhou and Nabus, 2023) that can be used by HR to communicate safety policies, safe working rules, or hazard warning signs with graphics. The potential of DALL-E is exciting, as it opens up new possibilities for creativity and artistic expression for employee training and safety in the workplace.

Bard: Followed by the implementation of GPT into Microsoft's Bing, Google unveiled its own generative AI chatbot, Google Bard. It provides results based on more natural language queries and context instead of just keywords (Kanodia, 2023). For predictive analytics in strategic HR, Google Bard helps to improve predictive hiring by analyzing job-related documents and identifying the essential skills and qualifications required for a job position. It can also predict whether an employee is trying to leave a company based on their behaviour and past interactions (Pocket HRMS, 2023).

The integration of generative AI into work has been impressive. For example, employees' work on processes such as job description creation and intelligent search can now be augmented using data-driven insights and generative AI that transform HR processes and empower HR professionals to innovate and focus on higher-value work (Goldstein, 2023). Bailey (2023) explains that as a language-based application, generative AI represents a significant advancement that provides HR professionals with the opportunity to "interact" with AI in a way we have never seen before—for example, through chatbots like ChatGPT. Leveraged responsibly, it can significantly augment the employee and candidate experience, specifically enabling organizations to identify, attract, and retain the best talent effectively while supporting diverse workforce growth (Oganezi and Lozie, 2017). The concepts of generative AI underscore the need for HR professionals to understand and adapt to the changing AI landscape, particularly the transformative and disruptive potentials of generative AI on HRM planning, practices, processes, platforms, and productivity (Budhwar et al., 2023).

Knoblich and Rogelberg (2023) provide a thorough study on how ChatGPT impacts employment relations, employee well-being, and engagement. It is generally established that trust is a central factor in the employee-employer relationship (Yadav et al., 2022), and Knoblich and Rogelberg (2023) opine that employment relations are likely to be moderated through the use of ChatGPT interfaces inasmuch as employees

view the technology as an appropriate, leveraged, capable, and trusted resource. Research provides the limitations of ChatGPT in this regard. For example, Marr (2023a) reveals that generative AI like ChatGPT lacks common sense in the sense that while it can generate human-like responses and has access to a large amount of information, it does not possess human-level common sense, and the artificial brainbox also lacks the background knowledge humans have. This implies that ChatGPT will oftentimes provide nonsensical or inaccurate responses to certain questions in human resources or in finding solutions in employer-employee situations, as it is assumed to do.

Marr (2023b) describes AI as lacking emotional intelligence in that aspect; although it can generate responses that seem empathetic, it does not possess true emotional intelligence and is unable to detect subtle emotional cues or respond appropriately to complex emotional situations, which are practically opposed to the purpose of the employee assistance program (EAP) of an organization's HR department in contemporary times. Therefore, emotional intelligence cannot be artificial, and vice versa. Additionally, the integration of ChatGPT into the workplace may also negatively affect employee well-being. For instance, the integration of ChatGPT may increase anxiety for employees concerned about job insecurity (OpenAI, 2023).

The current literature highlights the positive and negative impacts of integrating AI into work. However, we still have little insight into employees' experiences of using generative AI in the workplace. Our knowledge remains limited about how pertinent the convergence and usage of generative AI tools for effective work dynamics are. What are the motivations for using generative AI at work and its impact on employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, leisure, well-being, etc.? Are there ethical implications of generative AI usage in professions with concerns for job security? This study aims to address these gaps through empirical research.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze the real-life impacts of generative AI across various industries. By focusing on the experiences of general employees, we aim to delve into their perceptions and feelings about AI integration in their work. This approach, rooted in the principles outlined by van Manen (1977), allows for a deeper understanding of the social implications of AI in the workplace.

3.1. Data collection process

We employed three semi-structured interviews for in-depth exploration, aligning with Glaser's (2002) perspective that such interviews are ideal for developing theories in exploratory research. The demographics of these participants are mentioned in **Table 1**. Sample interview questions include: What prompted you to start using a generative AI tool like ChatGPT? Was this decision influenced by your supervisor or management? How does the use of generative AI impact your efficiency and productivity? How has the introduction of AI tools affected your job satisfaction and morale? Have you experienced any challenges or concerns related to job security due to the integration of AI tools?

Table 1. Demographic profiles of interviewees.

Interviewee	Age range	Education level	Position title	Job tenure	Industry	Gender	Location	Employment status
1	36–40 years	Master’s degree	Principal software developer	More than 10 years	Entertainment and architecture industry	Male	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Full-time
2	20–25 years	Bachelor’s degree	Senior data engineer	1–2 years	Bank	Male	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Full-time
3	26–30 years	Bachelor’s degree	Ad ops specialist	3–5 years	Digital marketing agency	Male	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	Full-time

These interviews, conducted via Zoom, typically lasted between 45 min and an hour. Each session was recorded with verbal consent obtained at the start and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, participants provided electronic consent to meet the institution’s REB approval requirements. Our interviewees, chosen from our networks for convenience, provided insights during online and in-person conversations. We ensured ethical compliance by obtaining consent and maintaining transparency throughout the process. Researchers often utilize snowball and network sampling methods in field research, as highlighted by Collis and Hussey (2003) and Sommer et al. (2010). This approach is particularly effective due to the challenges in accessing individuals who precisely match the study criteria, a difficulty noted by Marshall and Rossman (2011). We ensured ethical compliance by obtaining consent and maintaining transparency throughout the process.

3.1.1. Participants’ overview

The first participant (P1) in our study was involved in software development within the entertainment and architecture industries, focusing on tasks like programming and software architecture at a public company. The second participant (P2), a senior data engineer at a leading Canadian bank, worked with ETL pipelines and machine learning models. They were researching generative AI applications, with experience in both professional and academic settings. The third participant (P3), an ad operations specialist in a digital marketing agency, played a crucial role in ad placement and audience targeting, offering insights into generative AI’s impact on digital marketing.

3.1.2. Justification of the sample size

It is a practical reality that sample size is not always determined based on noble scientific goals (Lenth, 2001). Studies have proven that sample-size problems are context-dependent. We considered the smallest effect size that is theoretically interesting. The significance of increasing the sample size to account for the effects or impact of the use of generative AI on employee well-being and work dynamics in context depends on practical, realistic, and ethical criteria, especially in a study involving human respondents where sample size is a critical issue for scope and ethical reasons. In an oversized experiment, an unnecessary number of respondents would be potentially exposed to risks (Lenth, 2001), such as breaching non-disclosure clauses in their employment contracts or their respective professional codes in the current jet age. Based on the design of the study, we aim to eliminate such risks.

This study is also planned to reduce or evade possible high non-response rates, noting that definitive success is achieved by asking concrete questions and testing out concrete examples on a sizeable sample size (Shetty, 2024). Also, in pursuit of substantial qualitative insights from a specific audience type, standards demand that the first objective when carrying out qualitative research be to ensure the few right respondents are invited to participate in the study through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic research, which are the most productive methodologies used in qualitative studies, each method being unique in the information it can provide and the setting it can be used in (Shetty, 2024).

Lastly, this study prioritizes quality over quantity and adopts the principle of saturation. Data saturation is a data adequacy point where no new information can be obtained from participants in qualitative research (Sarfo et al., 2021). Agreeably, a sample size should be large enough to sufficiently describe the phenomenon of interest and address the research question at hand. However, a large sample size risks having repetitive data or responses void of additional perspectives or information. To avoid a point of diminishing returns with larger samples of more data that doesn't necessarily lead to more information, the authors determine that fewer respondents' opinions are sufficient to constitute the analysis framework. The sample size respondents for the study are professionals in tech who meet the study design criteria, consisting of active and available high-quality participants whom the authors believe, based on the study scope, are more suitable than a larger size pulled from a large population that falls within broad parameters (Shetty, 2024).

4. Research findings

Below, we present our research findings.

4.1. Familiarity and usage of generative AI tools

Participant 1 shared, *"I've been using AI tools for almost a year now. I started with image generative AI tools and later shifted to Chat GPT, using it approximately three times a week."* Participant 2 had several years of experience with AI tools, utilizing them for both work-related challenges and personal curiosity. The third interviewee employed generative AI tools in reporting and daily tasks, albeit with regulatory limitations on direct use.

4.2. Motivation for using generative AI

The first participant's motivation for using generative AI stems from personal initiative, independent of any influence from their supervisor or organization. Participant 2, expressed, *"My motivation stems from both personal curiosity and the practical challenges I face in my work. The versatility of AI tools allows me to address specific needs while satisfying my intellectual curiosity."* This individual was driven by personal curiosity and work-related challenges and needs. The third interviewee was motivated by the potential industry impact, its use in reporting, and daily tasks.

4.3. Impact on efficiency

The first participant mentioned that *“Generative AI is useful for quick tasks but needs improvement, especially with accuracy and manual adjustments.”* This individual found AI tools useful for quick tasks but acknowledged the need for improvement, particularly in terms of accuracy and the necessity for manual adjustments. Participant 2 reported, *“Generative AI has had a positive impact on my mental workload. It facilitates faster problem-solving, allowing me to focus more on significant tasks. It’s become an integral part of my workflow.”* These individuals reported a positive impact on mental workload, faster problem-solving, and increased focus on significant tasks. The third participant noted the streamlining of legwork processes and the reduction of obsolete tasks.

4.4. Supervisor and management discussions

The first participant discussed the adoption of AI tools within their company, noting a general welcoming of AI tools with acknowledgement of their limitations. The second participant discussed limitations due to client data restrictions, security concerns, cost considerations, and experimentation with different tools. The third participant stated, *“In our organization, there has been an open conversation about AI tools. Management not only encourages their use but has gone a step further by developing internal AI tools tailored for our specific needs.”* This individual had open conversations about AI tools, with encouragement from management and the development of internal AI tools for employees.

4.5. Job satisfaction and morale

The first participant reported no significant impact on job satisfaction or morale, acknowledging AI’s limitations in a tech-heavy industry. The second participant stated, *“I’ve experienced a positive impact on my job satisfaction, particularly in managing my workload more efficiently. It has allowed me to concentrate on tasks that truly matter.”* This individual noted a positive impact on mental workload, job satisfaction, and focus on significant tasks. The third interviewee reported no direct impact on job satisfaction but acknowledged considerations for ease of work.

4.6. Impact on task engagement and job role

The first participant reported minimal impact on task engagement and job role, noting that generative AI is at an early stage with limited significance in day-to-day work. The second interviewee did not explicitly mention this aspect. The third interviewee noted the streamlining of legwork processes and the reduction of obsolete tasks.

4.7. Challenges or concerns regarding job security

The first participant mentioned concerns over job security and the internal management of AI tools for data control. The second interviewee initially had concerns about job replacement but shifted their perspective towards increased productivity. Similarly, the third participant initially had concerns about job security but recognized certain irreplaceable roles. More specifically, they stated, *“There were initial concerns*

about job security, particularly with the recognition of certain irreplaceable roles. However, as I see it now, the threat of job replacement by AI is not imminent.”

4.8. Work-life balance and leisure time

The first participant reports no current impact on work-life balance but speculates on future changes as AI evolves. The second participant reported a positive impact on work-life balance, stating, *“The positive impact on my work-life balance has been significant. It allows me to time-box my tasks, creating a clear separation between work and personal time.”* This individual can time-box and separate work from personal time. The third participant reported no direct impact on work-life balance but noted a reduction in research time.

4.9. Instances of AI content adjustment and correction

The first participant stated that the output produced by the generative AI tools needed to be adjusted and corrected. This individual especially noted this adjustment with the generated Python code. The second participant took an iterative approach to refining AI-generated answers, sharing, *“I take an iterative approach to refining AI-generated answers. Testing and adapting are crucial for achieving the perfect solution to the challenges I encounter.”* This individual emphasized testing and adapting for the perfect solution. The third interviewee noted the training requirements for AI tools, the recognition of mistakes, and the learning process for AI tools.

4.10. Ethical implications of generative AI usage

The first participant expressed concerns about job replacement, salary impact, data privacy, consent, and bias in AI. The second participant considered the ethical implications of using generative AI. More specifically, they stated, *“Ethical considerations play a crucial role in my use of generative AI. I’m mindful of data privacy, bias, and security concerns, ensuring responsible and ethical usage.”* This individual had concerns about data privacy, bias, and security. The third participant highlighted the unfairness of equal access to generative AI.

4.11. Impact on authenticity and originality in work

The third participant emphasized that *“while not explicitly mentioned, maintaining authenticity and originality is vital in our work. Generative AI serves a purpose but is not a direct replacement for the creative input and expertise that humans bring to the table.”* However, the other two participants reported no significant impact on work authenticity.

4.12. Recommendations from participants for positive AI integration in organizations

The first participant recommended viewing *generative AI as a tool and cautioned against overuse in communication to maintain genuineness*. The second participant emphasized the importance of training, awareness, and security measures for organizations integrating AI tools. More specifically, they stated, *“For organizations integrating AI tools, my recommendations include a strong emphasis on training,*

awareness, and robust security measures. These factors are pivotal for successful and responsible integration.” The third interviewee suggested implementation levels based on the nature of work and cautioned in financial and data-sensitive areas.

4.13. Future outlook of generative AI

Participant 1 expected more everyday use of generative AI, foreseeing its more significant role in daily tools and activities. Participant 2 held a positive view of AI's future in the workplace, acknowledging its inevitable presence. Participant 3, focusing on the AI integration process, stressed the importance of continuous learning and careful implementation, recognizing AI's significant potential impact on work aspects.

Overall, the first participant highlighted the generative AI field's fast-paced growth and competitive landscape. The second participant shared a positive vision for the future of work, coupled with good wishes for the audience's success and well-being. Meanwhile, the third participant underscored the captivating aspects of AI, focusing on the importance of careful implementation, ongoing learning, and adaptability in integrating AI.

5. Discussion

This empirical research contributed to our existing knowledge of the impact of generative AI on work dynamics. The implications of generative AI on workplace well-being are significant, particularly in enhancing job satisfaction, increased efficiency, and improved work-life balance. However, ethical considerations are paramount due to biases in machine learning algorithms, which can impact employee well-being. Human intervention remains essential in AI usage to maintain productivity and monitor AI systems. Continuous employee education aligns with technological advancements, contributing to career growth and economic development, which is crucial. Embracing generative AI is crucial for organizational competitiveness, necessitating a deep understanding and effective use of AI for industry-specific data analysis and strategy. Overall, the findings complement existing literature, offering insights into generative AI's impact on employee well-being and work dynamics and suggesting practical solutions for integrating AI technology in the workplace.

Loring (2018) and Loten (2017) argue that repetitive, unproductive, and mundane jobs can be eliminated with the use of AI to improve efficiency. A recent survey indicated that AI has changed 82% of how work is performed and the requisite knowledge and skills (Hupfer, 2020). Our findings revealed that generative AI is still at an early stage with limited significance in day-to-day work. For some, however, generative AI was an essential component in reducing routine and obsolete tasks and streamlining processes. While AI had not explicitly impacted their task engagement, it had contributed to streamlining processes and reducing obsolete tasks, thereby enhancing efficiency in certain aspects of their job. The findings regarding the familiarity and usage of generative AI tools were consistent with the existing literature (Bailey, 2023) which agrees that generative AI provides professionals with vast resources to use AI in their work for continual efficiency and productivity.

The findings revealed that organizations are adopting AI tools and acknowledging their limitations. Management has revolved around limitations due to

client data restrictions, security concerns, and cost considerations. It also highlighted the active experimentation with different tools to find the best fit for their needs. Most organizations have been having an open conversation about AI tools. Management not only encourages their use but is also developing internally tailored AI tools, which is perceived as a collaborative effort to enhance efficiency.

There are ethical implications to using generative AI, with concerns about data privacy, bias, and security (Yapo and Weiss, 2018). Consistent with the current research, generative models, particularly those configured on personal data, pose privacy risks (Somdip, 2023). Our findings reveal that, in most instances, one needs to adjust and make corrections. Additionally, an iterative approach needs to be taken to refine AI-generated answers, testing, and adapting for the perfect solution. There are training requirements for AI tools, recognition of mistakes, and learning algorithms for AI tools. These findings are consistent with the arguments of Ashraf (2022) and McKendrick and Thurai (2022), who suggest that data needs to be controlled by humans to rectify AI's errors and give accurate results. While AI tools are often perceived as superior to humans, they still require human oversight to avoid errors in their outputs (McKendrick and Thurai, 2022).

Some of this study's findings contradict existing literature; hence, it bridges the gap. Frey and Osborne (2017) pointed out the risk of losing job enthusiasm with the continued use of AI. Additionally, Brougham and Haar (2020) argued that generative AI has generated fear, resulted in high employee turnover, and reduced total commitment to work. Holford (2019), Arslan et al. (2021), and Rampersad (2020) have also raised similar concerns about job security. However, in this research, the participants' use and familiarity with generative AI did not influence their commitment and loyalty to the organization. Our findings provided insight into the participants' experience with job security concerns, highlighting the importance of internal management of AI tools for data control. Employees did not view AI as a threat but as a tool that enhances productivity and complements skills.

Generative AI has both negative and positive effects on employee morale and productivity if not properly managed (Shrinivaas, 2021). Our findings revealed that there is a positive impact of AI on work, particularly in terms of managing workloads more efficiently and allowing focus on significant tasks.

The study's findings on work-life balance indicate no current impact from generative AI, with varied expectations about future changes. While some of the participants saw a positive influence, particularly in reducing work time and delineating work-personal life boundaries, others, more skeptical about technology, noted no significant change in work-life balance. This reflects a broader debate in existing literature about technology's impact on productivity. As Rhomberg (2022) noted, the "productivity paradox" suggests that increased technology doesn't necessarily lead to proportional productivity gains, potentially affecting both personal life and work efficiency.

Our findings have implications for employers, employees, and society. Employers should ethically utilize generative AI, recognizing that some human roles are irreplaceable. It's essential to balance AI's productivity benefits with the need for effective data management and respect for job security. Employees should advocate

for regulations overseeing generative AI use. Integrating human interaction into AI training becomes a valuable skill as AI accelerates processes. Employers must protect employees' legal rights, ensuring their job security and well-being aren't compromised by AI deployment. Addressing societal fears about AI involves tackling issues like data harvesting and privacy. While some platforms prioritize security, others may compromise user data. Therefore, a collaborative effort is needed among organizations, society, and government to establish ethical guidelines for AI use, promote responsible deployment, and mitigate negative societal concerns.

6. Conclusion

The era of generative AI has seamlessly integrated into our work and personal lives. Integrating humans and technology requires strategic and operational decisions tailored to the business environment. Our research indicates that AI is currently not seen as a threat and is unlikely to be in the near future. Generative AI is embraced as a beneficial tool, simplifying lives and being warmly incorporated into various systems. This positive reception can be further leveraged, considering AI's potential to influence all aspects of life, including work and personal needs.

7. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further study

Although the sample size is small, this study seeks to generate and contribute concepts to the principles of strategic human resource management in contemporary times wherein generative artificial intelligence has come to stay and is evolving even faster. There is insufficient literature that investigates the effects of a synergy of generative AI and employee well-being practices in organizations. Additionally, pragmatic human resources that include employee well-being agendas and work dynamics in most corporate cultures are still traditional. Another limitation was the measurability of employee well-being. This is sometimes not a tangible aspect, and relating it to the use of AI creates a dynamic and complex environment to measure its success or failure. Data security was paramount in the study and utilization of the information obtained, which required guided utilization of information, which restricted the availability of complete information.

Thus, further thorough studies could investigate the significant effects of the synergy of evolving generative artificial intelligence technologies and corporate strategic culture on revolutionized work dynamics, employee well-being, performance, and work-life balance through a quantitative study to test some hypotheses that can be drawn from this qualitative study. Also, scholars may attempt to collate a substantial data sample size that consists of ideally selected respondents based on set criteria, devoid of invalidating repetitive responses and non-defaulting on respondents' professional codes or choices of privacy. Significantly, further studies would increase the globally needed literature on the emerging niche of tech-driven strategic human resource management practices for employees.

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RMM; data curation, SH; writing—original draft preparation, DRL, RO, SH, SZ, and MK; writing—review and editing, DRL; supervision, ARM; project administration, ARM. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Article

Spiritual dimension of organizational collective engagement: Scale development and validation

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to introduce a new dimension of organizational collective engagement (OCE), namely spiritual engagement. This dimension proposes spiritual engagement, which is considered to increase the bundle of engagement as a whole at the organizational level. We collected data from 107 employees who worked in various agencies in Indonesia. We tested the validity and reliability of the proposed indicators of OCE and spiritual engagement using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. This study enhances the literature in the field of human resource development, especially in OCE, with the Islamic dimension of spiritual engagement. The findings reveal that there are 10 valid and reliable indicators that can be used to measure the concept of OCE among employees in Indonesia. OCE with four dimensions (physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual) can be an effort to increase organizational effectiveness through the collective engagement of all employees. Since this research is limited to Indonesia, further studies are needed in institutions around the world so that the consistency of the results can be justified.

Keywords: organizational collective engagement; spiritual engagement; organizational engagement

1. Introduction

The role of engagement in the organization is considered to be one of the factors in increasing productivity and performance. In the context of employees, engagement supports efforts to understand roles in business strategy and have a strong emotional connection and commitment to the organization (Jha and Kumar, 2016; Fachrunnisa et al., 2020a). Several studies on engagement have tested more at the employee level for performance improvement (Harrison et al., 2006; Rich et al., 2010). Engagement at the organizational level has not been researched much, which means that engagement may be a factor that can be used to understand an organization's ability to help companies achieve and maintain higher performance. Barrick et al. (2015) concluded in their research on engagement outside the individual called organizational collective engagement (OCE) that it can be considered an organizational-level construction that is influenced by the motivation of focused organizational practices that represent company-level resources. They argue that employees can collectively engage in the workplace with an analysis of how companies can strategically structure and use company resources to generate a shared perception among employees that organizational members are collectively involved in the workplace and, in doing so, create value for companies that ultimately improve performance. Barrick et al. (2015) define OCE as the perception held by organizational members that organizational

members, as a whole, are physically, cognitively, and emotionally involved in their work. OCE has three measurement dimensions, namely the dimensions of physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

Departing from the research of Barrick et al. (2015), who have not included spiritual values as part of work engagement, this study proposes the addition of one dimension, namely 'spiritual engagement'. Spiritual engagement is defined as a person's attachment to his work spiritually, or according to the belief that is believed. Roof et al. (2017) define spiritual engagement as an evolutionary, spiritually transforming set of beliefs, behaviours, expectations, and emotions that have the potential to affect ethics, values, identity, and organizational dynamics. Spiritual engagement is understood to include different actions such as 'maintaining relationships with other people', 'showing and receiving love', 'praying' and 'participating in other religious practices' (Penman et al., 2013; Fachrunnisa et al., 2020b). This action can build and maintain strong relationships among the participants because spiritual engagement is understood as love in action (Pavlovich, 2020). Action in this case can be reflected as doing work. People who do their work with religious encouragement, for example, can become more involved and love or interpret their work well. The influence of religion and culture on spiritual engagement is important because it is a way of expressing spirituality in the context of their work. They are spiritually involved in their work and interpret it well because it is fundamental to doing work as worship.

The addition of a spiritual dimension to OCE, different objectives in previous fields (e.g., health and education), and the scale standard are uncertain; therefore, a specification of the measurement domain is necessary so that broad measures are likely to be poor predictors of certain outcomes (Ajzen, 1987). To achieve a standard scale on the measurement of spiritual engagement, reliability and validity must be established, and their use allows cross-study comparisons (Goldsmith and Hofacker 1991). Our research aims to contribute to the human resource literature by (1) proposing a new dimension of spiritual engagement in OCE and (2) developing and validating a scale to improve measurements of spiritual engagement in OCE. We propose that the OCE literature, which has three measurement dimensions, can add a new dimension, namely the spiritual side, thereby adding a new perspective on the phenomenon of organizational engagement.

We compiled this research paper as follows: First, we review the emerging spiritual engagement literature and provide specific definitions of the dimensions of OCE. Then we discussed how to intervene in adding the OCE dimension, namely the spiritual dimension. Finally, we discuss the results of validity and reliability testing and provide suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

The conceptualization of engagement can be divided into two different contexts, namely a role in the work of an employee or a role as a member of the organization. Engagement, according to Macleod and Clarke (2009), is a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are focused and firm on the goals and values of their organization, are motivated to contribute to organizational success, and at the

same time enhance their own sense of well-being. Organizational engagement can be achieved when there is growing trust from employees in the organization and there is justice that the organization applies to all members of the organization (Malinen et al., 2013). Employees certainly expect wise business decisions by management so that they can achieve their full engagement with the organization. Macey and Schneider (2008) divide engagement into two dimensions: (a) employee values and expectations and (b) organizational ability to create an environment conducive to one's career growth. Employee expectations that are fulfilled by the organization (including rights, obligations, and wise decision-making) can certainly increase their trust in the organization so that it can increase full engagement in the organization. Scholars also suggest that engagement could potentially manifest itself as belonging to the organization, which can influence performance improvements.

2.1. Organizational collective engagement (OCE)

OCE is defined as the perception held by organizational members that organizational members, as a whole, are physically, cognitively, and emotionally involved in their work (Barrick et al., 2015). Engagement has been defined as behavior that shows the degree to which individuals are motivated to unite with their work in an organization. Whereas at the organizational level, engagement refers to the aggregate number of individuals involved in the organization (Barrick et al., 2015). To achieve this collective engagement, organizations must be able to translate individual engagement into collective engagement. The engagement that each individual has must collectively be raised to encourage collective engagement in their work so that organizational goals can be achieved. OCE is a firm-level construct and an indicator of the motivational environment as a whole in its assertiveness, and thus has a more descriptive focus. In contrast to individual engagement, which is based on the perception of self-engagement, it has a more evaluative focus (Klein and Kozlowski, 2000). Individual engagements will motivate other individuals to increase their engagement so that collectively, organizational engagement will emerge and affect the effectiveness of organizational performance (Barrick et al., 2015). OCE is also one of the capabilities that can be used by companies to create value, as shown by company performance. This value creation can be achieved by having resources at the organizational level such as work design, HR practices, and transformational leadership, all of which impact employee motivation (e.g., Combs et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2011; Sirmon et al., 2011), stating that company leaders play an important role in increasing organizational resources to produce capabilities. Therefore, it is probably that the knowledge and behavior of corporate leaders regarding company strategy contingently influence the collective engagement of organizations based on how they manage organizational resources effectively.

Organizations have the opportunity to take advantage of various actions at the organizational level to maximize the collective engagement of the organization and the performance benefits that will result from it. First, jobs were redesigned to provide workers with more feedback and greater autonomy, identity, variety, and significance in their assignments. Second, HR practices such as awards or assessments provide motivation to improve their performance in a sustainable manner. Third, leaders must

strive to inspire and motivate by persuading employees that they are working toward a common goal that is meaningful and significant. That way, individuals will be involved physically, emotionally, and cognitively in pursuing organizational goals by being more involved in their work, which in turn increases their potential to grow and survive in a competitive environment.

2.2. Spiritual engagement

Spirituality in the last decade has been in the spotlight of practitioners and academics because of its relation to increased engagement in the work of employees in organizations. However, spirituality and religion in the workplace do not come from studying the psychology of religion (Benefiel et al., 2014; Carroll, 2013; Khari and Sinha, 2020), but from scientific fields such as organizational behavior and human resource management. Effective leaders must create an environment for employees to express their own religion and to respect the religious beliefs of others (Hicks, 2003). Spirituality has been associated with religion. Religion is embedded in the faith tradition, which involves the devotion to shared beliefs and practices. The practice of spirituality in the workplace creates conditions for individuals to be more involved with their work and can contribute important values to support individuals and minimize organizational problems such as turnover (Driver, 2005). Islam provides solutions to various kinds of organizational problems (Al-Attas, 1995) because Islam is a way of life to teach people about their relationship with God, with the universe, and the relationship between their ethics and the economy and political system. Spirituality in Islam can bridge the creation of job engagement because it has the value of worship so that individuals can interpret their work well (Adawiyah and Pramuka, 2017).

Spiritual in the context of engagement refers to a person's attachment to his work spiritually, or according to the faith that is believed (presenting Allah SWT). Spiritual engagement has been defined here as a set of evolutionary and spiritually changing beliefs, behaviors, hopes, and emotions that have the potential to influence ethics, values, identity, and organizational dynamics (Roof et al., 2017). In line with the research of Hassan et al. (2016) which states that the integration of vertical and horizontal spiritual values helps organizations develop relationships of motivation and action, The value of spirituality in the organization will motivate them to get involved in work because of the meaning of worship and to expect the blessing of Allah SWT. Nasr (1987) states that spirituality is identical with the presence of a relationship with God, which affects individual self-esteem, meaning, and connection with others and nature. Kamil et al. (2011) have tried to study spirituality. They believe that Islamic spirituality in the context of an organization consists of four elements: ritual (Ibadat), forgiveness/repentance (Al a'fw), belief (Iman), and remembering Allah (Dzikrullah). Work associated with God and interpreted in the concept of religion (such as worship, working with blessings, and working in accordance with Islamic values) has more engagement in the work itself. They will be more motivated to be fully involved in work and can influence their other co-workers who value the same thing.

Other research has also shown that spirituality and religious engagement tend to improve a variety of college outcomes, including greater overall satisfaction (Astin,

1993), less stress (Pollard and Bates, 2004), higher indicated honesty (Perrin, 2000), and increased moral judgment (Good and Cartwright, 1998). Research by Penman et al. (2013) stated that the key to spiritual engagement is recognizing the person's efforts to understand the experience and provide support. Organizational support in the context of spirituality is able to create values that affect individual engagement. Research by Rennick et al. (2013) states that there is a positive relationship between spiritual engagement and affective college outcomes, which supports and validates the philosophy and mission of religious institutions in pursuing spiritual development and learning as academic experiences. Their research mentions several ways to promote spiritual engagement, such as encouraging students to engage in practices such as prayer, meditation, spiritual conversation, or other self-reflection exercises. This can be applied in the world of work. Organizations that have the same values as their members are certainly easier to motivate to engage in spiritual activities as an effort to integrate the spiritual context into their lives in the world of work. This effort has greatly influenced the process of improving their performance, which is based on the balance of their lives—for example, bringing the context of work into the context of an effort to improve spirituality. We summarize some of the concepts of spiritual engagement in **Table 1**, along with their measurements.

Table 1. Existing concept of spiritual engagement.

No.	Author and concept	Measurement
1	The hide of calling (meaning of work and religiosity) (Wood 2011)	• Know Your God-Given Strengths. • It's Not About You • Surrender to the Greater Purpose for Your Work. • Get a Spiritual Partner. • Develop a Portfolio of Spiritual Practices.
2.	The spiritual engagement instruments (Roof, Bocarnea, and Winston 2017) Spiritual engagement has been defined herein as an evolutionary, spiritually transforming set of beliefs, behaviors, expectations and emotions that have the potential to affect ethics, values, identity and organizational dynamics.	• Worship • Meditation • Fasting • Rest
3.	Spiritual Formation Behaviors (Baker and Lee 2020)	• Honoring individuals • Our celebrations honor individuals and make them feel valued. • Our work group celebrates teamwork and milestones together. • My company supports a healthy work/life balance. • My supervisor gives constructive feedback which helps me pursue my personal goals. • Nurturing relationship • People in my work group treat one another with courtesy and respect. • People in my work group help and encourage one another. • People in my work group show appreciation for me. • Serving with integrity. • I am trusted to use my judgment and make decisions. • Our work is focused on meeting real needs of customers. • Good ethical values and behaviour are important to us.

3. Method

3.1. Process of scale development

The methodology employed in this study for constructing a spiritual organizational collective engagement scale adheres to established principles of instrument design, as outlined by Churchill (1979), Boateng et al. (2018), Latif (2018), and Latif et al. (2019). The process encompassed seven key stages: 1) defining the construct's domain; 2) generating items based on existing literature; 3) categorizing items into each dimension of the construct; 4) conducting a pilot study with expert validation; 6) employing exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to discern the underlying dimensions of the scale using IBM SPSS; and 7) conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the reliability and validity of the proposed scale using IBM Amos.

3.2. Domain of the construct

As clarified in the literature review section, this paper focuses on examining the construct's domain, specifically the spiritual dimension, in the development of the OCE scale from the perspective of employees (organizational members). The spiritual dimension of OCE investigates how employees integrate their faith into their work, encompassing beliefs, practices, behaviors, and motivations. This integration propels their commitment, inspires colleagues, and nurtures a supportive work environment, ultimately contributing to collective engagement. By assessing these aspects on a scale, valuable insights are gained into the potent influence of spirituality on organizational well-being and performance.

3.3. Generation of OCE spiritual engagement items

To formulate the scale items, various procedures have been identified in this research, including literature review, expert surveys, and group discussion (Churchill, 1979; Boateng et al., 2018; Latif et al., 2019; etc.), among others. To ensure robustness, our study combined several of these methods. Initially, a total of 20 (twenty) items were created through an examination of existing literature, focusing on employee engagement linked to the spirituality of employees (organizational members). After identifying items with the potential to measure spiritual engagement among employees (organizational members), the authors categorized the original statements into the four dimensions of employee engagement toward employees' spirituality, as theoretically conceptualized in the paper.

Furthermore, the research conducted focused discussions with academics and professionals to validate items designed to effectively measure employee perceptions of spiritual engagement. Subsequently, for further refinement of the items, the scale underwent evaluation by the Head of Management Agencies, four professors, and researchers specializing in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management, Psychology, Spirituality/Religion, and Methodology, alongside employees and staff of organizational agencies. The panel conducted a meticulous examination of each item with respect to its intended dimension of measurement, concentrating on whether the dimensions could accurately capture the measurement

of employee engagement towards the spirituality of organizational members. This scrutiny resulted in the removal of several items from the scale and the reformulation of others to enhance clarity. Following this phase, a total of 20 items were ultimately integrated into the scale, with **Table 2** presenting all the items and their respective sources. In the subsequent employee survey, each statement was introduced with the phrase “my co-workers and I”.

Table 2. Initial compilation of itemized elements.

Items	Source
1) My co-workers and I were totally “involved” in our work.	Barrick et al. (2015)
2) I find that nearly everyone in our office puts a lot of effort and energy into achieving our job goals	Roof et al. (2017)
3) My co-workers and I take great pride in completing our job well	Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010)
4) Almost everyone at my workplace is passionate and enthusiastic about their respective jobs	Baker and Lee (2020)
5) Doing work at my workplace is (as a whole) so enjoyable that I often lose track of time	FGD with management science experts and Islamic worldview
6) My co-workers and I tend to be very focused when we get our work done	
7) Me and my co-workers tend really maintain the religious value of our office	
8) My co-workers and I believe that our personal spiritual values are compatible with the spiritual values of our office	
9) My colleagues and I interpret the value orientation of the value of worship every time I finish work	
10) My colleagues and I put forward genuine kindness and usefulness in completing work	

3.4. Initial data collection and purification

Following the inspection of the initial item set, a comprehensive data collection endeavor was undertaken to conduct a pilot study, engaging a cohort of 107 respondents. Subsequently, a preliminary questionnaire was formulated, comprising two distinct segments. Part A delved into the demographic and academic backgrounds of the respondents, while Part B entailed the assessment of respondent agreement levels concerning each of the 20 (twenty) statements articulated in steps 2 and 3. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) was employed for this purpose. Additionally, participants were encouraged to provide comments relevant to the statements to facilitate further refinement and enhance clarity. Upon completion of the pilot study, the survey underwent meticulous scrutiny by a proficient native Bahasa Indonesia and English-speaking editor, along with input from four academics for their insightful feedback.

Subsequently, we crafted a statement in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), the language of our research participants, and translated it back into English. In developing the questionnaire, we adhered to the counsel of experts, as advocated by scholars such as Hair et al. (2011) and Sekaran and Bougie (2016), steering clear of double-barrelled statements, confusing language, leading questions, and emotional expressions to mitigate potential confusion. A seasoned editor carefully reviewed the questionnaire, identifying and correcting omissions, errors, and perceived ambiguities. Following this scrutiny and in response to invaluable feedback from the pilot sample, the stylistic editor, and academic contributors to this research phase, essential refinements were introduced to enhance the questionnaire’s precision. This iterative

process, guided by discerning observations and recommendations from diverse expert perspectives involved in the critical review, ensured a heightened level of clarity and accuracy.

3.5. Data collection

The study's focus encompassed the workforce within an undisclosed number of agencies. Employing the snowball sampling technique coupled with purposive sampling (a non-probability approach), respondents were intentionally chosen. Non-random sampling methodologies were employed due to the absence of information on the precise population size, precluding the implementation of random sampling based on a sample frame. The selected cohort comprised 150 employees hailing from diverse professions within agencies and organizations situated in Indonesia. Eligible respondents were those aged 20 years and older. Notably, 120 employees actively engaged in this study, resulting in a noteworthy response rate of 90.83%. Of these responses, 107 questionnaires were deemed comprehensive and suitable for analysis. The succinct synthesis of respondents' profiles is encapsulated in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Profile of respondents.

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
20–29	12	11.22
30–39	25	23.36
40–49	21	19.63
≥50	49	45.79
Gender		
Female	57	53.27
Male	50	46.73
Agency field		
Teacher/Lecturer	53	49.55
Administration Staff	28	26.16
Private Sector/others	26	24.29

3.6. EFA (Exploratory factor analysis)

Following the meticulous collection and refinement of data, we initiated the assessment of the scale structure and its psychometric attributions to ascertain the reliability and validity of the proposed multidimensional tool for measuring Spiritual Engagement (SE) among employees (organizational members). As a preliminary step in this analytical process, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted employing principal component analysis and varimax rotation via IBM SPSS statistical software. The utilization of EFA in Employee Engagement development studies as an initial measure to validate the dimensional structure of scales has been well documented in previous research (Brockner et al., 2017; El Akremi et al., 2018; Kyriazos and Stalikas, 2018). The predetermined minimum factor loading criterion was set at 0.500. Additionally, an assessment of scale communality, reflecting the

extent of variance within each dimension, was carried out to ensure satisfactory explanatory levels. The findings indicate that all communalities surpassed the 0.500 threshold. Nevertheless, the item in proximity to the 0.500 margin was retained for further analysis to uphold the content validity of the scale.

In addition, in relation to the loading factor, all items must have 0.50 or more, which is considered to have sufficiently strong validation to explain latent constructs (Hair et al., 2009). Another reference states that the weakest loading factor that can be accepted is 0.40 (Sharma, 1996). The results of the factor analysis show that of the 10 variables that meet the requirements, they are spread into 3 factors (**Table 4**). Then the eigenvalues also show that 3 factors show a number greater than 1 with a total variance of 61.68%, higher than the recommended value of 60 percent in social science research (Hair et al., 2009). The EFA results show all items have a correlation coefficient above 0.3. We used the anti-image correlation matrix to examine the measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) with values above 0.50 for the factorability of individual items. The MSA of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin is 0.766, which indicates the suitability of the data for factor analysis since a minimum value of 0.60 is acceptable (Hair et al., 2009). Bartlett's roundness test with a p value of 0.00 less than 0.05 shows the overall significance of the correlation among all items. **Table 4** presents the results of the EFA analysis.

Table 4. EFA result.

No	Item	Factors		
		1	2	3
1	My co-workers and I were totally "involved" in our work (physically)	0.064	0.341	0.592
2	I find that nearly everyone in our office puts a lot of effort and energy into achieving our job goals (physically)	0.857	0.074	−0.010
3	My co-workers and I take great pride in completing our job well (emotionally)	0.437	0.342	0.333
4	Almost everyone at my workplace is passionate and enthusiastic about their respective jobs (emotionally)	0.853	0.115	0.011
5	Doing work at my workplace is (as a whole) so enjoyable that I often lose track of time (cognitively)	0.046	−0.131	0.834
6	My co-workers and I tend to be very focused when we get our work done (cognitively)	0.548	0.251	0.468
7	Me and my co-workers tend really maintain the religious value of our office (spiritually)	0.114	0.847	0.042
8	My co-workers and I believe that our personal spiritual values are compatible with the spiritual values of our office (spiritually)	0.163	0.673	0.197
9	My colleagues and I interpret the value orientation of the value of worship every time I finish work (spiritually)	206	778	−0.015
10	My colleagues and I put forward genuine kindness and usefulness in completing work (spiritually)	0.618	0.402	0.236
KMO		0.766		
Sphericity Barlett test		304.385		
Df		45		
Sign.		0.000		

3.7. CFA (confirmatory factor analysis)

The assessment of measurement models was conducted through the application of the structural equation modelling technique, utilizing IBM SPSS AMOS. This evaluation involved a thorough scrutiny of goodness of fit, composite reliability, as

well as convergent and discriminant validity. The purpose of measurement models is to clarify the relationship between latent variables and their corresponding observed measures, determining the degree to which the data conforms to the proposed model (Henseler et al., 2009; Demo et al., 2012; Brown, 2015). Notably, Demo et al. (2012) and Brown (2015) underscored the importance of considering the model's consistency when fit indices fall within marginal ranges. To gauge the goodness of fit between a specified model and the observed data, the present study relies on an extensive set of indices, encompassing CMIN (Chi-square), standardized root means square residual (SRMR), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), PGFI (Parsimony-adjusted Goodness of Fit Index), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

The fit indices adhere to specific cutoff values. As recommended by Hu and Bentler (1998), a cutoff value of 0.08 is suggested for SRMR, and the RMSEA value should not exceed 0.08. For CFI and TLI, falling within the 0.90 to 0.95 range is advised, according to Bentler (1990). The acceptance range for CMIN/df varies among researchers, ranging from less than 2 (Ullman and Bentler, 2012) to less than 5 (Schumacker and Lomax, 2010). PGFI values are proposed to be in the 0.50 range, with other indices ideally ranging around 0.90 (Mulaik et al., 1989). To assess the measurement model, data quality, including construct reliability and construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis, was considered. The development of the measurement model was informed by the findings of the EFA, with all 10 items incorporated into the structural model. Importantly, none of the items were omitted due to low loadings. The results of the CFA with 10 items demonstrated a commendable fit, and a summary of these outcomes is presented in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Fit indices.

Fit indices	Recommended value	Outcome
χ^2/df		221.049
P	In-significant	0.000
CMIN/df	≤ 5	1.812
RMSEA	≤ 0.06	0.057
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.973
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.967

The analysis of indices following the CFA, as outlined in **Table 5**, revealed that the three-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit. Multiple approaches were employed to assess the overall fit of this model to the data. An exact fit is indicated when the significance level (typically set at $P > 0.05$) surpasses a specified threshold. It is acknowledged that χ^2 is influenced by sample size and tends to be significant in larger samples, as is evident in our study with a sample size of 107. The indices, with values spanning from 0 to 1, generally signify a superior fit with higher values, excluding RMSEA. An RMSEA < 0.05 and a poor fit for RMSEA > 0.05 to < 0.08 to 0.10 (Kelloway, 1995; Chow et al., 2001). Both CFI and TLI values exceeded 0.90. Consequently, the conclusion drawn was that the three-factor model adeptly fits the data.

3.8. Analysis of reliability

To ensure the internal consistency of multiple indicators for each construct, a reliability analysis was conducted, following the approach outlined by Lu et al. (2009). The focus was on the composite reliability coefficient, a metric employed to evaluate the reliability of factors. This coefficient gauges the degree to which a set of latent construct indicators collectively contribute to the measurement of a construct (Hair, 2009). While Cronbach's alpha has traditionally been utilized for assessing construct reliability, Cronbach and Shavelson (2004) have acknowledged that relying solely on the alpha coefficient may be insufficient. Therefore, composite reliability, drawing on the standardized loadings and measurement errors of each item, is now considered more robust (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The obtained values for composite reliability, ranging between 0.878 and 0.942, affirm the reliability of the measures in the study (Hair et al., 2011).

Based on reliability testing, the OCE variable with 10 measurement items in it shows the number 0.790, so this variable meets the reliability requirements, which is more than 0.60. We also tested the reliability of the spiritual dimension as an additional dimension to the OCE concept, which indicated that the reliability value was 0.749, so this dimension also met the criteria for an OCE variable.

4. Discussion

This study proposes the new concept of OCE by adding a dimension to the spiritual context. Thus, OCE in this study refers to the perception held by organizational members that organizational members, as a whole, are physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually involved in their work. Individual engagement is able to motivate other individuals because of the same values and encouragement from the organization, which ultimately leads to collective engagement in the organization that will create value for the company. Interaction between employees will create new knowledge sharing, such as affective, motivational, and moral behavior, including performance-related attributes such as obtaining collective benefits and high group potential (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2000). The process of social comparison between employees can generate job discussions that make them more involved together in their work because of the influence between each other.

Spiritual engagement is proposed to be one of the dimensions of OCE. Collective engagement can be achieved by tapping into individual spirituality to stimulate engagement in work. Employee engagement and spirituality are related to the emotions and enthusiasm of individuals in the work environment (Saks, 2011). The meaning of work, shared values, and organizational drive can foster the spiritual level of the individual in it. Organizational values, leadership behavior, and most importantly, organizational culture can influence employee engagement (Frank et al., 2004; Fachrunnisa et al., 2021). Mahipalan and Sheena (2018) stated that spirituality can increase job engagement, mediated by employee engagement. Job engagement includes a person feeling united in a job because they feel happy with the job. Spirituality has also been linked to well-being, such as maintaining better physical and mental health (Zullig et al., 2006). Spirituality can provide meaning and contribute to

the quality of work life (Lee, 2002). Individuals with a higher spiritual level are more likely to be involved in their work because their ability to interpret work associated with worship in the context of worship can minimize obstacles, for example, experiencing less stress (Pollard and Bates, 2004). This is very important because when they enjoy the job properly, it will affect their environment more spiritually. Even the research of Sarmad et al. (2018) concludes that spiritual workplaces include organizations that support the meaning of work, such as working with the intention of worship (Holy Qur'an, 51:185), working sincerely to achieve the pleasure of Allah (Holy Qur'an, 98:5), and for the purpose of the afterlife (Holy Qur'an, 99:6–8).

Individuals with an understanding of the meaning of work by connecting religion (Islam) and God are considered to be more involved in their work. They believe that the results of work are not only in the form of material but also an effort to seek the pleasure of Allah and the goal of the hereafter, so that they have high enthusiasm and dedication to complete work. The environment and people with the same values also trigger their full engagement to jointly synergize the ability to achieve organizational goals.

Limitation and further research

In alignment with the outlined research objectives, the results of this undertaking in scale development successfully introduce spiritual engagement as a novel dimension within the broader construct of Organizational Collective Engagement (OCE). Furthermore, this investigation strives to incorporate perspectives grounded in Islamic values, drawing on the works of Al-Attas (1995), Adawiyah and Pramuka (2017), Hassan et al. (2016), etc. in a literature review. However, it is important to acknowledge a limitation in this, as it falls short of establishing a definitive connection between Islamic values and spiritual engagement within the OCE context. The findings accentuate the critical need for future research endeavours to develop a comprehensive scale that adeptly captures the nuanced intricacies of Islamic spiritual values, incorporating more refined items and considerations tailored to the specificities of Islamic religious and spiritual environments.

To address the identified limitations pertaining to the establishment of a connection with Islamic values and to enhance the incorporation of Islamic spiritual values in scale development, a comprehensive outline for improvement is proposed. First and foremost, undertaking an exhaustive literature review is imperative. This review should encompass an in-depth exploration of Islamic spiritual values and their relevance to organizational engagement. Notable works in this domain, such as those by Alqhaiwi and Luu (2023), Mumtaz et al. (2023), Koburtay et al. (2022), etc., should be consulted to inform a nuanced understanding of Islamic values, principles, and practices related to spirituality in the workplace. Secondly, a strategic collaboration with Islamic scholars or experts is recommended. Involving these experts in the development process ensures that the scale accurately reflects the specific values and principles outlined in Islamic teachings. Their invaluable insights can shed light on the unique aspects of Islamic spirituality within the organizational context.

Thirdly, a pilot test of the scale with a sample of Islamic participants is crucial to gathering first-hand feedback on its relevance and alignment with Islamic spiritual

values. This iterative process allows for the identification of any discrepancies and ensures that the scale authentically captures the nuances of Islamic spirituality. Lastly, generating scale items that align meticulously with Islamic values is paramount. Drawing on insights from the literature review and feedback obtained from Islamic experts and participants, the scale and its principles should be meticulously crafted to be specific to Islamic teachings and resonant with Islamic employees. This multifaceted approach lays the groundwork for future research endeavours seeking to refine and advance the understanding of spiritual engagement within an Islamic organizational framework.

5. Conclusion and implication

The results of the study of the concept of OCE with four dimensions (physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual) enrich the literature on human resource development, especially in the field of organizational collective engagement, by assessing the empirical dimensions of the construction of spiritual engagement in Indonesia. Islamic-based human resource managers can use instruments to measure spiritual engagement in the organization to achieve organizational goals. The spiritual context of engagement can collectively increase organizational engagement, which is considered to be an important component of performance effectiveness. Scholars and professionals can use research findings to justify their efforts in designing, developing, and implementing appropriate learning and performance interventions so that spiritual engagement can continue to increase among Muslim employees and shape the concept of OCE.

As an emerging tool, the instrument needs further validation of using different approaches in different organizational settings across cultures and countries to produce consistent results before applying it widely as a model for organizational transformation to drive organizational development. Moreover, the number scale of the spirituality dimension of engagement in the OCE concept requires further testing of its usefulness for non-Muslim employees. The spirituality tested in this study is in the context of Islam, so it is necessary to test whether it is relevant if tested on non-Muslims.

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Article

Lifelong learning and skill development for project managers in the dynamic labor market landscape

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of project managers working in the distinct environment of clinical trial organizations as project management changes in dynamic labor markets. The literature emphasizes the changing skill set needed for project managers and stresses the value of cognitive flexibility, interpersonal skills, and lifelong learning. Nonetheless, there is still a great deal to learn about how these dynamics appear in the setting of clinical trial organizations. By investigating project managers' perspectives and involvement in lifetime learning and skill development inside clinical trial organizations, this study seeks to close this gap. To elucidate the nuances of their professional experiences, 64 project managers were interviewed using a qualitative methodology. Key themes emerged from the thematic analysis, including the importance of interpersonal and personal qualities, the dynamic nature of abilities like creativity and critical thinking, and the strategic application of lifelong learning. The findings add new evidence to the body of knowledge by offering a sector-specific understanding of the lifelong learning needs and skill requirements for project managers in clinical trial organizations. The study emphasizes how crucial it is to continuously learn to improve healthcare outcomes and adjust to industry-specific problems. Contextual implications encompass perspectives for entities seeking to maximize training regimens and augment the flexibility of project management groups in clinical trial environments. This work advances theoretical ideas and practical concerns for lifelong learning and skill development in clinical trial organizations. It also adds subtle insights into a specialized domain to the discourse on project management.

Keywords: lifelong learning; skill development; project managers; clinical trial; labor market; technology; professional development

1. Introduction

In a time of swift technological progress, evolving industry trends, and a growing need for creative project resolutions, project managers have become indispensable to the success of organizations. Project managers must constantly adapt, develop, and improve their skill sets due to the dynamic nature of the modern labor market to address the challenges presented by a constantly shifting work environment.

Project managers play a crucial role in coordinating intricate plans, guaranteeing project completion on schedule, and matching project results with company goals. However, the traditional skill set needed for project management is expanding and no longer limited to technical knowledge (Munir, 2022). Today's project managers face a wide range of difficulties, such as incorporating cutting-edge technology, encouraging productive teamwork, and adjusting to the growing complexity of project scopes (Ubfal et al., 2022). Project managers encounter never-before-seen difficulties in the quickly changing field of project management, which is defined by

globalization, technological breakthroughs, and changing industrial dynamics. A broad skill set that goes beyond conventional technical knowledge is required due to the dynamic nature of the work market. This study explores the viewpoints of 64 project managers in clinical trial organizations about lifelong learning and skill development, taking into account their experiences in this changing environment. By concentrating on this particular industry, we hope to capture the subtleties particular to the clinical trial space, where project managers are essential to the smooth running of trials that increase medical knowledge.

Through the following research question, this study explores the necessity for project managers to participate in ongoing learning programs by looking at the variety of abilities that the changing labor market requires.

How do project managers in clinical trial organizations perceive lifelong learning as a strategic tool for skill development?

This study's main goal is to clarify how project managers understand the complex dynamics of skill development and lifelong learning. This study is important for project managers who want to succeed in fast-paced work situations, as well as for organizational leaders, legislators, and educators who are involved in creating professional development initiatives. It is predicted that the results will provide insightful information that will influence training programs, help make strategic decisions, and eventually develop a workforce of project managers who are more adaptable and resilient.

2. Literature review

Project managers now play a role that crosses traditional boundaries and requires a wide skill set beyond technical skills in the quickly changing field of project management. The literature on project management skill development and lifetime learning highlights the significant changes taking place in the sector, emphasizing adaptability, multidisciplinary abilities, and the relationship between personal qualities and career success. Professional development now revolves around lifelong learning, particularly in fast-paced fields like project management. Project managers must be able to continuously learn and adapt to stay effective in a world where stakeholder expectations are changing and technology is advancing (Drewery et al., 2020; Kim and Park, 2020). It is becoming more widely acknowledged that organizations looking to stay competitive must prioritize lifelong learning as a strategic goal rather than only as a personal endeavor (Dachner et al., 2021). This is consistent with the increasing consensus that to effectively negotiate the intricacies of the dynamic labor market landscape, project managers must actively seek out new knowledge and skills (Kerzner, 2022).

In project management, the emphasis on technical skills has evolved to include a dynamic set of cognitive talents. The importance of creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities in a project manager's toolset has grown (Singh Dubey et al., 2022; Ubfal et al., 2022). Project managers need to be flexible enough to innovate and adjust as projects grow more complicated and uncertain (Arefazar et al., 2022; Cobb, 2023). According to Munir (2022), to manage changing project needs, project

managers need a comprehensive skill set that includes technical proficiency and cognitive flexibility.

The widespread tendency to incorporate technology into project management procedures necessitates that project managers possess digital literacy abilities. Project managers are supposed to use technology not only for communication and project monitoring but also for making strategic decisions (Marion and Fixson, 2021). Research highlights the need for project managers to develop and maintain their digital literacy to take advantage of new technology (El Khatib et al., 2022). To maximize project outcomes, project managers need to stay up-to-date on developing technologies as more organizations adopt digital project management tools (Ju et al., 2020).

The literature now places a greater emphasis on interpersonal abilities, demonstrating a paradigm shift from the idea that project managers are only technical specialists to that of leaders who can build productive teamwork. Crucial interpersonal skills for project managers have been highlighted as effective communication, diversity adaptation, and team leadership (Elkbuli et al., 2023; Moradi et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2021). According to Kukah et al. (2022), effective project managers possess a high level of emotional intelligence, which helps them resolve conflicts with others and form cohesive project teams.

The body of research emphasizes how personal qualities like emotional intelligence, resilience, and an entrepreneurial attitude influence project managers' success. To successfully navigate the risks and setbacks that come with project management, resilience is essential (NAJEH and Morched, 2023). Effective stakeholder management and teamwork are facilitated by emotional intelligence, which includes social skills and self-awareness (Al Hosani et al., 2023). Moreover, project success has been linked to an entrepreneurial attitude, which is typified by a proactive and inventive approach (Al Hosani et al., 2023).

The body of research on project managers' skill development and lifetime learning agrees that the modern job market necessitates a diverse skill set (Al Hosani et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2021). In addition to being highly skilled in technical areas, project managers also need to possess cognitive flexibility, interpersonal grace, and other qualities that foster resilience and creativity. This literature analysis provides sector-specific insights into the lifelong learning experiences and skill requirements of project managers. It also forms the basis for the current study, which investigates how these themes appear within the unique setting of clinical trial organizations.

There is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding clinical trial organizations, even though it acknowledges the dynamic nature of project management roles and the importance of lifelong learning. Project managers may need to acquire certain skills and undergo specific learning experiences due to the various obstacles and regulatory complexities associated with clinical trials. There is a dearth of research in the literature today that specifically examines how project managers in clinical trial firms see and participate in lifelong learning, especially in light of the constantly shifting labor market conditions that are unique to this industry. This research fills the identified gap by offering fresh data and an in-depth look at project managers' experiences in clinical trial organizations. Within the context of a specialized industry,

it provides a concentrated analysis of the complex interactions between skill development and lifetime learning. Also, the knowledge of how project managers negotiate the changing labor market, with an emphasis on interpersonal skills, creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, is sector-specific and makes a significant contribution. The paper contributes to the theoretical discourse on project management in specific contexts and the practical optimization of professional development programs in clinical trial organizations by illuminating these experiences.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences, viewpoints, and practices of project managers working in clinical trial organizations in the dynamic labor market environment, with a particular emphasis on skill development and lifelong learning. To ensure diversity in experience, specialization, and organizational setting, a total of 64 project managers with at least five years of project management experience were included in the study.

Each participant has an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interviews is to learn more about the project managers' experiences with skill development and lifetime learning within the framework of their jobs. Each interview lasts between sixty and ninety minutes, long enough to allow for a thorough examination of the viewpoints of the participants.

To find, examine, and present patterns in the qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilized using NVivo 12. The identification of themes about skill development and lifelong learning guarantees a deep and complex comprehension of the project managers' experiences.

3.1. Ethical considerations

Participants get comprehensive information about the goals, methods, and any dangers of the study. Before the interview, each participant gives informed consent. Participants' privacy is rigorously protected. Pseudonyms are given to participants to conceal their identities, and all data is anonymized.

3.2. Limitations

Generalizability: Results might be unique to the setting of clinical trials and might not apply to project managers in other sectors of the economy.

Self-report biases: Since the study uses self-reported data, social desirability and memory biases may have an impact on participants' responses.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic

The study included a total of 64 respondents, with a mean age of 28.6 years and ages ranging from 20 to 49. There were 29 women and 35 men among the respondents. Eleven of the respondents held doctorates, and five held a postdoctoral degree in the medical sciences. All of the respondents had completed their master's degree in higher

education. The majority of respondents stated that their entity's operational range encompassed the whole of the United States, while fourteen respondents suggested it was international and eight indicated it was regional. Every study participant participated in project execution at the managerial level within their respective organizations. The respondents' descriptions of the projects they carried out showed that the study group's implemented initiatives were clinical trials.

4.2. Lifelong learning as a tactical tool

Respondents shed light on the strategic importance of lifelong learning for project managers negotiating the constantly changing landscape of the contemporary labor market. Lifelong learning encapsulates the proactive approach needed to prosper in a quickly evolving world where fresh knowledge is always in demand and traditional skills could become outdated (R31). Lifelong learning is a strategic strategy that aims to provide a competitive advantage, improve adaptability, and guarantee ongoing relevance in a quickly changing professional environment (R28). Professionals who actively participate in lifelong learning are better able to foresee changes, seize new opportunities, and overcome obstacles (R8). Project managers continuously improve, adapt, and flourish in their professions through lifelong learning (R64).

The participant's response captures the essence of the idea that lifelong learning is a strategic and intentional method for people to navigate the complexity of today's environment. Lifelong learning is a purposeful, planned approach rather than a passive reaction to change (R1). Lifelong learning is a deliberate and methodical attitude toward learning new things throughout one's career, including perspectives, abilities, and information (R25). Project managers use lifelong learning as a tool to improve their skills throughout their careers, obtain a competitive edge, and adjust to new trends (R8). Lifelong learning is not only advantageous but also necessary to remain effective and relevant in the face of changing work environments (R2). Project managers smartly choose and learn the information and skills most pertinent to their positions and market trends (R55).

4.3. Dynamic nature of skills

Respondents clarify why it is so important for project managers to adopt a mentality that sees talents as dynamic, ever-evolving assets that are essential to success in the labor market of the future, rather than as static things. Skill sets are always changing due to changes in economic, social, and technological paradigms (R12). Respondents highlighted important qualities like creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving as essential parts of the dynamic skill set needed in today's workplace. The majority of the respondents (56 respondents) mentioned that creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving are crucial skill sets that project managers need to have in the dynamic labor market landscape. Respondents exhort project managers to cultivate a creative attitude, stressing that creativity is a strategic tool for coming up with original and workable project solutions rather than being limited to artistic pursuits. According to the respondents, project managers can improve their ability to solve problems, make wise judgments, and negotiate the complexities of a project with a nuanced understanding by encouraging a culture of

critical thinking. It encourages project managers to critically assess information, challenge presumptions, and conduct in-depth analysis (R32). Respondents talk about how problem-solving is iterative, highlighting the importance of flexibility and ongoing solution improvement. Project managers need to adopt a strategic problem-solving mindset that can foresee and mitigate future challenges, rather than just focusing on solving immediate problems (R18).

4.4. Technology and digital literacy

Respondents talk about how technology is changing the workforce and emphasize how important it is for project managers to become digitally literate. Technological adaptation is a proactive step toward improving project effectiveness and maintaining relevance in a changing technological landscape (R12). In the modern corporate environment, technology is not just a tool but also a driving force that is changing the nature of projects and how they are managed (R26). Project managers need to anticipate technology changes and make proactive adaptations (R10). Technology is a dynamic force that is always changing, and for project managers to continue being effective, they must keep up with these developments (R27).

Respondents emphasized the necessity for project managers to understand and effectively use digital tools. Digital technology improves collaboration, expedites project procedures, and boosts overall project success (R17). To fully utilize technology in project management, project managers have to consistently improve their digital literacy (R21).

Respondents talked about how project management software, data analytics, and virtual collaboration tools are being used more frequently. Respondents recommended that project managers accept these changes, seeing them as necessary to maintain their competitiveness in a workplace that is increasingly digitally oriented.

4.5. Interpersonal skills

Respondents emphasized how crucial it is for project managers to have strong communication and collaborative skills in the setting of a more diversified and linked workplace. Clear, open, and flexible communication is essential for project managers (R1). Effective communication is essential to building mutual understanding amongst team members, stakeholders, and various partners (R17). Project managers should adapt their communication techniques to suit a variety of audiences (R29). Project managers' performance is closely linked to their ability to successfully traverse a complex and globally interconnected work context, even beyond their technical skills (R8). One of the most important interpersonal skills for project managers is good communication (R20). It is important to communicate intelligibly across linguistic and cultural divides (R8).

Respondents emphasized the growing importance of cooperation and cross-functional collaboration. Fostering a collaborative mindset, appreciating different points of view, and utilizing the combined intelligence of varied teams are tips that project managers should follow (R34). Collaboration is a strategic advantage in utilizing the skills of a diverse workforce, in addition to a way to achieve project goals (R20).

Respondents recommended that project managers cultivate a sophisticated comprehension of cultural subtleties in order to provide an inclusive and courteous workplace. Building cohesive and high-performing project teams needs the capacity to negotiate a variety of cultural norms and perspectives (R36).

4.6. Personal attributes

Respondents emphasized the importance of non-technical personal and professional attributes and acknowledged their critical significance in determining project managers' performance. Respondents talked about the importance of resilience, emotional intelligence, and an entrepreneurial attitude in handling the opportunities and difficulties posed by a quickly evolving work environment. It is advised that project managers develop a resilient mindset, seeing challenges as chances for development and education rather than impassable hurdles (R8). Emotionally intelligent project managers may effectively navigate interpersonal interactions, comprehend and regulate their own emotions, and demonstrate empathy towards the viewpoints of their team members (R4).

5. Discussion

The concept of "lifelong learning as a tactical tool" has emerged, highlighting the strategic importance of ongoing education in project managers' professional development. The participants conveyed the necessity of continuous skill development to stay current in the dynamic field of project management. As a tactical tool, lifelong learning helps project managers adjust to evolving industry trends, organizational dynamics, and methodology. This result is consistent with a larger body of research that highlights the value of flexibility and ongoing learning in modern work environments (Dachner et al., 2021; Drewery et al., 2020; Kim and Park, 2020).

The discussion about the changing nature of skills emphasizes how important problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking are to a project manager's skill set. Participants stated that project managers need to be able to think critically about the requirements of the project, solve problems creatively, and negotiate complicated issues. The focus on how skills are dynamic, especially creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, is consistent with research showing how traditional technical abilities are giving way to a more adaptable skill set (Munir, 2022; Singh Dubey et al., 2022; Ubfal et al., 2022). This is in line with the changing requirements for project management positions, which place a high focus on cognitive skills necessary for creativity and sound decision-making in addition to traditional technical expertise.

The "Technology and Digital Literacy" subject highlights how technology has revolutionized project management. The participants recognized that to successfully negotiate the incorporation of technology into project workflows, they would need to acquire digital literacy abilities. This result is consistent with the present trend, which calls for project managers to use technology more for collaboration, communication, and project monitoring (El Khatib et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Marion and Fixson, 2021). To guarantee the best possible project outcomes, the discussion urges organizations to fund training initiatives that improve project managers' technological competence.

The issue of interpersonal skills surfaced as being multidimensional and including team leadership, collaboration, effective communication, and adaptation to diversity. Project managers stressed how important these abilities are to creating cohesive project teams and a productive workplace. The conversation emphasizes how interpersonal skills affect team dynamics and project success. The identification of interpersonal skills such as team leadership, collaboration, effective communication, and diversity adaptation corroborates previous research showing how project managers are increasingly playing the role of leaders who can promote productive teamwork (Elkbuli et al., 2023; Moradi et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2021). The industry-specific details provide value by highlighting how crucial these abilities are in the setting of clinical trials, where teamwork and clear communication are essential.

The last theme focuses on the character traits of project managers, such as emotional intelligence, resilience, and an entrepreneurial spirit, and it aligns with literature recognizing the importance of these qualities in project success (Al Hosani et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2021). The significance of resilience in surmounting obstacles and managing uncertainty was acknowledged by the participants. Emotional intelligence, as a key competency, contributes to effective stakeholder management and team collaboration. Project managers can also address problems with a proactive and creative perspective by developing an entrepreneurial mindset. This theme promotes the inclusion of personal development activities in professional training programs and highlights the importance of the human element in project management.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 64 project managers working in clinical trial organizations, delving into the complex dynamics of skill development and lifelong learning in the dynamic labor market. The emerging themes illuminate important aspects that influence project managers' career paths and have consequences for both organizational objectives and individual career paths.

The "Lifelong Learning as a Tactical Tool" topic draws attention to the strategic importance of ongoing education in project management. Project managers realized that continuing education and skill development were essential to their jobs. To keep their project management teams at the forefront of industry innovations, organizations are recommended to cultivate a culture that supports and fosters lifelong learning programs.

The understanding of how abilities, especially creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, are dynamic highlights how project managers are held to changing standards. These cognitive abilities go beyond technical competence and are recognized as crucial parts of a project manager's arsenal since they promote creativity in project outcomes and allow for flexibility in handling difficult problems.

How technology has revolutionized project management techniques was also emphasized. Project managers understood that to successfully incorporate technology into their processes, they needed to continuously improve their digital literacy abilities. It is recommended that organizations make investments in technical training programs to guarantee that project managers fully utilize digital tools for enhanced project productivity.

Interpersonal skills surfaced as a central theme that included team leadership, collaboration, effective communication, and adaptation to diversity. Project managers emphasized how important these abilities are to creating cohesive teams and encouraging work cultures. The conversation promotes giving interpersonal skill development top priority through focused training initiatives, in line with the industry's growing understanding of the role soft skills play in project success.

The last theme highlights the qualities that project managers bring to the table, such as an entrepreneurial mentality, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Project managers recognized the value of these characteristics in overcoming obstacles and encouraging creativity. The study recognizes the holistic nature of a project manager's skill set and supports the inclusion of personal development activities in professional training programs.

Overall, the themes that have been found offer significant perspectives on the complex terrain of competencies and educational prerequisites that project managers must master in ever-changing labor markets. Both project managers and organizational leaders can benefit from the practical insights provided by this study. It is recommended that project managers have a proactive approach to lifetime learning, consistently honing their technical, interpersonal, and personal proficiencies. In response, businesses are recommended to fund extensive training initiatives that tackle the mentioned issues to develop a workforce that is flexible, tech-savvy, and highly competent in both interpersonal and personal domains.

It is critical to recognize the study's limitations, such as the fact that the results are context-specific for clinical trial organizations. To increase the results' generalizability, related issues could be investigated in other industries in future research. Longitudinal studies may also shed light on how lifetime learning programs affect project managers' career paths in the long run.

In conclusion, this study adds to the expanding body of research on project managers' skill development and lifetime learning. Project managers and organizations may negotiate the dynamic labor market landscape with resilience, adaptability, and a dedication to continuous professional progress by understanding the subtle interactions between technical, interpersonal, and personal abilities.

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Article

How does human capital in the public sector affect tax uncertainty?

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Abstract: This paper provides new evidence on human resources management within the public sector. We explore the impact and mechanisms of the education and skills of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty using data from A-share-listed companies from 2009 to 2016. Our findings show that tax uncertainty is negatively correlated with the increase in human capital in the tax inspection bureau. That is, tax inspectors with higher levels of education and those who are certified tax agents help reduce tax uncertainty. Further analysis demonstrates that the impact of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty is most pronounced within large-scale and long-established firms.

Keywords: human capital; tax uncertainty; corporate governance; tax inspectors

1. Introduction

Human resources management has long been a significant issue in the field of economics. Prior literature, however, focuses on human resources management in firms. It is unclear how human resources management within the public sector works. Public officials serve as the linchpins in the execution of governmental functions and the delivery of public services. Their competencies and efficiency profoundly impact the quality of governance, transparency, and public trust in institutions (Roger et al., 2023). Given the importance of public officials in government governance, the public sector is increasingly prioritizing the enhancement of human capital among its officials, aiming to improve the quality and effectiveness of government administration. Competent public servants ensure the effective implementation of policies, uphold the rule of law, and safeguard the interests of citizens. Conversely, deficiencies in human capital, such as inadequate skills, can lead to governance failures and the erosion of public confidence in government institutions. In this paper, we exploit a relatively special setting—the tax inspection bureau in China—to provide new evidence on the governance effect of human capital within the public sector.

The tax inspection bureau in China presents an opportunity for us to examine the impact of the education and skills of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty. The government places significant emphasis on recognizing and harnessing the governance role of human capital within the public sector. It underscores the importance of public officials acquiring the requisite skills and competencies to navigate the complexities of governance in a rapidly evolving landscape. One area that has received particular attention is the tax authorities, given their critical role in revenue generation and fiscal management. As a frontline agency tasked with serving taxpayers and upholding tax compliance, the tax authorities operate within a dynamic environment characterized by evolving regulations and diverse stakeholder needs. Consequently, there is a heightened emphasis on enhancing the professional skills and expertise of tax officials.

Tax bureaus are placing greater focus on recruiting individuals with higher education levels, providing them with training, and offering incentives for them to pursue professional certifications, such as certified tax agent credentials. Moreover, these certifications are increasingly tied to salary increments and career advancements within the bureaus.

Tax uncertainty, a pervasive concern in the realm of corporate tax strategy, has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Prior literature has studied the relationship between tax uncertainty and corporate tax avoidance and explored the impact of tax uncertainty (Guenther et al., 2018; Hanlon et al., 2017; Jacob et al., 2022). At its essence, tax uncertainty refers to the ambiguity and unpredictability surrounding various aspects of tax laws, regulations, interpretations, and enforcement practices, which may affect corporate activities. Firms always hold more cash and delay large capital investments in the face of tax uncertainty (Hanlon et al., 2017; Jacob et al., 2022). The enforcement capabilities of tax inspectors in the tax inspection bureau play a pivotal role in shaping tax uncertainty. On one hand, when tax inspectors possess the necessary expertise and proficiency in tax laws and regulations, they are better equipped to identify potential instances of non-compliance and enforce tax obligations rigorously. If this is the case, tax inspectors can effectively dissuade enterprises from engaging in tax avoidance. We adopt a broad definition of tax avoidance as the entire continuum of all the tax-planning activities to reduce firms' explicit tax burden. "Tax avoidance" is used as a neutral term in this paper) practices that reduce the likelihood of tax uncertainty stemming from ambiguous tax positions or contentious tax practices (Guenther et al., 2019). On the other hand, elevating the professional skills of tax inspectors can enhance the quality of tax services provided. Timely and accurate tax inspection, clear and transparent communication of tax obligations, and efficient resolution of tax inquiries and disputes contribute to a more predictable tax environment for businesses. Conversely, inadequately trained or inexperienced tax inspectors may struggle to navigate the complexities of tax laws and regulations effectively. This can result in inconsistent application of tax rules, erroneous tax assessments, and delayed resolution of tax disputes, all of which contribute to heightened tax uncertainty.

Using the data from Chinese listed firms from 2008 to 2016, we examine how tax inspectors affect tax uncertainty. Our findings revealed that for every one percentage point increase in the ratio of personnel with graduate degrees or higher in the tax inspection bureau, firms experienced a significant reduction in tax uncertainty of approximately 1.52 percentage points. A mere 1 percentage point increase in the proportion of staff holding CAT credentials corresponded to a 1.58 percentage point decrease in tax uncertainty for enterprises. Further analysis demonstrates that the impact of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty is most pronounced within large-scale and long-established firms. Their complex organizational structures and extensive resources often afford them opportunities to exploit loopholes in tax regulations, leading to increased tax uncertainty. However, the introduction of highly skilled tax personnel disrupts this trend by mitigating the inclination towards tax avoidance. In addition, the enhancement of human capital within the tax inspection bureau contributes to a more standardized tax audit process. This standardization reduces

uncertainty surrounding firms' tax obligations, fostering a more predictable tax environment.

We make two contributions. First, we advance the tax literature on the governance effects of tax inspectors on corporate activities. By shedding light on the phenomenon of "certificate craze" (the "certificate craze" in China refers to a phenomenon where there has been a surge in the pursuit of professional certifications) within Chinese tax authorities, our findings enhance our understanding of tax governance, particularly from the micro-perspective of law enforcement officials. Secondly, we extend the literature on tax uncertainty. While previous studies have examined the impact of tax policy and corporate tax avoidance on tax uncertainty, little attention has been given to the role of tax law enforcement personnel. Our findings bridge this gap by demonstrating the significance of tax agency staff in influencing tax uncertainty.

2. Research design

Data and methodology

We include all Chinese A-share firms from 2009 to 2016 as our samples. We obtain the firms and their financial data from the Chinese Stock Market and Accounting Research (CSMAR) database and the WIND database. Then, we delete firms that belong to the financial industry and have missing variables. The sample includes 13,459 firms in the A-share market during the sample period.

There are two main measurement methods for assessing tax uncertainty in the previous literature: Uncertain Tax Positions (UTP) reserve (Guenther et al., 2019) and the coefficient of variation of annual Effective Tax Rates (ETRs) (McGuire et al., 2019) over a period. Because the data sample of Chinese listed companies does not disclose Uncertain Tax Positions (UTP) reserves, this paper uses the latter to construct a tax uncertainty index. We measure the tax uncertainty of a firm's tax strategy using the coefficient of variation of annual cash ETRs over a five-year period, which measures the variability in the outcomes of a firm's tax avoidance strategy over time. Consistent with prior research, we define the cash ETR as cash taxes paid divided by pre-tax book income (adjusted for special items) (Dyreng et al., 2008, 2010). We measure the coefficient of variation for annual cash ETRs over a five-year period, which includes the current year's cash ETR and the cash ETRs for the four previous years (i.e., over the period t to $t - 4$). The coefficient of variation for cash ETRs (Uncertain) is determined by dividing the standard deviation of annual cash ETRs by the absolute value of the mean of annual cash ETRs over the same five-year period.

$$\text{Uncertain}_{it} = \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^N (\text{Cash ETR}_{it} - \text{Avg. Cash ETR}_i)^2 / N}}{\text{abs}(\frac{1}{N} (\sum_{t=1}^N \text{Cash ETR}_{it}))}$$

We define a company's tax uncertainty as lower when it demonstrates a low coefficient of variation for annual cash ETRs (i.e., a low value of uncertainty) over a five-year period. In our robustness checks, we also employ alternative measures of tax uncertainty, i.e., the coefficient of variation for the annual GAAP effective tax rate for the five-year period.

To construct human capital within tax inspection bureau measures, we obtain data on tax inspectors from the China Taxation Auditing Yearbook, which provides information related to tax administration and enforcement activities carried out by the tax inspection department across various regions of China. It also provides information on tax inspectors, including their academic backgrounds and professional qualifications. We measure human capital within the provincial tax inspection bureau using two ratios: the proportion of personnel with graduate degrees or higher (Graduate) and the proportion of certified tax agents (CTA) among the total workforce in the tax inspection bureau.

Additionally, we carefully consider various firm-specific characteristics that might influence tax uncertainty. These include firm size (the natural logarithm of total assets), leverage (total debt divided by total assets), asset tangibility (fixed assets divided by total assets), and Big4 (=1 if the audit firm is either Deloitte, EY, KPMG, or PwC). We further include an extensive set of area-specific characteristics as control variables. We control for secondshare (GDP share of secondary industry), tertiaryshare (GDP share of tertiary industry), and budget deficit (ratio of general budget expenditure to general budget revenue minus 1) for each province. We summarize all continuous variables at the 1% and 99% levels.

Essentially, we estimate the following regression analysis:

$$\text{Uncertain}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{human capital})_{pt} + \text{Controls} + \text{Year Dummies} + \text{firm Dummies} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

The subscripts i , p and t represent firm, province and year, respectively. We include fixed effects for year and firm to control the time and firm factors affecting tax uncertainty.

We execute a range of empirical strategies to enhance robustness. Specifically, we conduct a regression analysis incorporating industry and province-specific fixed effects.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Summary statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables. The mean and standard deviation of uncertain are 71.6% and 51.1%, respectively, suggesting that tax uncertainty, on average, is large with considerable variation.

We present the baseline results of Equation (1) in **Table 2**. Besides the full model, we also include simplified models without control variables and without area-specific characteristic control variables. In addition, we include industry-year and province-year fixed effects, and, following Petersen (2009), we cluster standard errors at the firm levels. For the first five models (columns 1–5), the independent variable is graduate, while in subsequent models (columns 6–10), it is CTA. Notably, in column 3 of **Table 2**, the coefficient of graduate is negative and statistically significant at the 1 percent level, indicating that tax inspectors with graduate degrees or higher in the tax inspection bureau reduce firm tax uncertainty. Similarly, in column 8, the coefficient of CTA is also negative and statistically significant at the 1 percent level. This implies that as the proportion of tax inspectors with certifications increases, tax uncertainty is reduced. We find that, on average, for each additional percentage point

increase in the ratio of personnel with graduate degrees or higher in the tax inspection bureau, firms experience a significant reduction in tax uncertainty, by approximately 1.52%. Similarly, a mere 1% increase in the proportion of staff holding CAT credentials corresponds to a 1.58% decrease in tax uncertainty for enterprises. Turning to the firm-level control variables, we find that Leverage and Assettangibility are positively and significantly associated with tax uncertainty, while Firmsize is negatively and significantly related to tax uncertainty. The results also indicate that the coefficients on Big4, Secondshare, Tertiaryshare and Budgetdeficit are all insignificant.

Table 1. Summary statistics.

Var name	Mean	SD	1th	Median	99th
Uncertain	0.716	0.511	0.017	0.613	2.449
Graduate	0.046	0.025	0.004	0.039	0.121
CTA	0.064	0.037	0.011	0.050	0.167
Firmsize	21.939	1.234	18.861	21.758	25.966
Leverage	0.421	0.209	0.028	0.418	0.863
Assettangibility	0.221	0.166	0.002	0.185	0.765
Big4	0.060	0.238	0.000	0.000	1.000
Secondshare	0.446	0.092	0.178	0.474	0.620
Tertiaryshare	0.481	0.117	0.298	0.453	0.816
Budgetdeficit	0.634	0.624	0.066	0.252	3.349

Table 2. The effect of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain
Graduate	−1.5405*** (0.4995)	−1.5295*** (0.4894)	−1.5223*** (0.5018)	−1.3929*** (0.5129)	−1.3608*** (0.4944)					
CTA						−1.4791*** (0.5114)	−1.5219*** (0.5029)	−1.5819*** (0.5062)	−1.5265*** (0.5364)	−1.3053** (0.5066)
Firmsize		−0.0640*** (0.0180)	−0.0629*** (0.0179)	−0.0565*** (0.0176)	−0.0714*** (0.0170)		−0.0663*** (0.0182)	−0.0644*** (0.0181)	−0.0580*** (0.0176)	−0.0725*** (0.0171)
Leverage		0.4121*** (0.0559)	0.4114*** (0.0561)	0.3942*** (0.0528)	0.3814*** (0.0549)		0.4131*** (0.0558)	0.4108*** (0.0561)	0.3967*** (0.0530)	0.3817*** (0.0550)
Assettangibility		0.4197*** (0.0583)	0.4200*** (0.0584)	0.4654*** (0.0567)	0.3995*** (0.0574)		0.4184*** (0.0584)	0.4197*** (0.0585)	0.4656*** (0.0568)	0.3993*** (0.0575)
Big4		0.0075 (0.0504)	0.0070 (0.0503)	0.0154 (0.0510)	0.0231 (0.0505)		0.0089 (0.0506)	0.0073 (0.0504)	0.0156 (0.0509)	0.0230 (0.0506)
Secondshare			−0.8075 (0.8430)	−0.6007 (0.8551)	−0.8510 (0.8342)			−0.9754 (0.8416)	−0.7130 (0.8586)	−0.9848 (0.8329)
Tertiaryshare			−0.8059 (0.8203)	−0.4385 (0.8293)	−0.6969 (0.8104)			−0.8023 (0.8204)	−0.3338 (0.8308)	−0.6852 (0.8111)
Budgetdeficit			−0.0235 (0.0459)	0.0218 (0.0394)	−0.0206 (0.0431)			−0.0151 (0.0451)	0.0298 (0.0385)	−0.0121 (0.0423)

Table 2. (Continued).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain
Constant	0.7858*** (0.0228)	1.9239*** (0.3888)	2.6604*** (0.8868)	2.2143** (0.8850)	2.8212*** (0.8615)	0.8101*** (0.0327)	2.0002*** (0.3966)	2.7940*** (0.8918)	2.2731** (0.8930)	2.9165*** (0.8648)
Observations	13459	13459	13459	13442	13455	13459	13459	13459	13442	13455
Firm FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province- industry FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Industry-year FE	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
r2_a	0.7377	0.7458	0.7459	0.7545	0.7536	0.7377	0.7459	0.7460	0.7546	0.7537

3.2. Robustness checks

We define Guncertain as the coefficient of variation for the annual GAAP effective tax rate for the five-year period. In **Table 3**, we examine the robustness of our main evidence using alternative measures of tax uncertainty. The results in columns 1 and 2 of **Table 3** show that the coefficients of Guncertain and CTA continue to be negative and significant at the 5% level. Hence, the baseline findings in **Table 2** are robust to alternative metrics of tax uncertainty.

Table 3. The effect of tax inspectors on tax uncertainty using alternative measures.

	(1)	(2)
	Guncertain	Guncertain
Graduate	−1.1187** (0.5222)	
CTA		−1.0469** (0.4927)
Firmsize	−0.0541*** (0.0182)	−0.0551*** (0.0183)
Leverage	0.4411*** (0.0556)	0.4407*** (0.0556)
Assettangibility	0.4244*** (0.0579)	0.4241*** (0.0579)
Big4	0.0199 (0.0482)	0.0199 (0.0484)
Secondshare	−0.3548 (0.7310)	−0.4656 (0.7293)
Tertiaryshare	−0.3271 (0.7147)	−0.3192 (0.7146)
Budgetdeficit	−0.0087 (0.0447)	−0.0013 (0.0438)

Table 3. (Continued).

	(1)	(2)
	Guncertain	Guncertain
Constant	1.8504** (0.8043)	1.9295** (0.8072)
Observations	13459	13459
Firm FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Adj. R^2	0.7461	0.7461

3.3. Heterogeneous analysis

We argue that the reduction of corporate tax avoidance due to the growth of human capital in the tax inspection bureau reduces tax uncertainty. The enhancement of human capital in the Tax Inspection Bureau has optimized and standardized the tax process and intensified the governance effect on tax uncertainty. If the logic is valid, we expect the impact of human capital on tax uncertainty to be more significant in companies with tax avoidance tendencies and complex businesses.

To examine this logic, we divide enterprises into large enterprises and small enterprises according to the median of their total assets (large = 1 if the firm is large). The results are reported in **Table 4**. The coefficients on Large are significantly negative. This suggests that in large enterprises, the effect of human capital in the tax inspection bureau on tax uncertainty is more pronounced. We also classify companies into old companies and new companies based on the median age of establishment (Old = 1 if the firm is old). The coefficients on Old $\times$ Graduate and Old $\times$ CTA are negative and significant. This indicates that for firms that have been established for a longer period of time, human capital in the tax inspection bureau results in a greater reduction in tax uncertainty. Overall, the findings in **Table 4** support the logic of the testable hypothesis.

Table 4. Heterogeneous analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain
Graduate	−0.1375 (0.5703)		0.4790 (0.6465)	
CTA		−0.6483 (0.5378)		0.1856 (0.5995)
Large $\times$ Graduate	−2.1975*** (0.5240)			
Large $\times$ CTA		−1.3569*** (0.3669)		
Old $\times$ Graduate			−3.7545*** (0.7612)	
Old $\times$ CTA				−2.9445*** (0.6755)

Table 4. (Continued).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain
Large	0.1302*** (0.0298)	0.1225*** (0.0298)		
Old			0.0909** (0.0454)	0.1091** (0.0554)
Firm size	−0.0720*** (0.0192)	−0.0749*** (0.0192)	−0.0651*** (0.0180)	−0.0645*** (0.0182)
leverage	0.4097*** (0.0559)	0.4124*** (0.0556)	0.3946*** (0.0561)	0.3974*** (0.0560)
Asset tangibility	0.4155*** (0.0580)	0.4177*** (0.0581)	0.4131*** (0.0581)	0.4109*** (0.0584)
Big4	0.0122 (0.0507)	0.0115 (0.0506)	0.0152 (0.0496)	0.0179 (0.0499)
Second share	−0.9608 (0.8453)	−1.0729 (0.8396)	−0.9519 (0.8387)	−1.0535 (0.8409)
Tertiary share	−0.9433 (0.8261)	−0.8741 (0.8198)	−0.8534 (0.8136)	−0.7886 (0.8184)
Budget deficit	−0.0289 (0.0467)	−0.0173 (0.0455)	−0.0281 (0.0462)	−0.0151 (0.0447)
Constant	2.9229*** (0.9056)	3.0253*** (0.9038)	2.7563*** (0.8824)	2.7535*** (0.8912)
Observations	13459	13459	13458	13458
Firm FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adj. R^2	0.7471	0.7469	0.7480	0.7475

4. Conclusions

In the past few decades, there has been a notable trend within Chinese tax authorities towards certification, with a growing number of tax officers actively pursuing professional skills certificates. This pursuit is incentivized by the tax authorities through bonuses offered to certified professionals. Based on this ideal context, we investigate the governance effects of human capital in the public sector. Our findings show that tax uncertainty is negatively correlated with the increase in human capital in the tax inspection bureau. Having more professional and proficient tax officers in the tax inspection bureau reduces firms' tax aggressiveness, subsequently diminishing tax uncertainty. Moreover, these skilled officers optimize and standardize the tax process, further lowering tax uncertainty. Through heterogeneity analysis, we have validated this logic. Our research refutes doubts about the phenomenon of tax authorities' "certificate craze". Far from being a frivolous pursuit, our findings demonstrate that such efforts yield tangible benefits, not only in terms of tax governance but also in mitigating tax uncertainty for enterprises. As we

navigate the complexities of modern taxation systems, the importance of investing in human capital within the public sector cannot be overstated, and our research serves as a testament to its enduring value.

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Article

Effects of different electronic HRM configurations on organizational consequences: An intra-country analysis

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Abstract: Purpose: This study focuses on the effects of electronic-Human Resource Management (e-HRM) on organizational consequences. In this analysis, the effects of different configurations are assessed within the same socio-economic context. **Design/Methodology:** This study adopts a cross-sectional survey of e-HRM actors, such as human resource managers, IT professionals, and line managers. The data analysis was conducted using linear regression. A sample of 300 respondents was selected based on Gill et al.'s framework for obtaining a representative sample. **Findings:** 'Integrated e-HRM configurations' employed in multinational corporations (MNCs) generate positive and improved operational, relational, and transformational consequences or outcomes. In small-to-medium-sized organizations, the operational-user configuration exhibits positive but lower operational, relational, and transformational consequences. However, the socio-economic variables used to categorize e-HRM configurations do not apply in a developing economy context. **Practical implications:** The application of information technology in HRM is not the sole predictor of organizational consequences. The sophistication of the adopted e-HRM system deserves some consideration too. When managers adopt sophisticated e-HRM systems, they are likely to achieve positive and improved outcomes. More predictor variables need to be uncovered for an elaborate categorization of effective e-HRM configurations. **Originality/value:** The contextual factors that define effective e-HRM configurations are not consistent across different socio-economic contexts. Company-based categorization of effective configurations is advisable. This study establishes the limitations of current categorization variables in explaining effective e-HRM systems.

Keywords: operational user configuration; power user configuration; e-HRM; e-HRM consequences; organizational consequences

1. Introduction

The human resource (HR) function's ability to influence organizational outcomes has been significantly enhanced by advances in information technology. Electronic-Human Resource Management (e-HRM), or the digitization of the human resource function, improves the operational, relational, and transformational outcomes of organizations. e-HRM consists of a "set of configurations of computer hardware, software, and electronic networking resources that enable intended or actual Human Resource Management (HRM) activities (e.g., policies, practices, and services) through coordinating and controlling individual and group-level data capture, information creation, and communication within and across organizational boundaries" (Marler and Parry, 2015, p. 2234). This definition emphasizes the multilevel nature of e-HRM as well as the existence of its multiple dimensions (Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier, 2007). While there is agreement on the definition of e-HRM, disagreement exists on its consequences.

A number of scholars have questioned the deterministic view of e-HRM that posits technology as the source of organizational consequences (Bondarouk et al., 2009; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). Instead, some scholars have started looking at both the role of different types of e-HRM systems as well as their contexts in explaining desired organizational outcomes (Galalanaki et al., 2019; Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). The acceptance of a universal e-HRM system across organizations and contexts is an oversimplification (Martini et al., 2020).

In developing economies, the predominant e-HRM configurations are clustered as ‘non-user’ and ‘operational-user’ wherein the context is characterized by small to medium-sized organizations, minimal strategic involvement of the HR function, a low proportion of young and educated employees, and low investment in information technology (IT). These typologies have the least favourable organizational consequences. In developed economies, the following contextual factors explain the emergence of the predominant ‘integrated e-HRM’ cluster (Galalanaki et al., 2019; Martini et al., 2020; Njoku, 2016; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014), large organizations, a strategic involvement of the HR function, a high proportion of young and educated employees, and a high uptake of information technology. This e-HRM configuration leads to favorable outcomes for the organization.

In view of current configuration knowledge, this research seeks to determine if the contextual variables of organizational size, strategic orientation of the HR function, profile of employees, and geographical scope of business operations are universal and key to categorizing e-HRM types. What is the effect of implementing different e-HRM types within the same socio-economic context? Do organizations having different e-HRM types but operating in the same contextual setting deliver different macro-level consequences?

2. Literature review

An understanding of different e-HRM configurations is essential to comprehending the varying organizational consequences. Different digitized HRM systems yield varying organizational consequences (Galanaki et al., 2019; L’Ecuyer and Raymond, 2023; Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). The contextual variables unique to each e-HRM configuration determine the organizational consequences it achieves. A fully integrated e-HRM configuration leads to more significant organizational consequences than a configuration with minimal IT use.

2.1. e-HRM consequences

The rationale for adopting e-HRM is to attain desired organizational consequences at three levels: operational, relational, and transformational. Operational consequences make up the first level of e-HRM consequences. These consequences result from the automation of administrative tasks and processes. e-HRM implementation brings about efficiency gains, such as a reduction in the number of employees, a reduction in indirect and direct costs, as well as faster execution of HR processes such as recruitment and selection (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Martini et al., 2021; Njoku, 2016; Zhou et al., 2022). e-HRM is also implemented to achieve relational consequences. This is the second level of consequences. This phenomenon

allows the HR function to connect faster and better with other parts of a company and outside organisations (Parry and Tyson, 2011). This connection relates to “new and extended possibilities of interactions between actors, leading to heterogeneous networks” (Strohmeier, 2007, p. 28). These networks enhance HR services for both internal and external stakeholders, thereby empowering employees (Bissola and Imperatori, 2014). The HR department can also achieve a range of outcomes, including centralized decision support, responsiveness to employee needs, an enhanced relationship with senior management, and greater access to training and development for staff.

The third level of e-HRM consequences is transformational. They concern the overall changes in the HRM function that centrally aim at the role HRM plays in company performance and strategy support (Strohmeier, 2007). The HR function’s digitization enables HR practitioners to take on business partner roles (Ruel et al., 2006). HR practitioners are involved in both strategy formulation and implementation. HR managers now primarily focus on environmental scanning and business strategy generation as change agents. The emergence of a knowledge-sharing culture results in higher levels of employee competence. Other consequences include the alignment of business and HR objectives to enhance overall corporate strategy implementation.

2.2. e-HRM configurations

No single e-HRM configuration guarantees the desired consequences. Different configurations yield distinct results. While multiple e-HRM typologies have been suggested for effectiveness in varying contexts, the literature on this topic remains limited. Literature posits types of e-HRM configurations deployed by organizations to achieve desired operational, relational, and/or transformational consequences (Galanaki et al., 2019; Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014).

Strohmeier and Kabst (2014) distinguished the non-user, operational user, and power user e-HRM configurations. Small organizations, employing a maximum of 67 employees, are yet to adopt e-HRM for achieving meaningful organizational success. Medium-sized organizations, employing up to 840 staff, utilize e-Payroll, e-Time and Attendance, e-Access Control, and e-Records and Administration applications for their operational user configuration. Organisational success is mainly limited to operational consequences. The third configuration, the power-user, utilizes operational, relational, and transformational e-HRM applications to offer a comprehensive package. It is domiciled in large-scale organizations with a minimum of 841 employees, a strategic orientation of the HR function, a bigger geographical market, and a large ratio of young and educated employees. This configuration has greater organizational consequences than any other type. However, it comes with a budgetary constraint, as it is expensive to adopt and implement.

Galanaki et al. (2019) outlined four configurations: non-usage, HR primacy, integrated e-HRM, and IT primacy. The non-usage configuration is operational in small-sized organizations with minimal strategic orientation of the HR function. Organizations in this category report low levels of young and highly educated employees (Galanaki et al., 2019). This explains the low adoption of IT for HRM as well as low e-HRM use. The HR primacy configuration finds its presence in medium-

sized organizations, with high e-HRM usage but low levels of IT for HRM. This setup yields better organizational consequences compared with the non-usage configuration. There is a high proportion of young employees, although with low education levels, making up a significant portion of the workforce. This configuration represents a higher level of efficiency than the non-user one. Consequently, it generates more revenue than the non-use and IT primacy types.

The integrated e-HRM configuration (the third configuration) is characterized by high e-HRM usage and high IT for HRM. The organization makes extensive use of e-HRM. The strategic orientation of the HR function is high. In multinational corporations (MNCs), this configuration leads to increased revenue and profitability (Galanaki et al., 2019, p. 11). Organizations employ young and highly educated employees. The majority of HR activities are digitized. The configuration showcases e-HRM's electronization in its entirety, complete with an array of e-HRM macro-level consequences. The fourth configuration, IT primacy, is normally domiciled in medium-sized organisations, with a strategic HR function. The use of e-HRM is low, while IT investment in HRM is high. Its contribution to organizational outcomes is less than that of integrated e-HRM but superior to non-usage.

Martini et al. (2020) distinguished three types of e-HRM configurations: non-user, relational user, and extended relational user. In a non-user configuration, the use of e-HRM yields minimal to no desired consequences. This type dominates in small organizations without a strategic orientation of the HR function. The organisations dominate the construction and commerce sectors. The relational user configuration uses e-HRM to “transfer knowledge and improve organizational collaboration” (Martini et al., 2020, p. 797). Enhancing internal communications within medium-to-large organizations is the desired relational consequence. The extended relational user configuration helps organizations achieve both relational and transformational consequences. It is used in large organizations with a strategic orientation toward innovation. It has a dominant position in the services sector. This configuration represents the full adoption and implementation of e-HRM. While the non-user and relational user configurations allow organizations to progress towards full digitalization of the HRM function, the extended relational configuration delivers the full potential of the system.

2.3. Hypotheses development

For the purposes of this analysis, it became imperative and convenient to equate the different types of e-HRM configurations. The e-HRM macro-level consequences of each type of configuration have been used to equate the different types. In all three major studies, the non-user configuration is consistent. This type of e-HRM has a low investment in IT for HRM and minimal e-HRM usage. Low e-HRM usage is a result of a low digital literacy rate, as companies have a low proportion of educated young employees. The low investment in IT is explained by the inability of small companies to invest in e-HRM technologies. Multinational companies with high resource capabilities to invest in IT for HRM and a high proportion of educated young employees are likely to operate sophisticated e-HRM systems to achieve superior e-HRM macro-level consequences. Consequently, the first hypothesis is:

H₁: The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in 'local companies with no international presence'

Strohmeier and Kabst's (2014) operational user configuration aligns with Galanaki et al.'s (2019) HR primacy and Martini et al.'s (2020) relational user configuration. e-HRM is used to automate fundamental HR functions and foster relationships among its users. This entails improving the efficiency of performing routine HR tasks, enhancing the quality of communications within an organisation and improving the quality of HR service provided to internal stakeholders. In the case of MNCs, the need for virtual team support across geographical borders becomes even more crucial. The physical distance between MNC subsidiaries is also an important factor in the adoption and implementation of e-HRM. Investing in higher e-HRM sophistication requires a substantial company size. One would therefore expect higher operational and relational consequences among configurations run by MNCs than in smaller organizations. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H₂: The effect of e-HRM on relational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in 'local companies with no international presence'

Strohmeier and Kabst's (2014) power user configuration aligns with Galanaki et al.'s (2019) integrated e-HRM and Martini et al.'s (2020) extended relational user configuration. These configuration types represent high IT for HRM and high e-HRM usage. All e-HRM macro-level consequences have been achieved under these configurations. Organizations fully harness the capabilities of e-HRM. This study uses Strohmeier and Kabst's (2014) categorization. A positive relationship exists between the size threshold and distinctive capabilities, on the one hand, and the feasibility of implementing e-HRM, on the other (Hooi, 2006). Due to their financial capabilities, large organizations can adopt extensive e-HRM systems. A larger organization's ability to institutionalize the HR function is greater than that of a smaller one, which makes MNCs have a more strategic HR function than 'local companies serving the domestic market only' (Galanaki et al., 2019; Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). Therefore, the subsequent hypothesis is:

H₃: The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in 'local companies with no international presence'.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Sampling procedures

The study followed a positivist philosophy and used a deductive approach. A quantitative survey strategy was employed for this study. A cross-sectional time horizon was used. This study focused on organizations in Zimbabwe that had at least 60 employees and had been using e-HRM systems for at least three years. The e-HRM resource demands informed the inclusion criteria (Galanaki et al., 2019; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). A minimum of three years has been deemed adequate to embed systems within organizations (Bondarouk and Ruel, 2013; Bondarouk et al., 2017). Twelve (12) economic sectors were represented by 112 organizations in the study population.

Stratified sampling was used to select 35 organizations ($n = 35$) from a population of 112 organizations ($n = 112$), representing the following 12 economic sectors:

technology, tertiary education, beverages, mining, banking, insurance, agriculture, retail, agro-industrial, food, building, and industrial. These economic sectors formed strata for sampling purposes. Human resource managers, information technology practitioners, and line managers utilizing e-HRM systems are the key players in e-HRM. They employ e-HRM applications to attain positive e-HRM macro-level consequences. Thirty-five (35) organizations were purposefully categorized into two groups: multinational companies (MNCs) and ‘local companies with no international presence’.

Ten (10) MNCs were sampled from the beverage and mining sectors. Three MNCs were drawn from the beverage sector and seven MNCs from the mining sector. Zimbabwe’s mining and beverage industries host the greatest number of MNCs. Using Gill et al.’s (2010) framework of a ‘sample size based on desired accuracy with a confidence level of 95%’ and variability of 50%’ a sample of 100 respondents within MNCs ($n = 100$) was drawn (see **Table 1**) using a convenience sampling technique. A sample of 200 respondents ($n = 200$) was drawn from ‘local companies with no international presence’. They came from the following economic sectors: technology, tertiary education, banking, insurance, agriculture, retail, agro-industrial, food, building, and industrial. The sampling technique used was stratified purposive, as indicated in **Table 1**. Three hundred respondents (300) made up the combined sample size. The sample size is sufficient for findings to be applied to a larger, external population. With a sufficiently large sample size, external validity is achieved. The results can be generalized to similar contexts in developing economies. This type of validity “refers to the extent to which results from a study can be generalised beyond the particular study” (de Vaus, 2001).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with scales anchored at strongly agree and strongly disagree. Two strategies were utilized to lessen the impact of nonresponse bias and improve the representativeness of survey data. First, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on a sample of 10 respondents. During the pilot test, issues with nonresponse bias, including question order, response options, and wording, were identified. Certain questions have been reworded, and others have been eliminated. Second, to boost the response rate, three follow-up reminders were utilized (Story and Tait, 2019). The research instrument was administered through a face-to-face drop-and-pick-up method. A total of 202 valid responses were noted, resulting in a 67% response rate. This high response rate increases the representativeness of the survey data. It also reduces the nonresponse bias.

Table 1. Amalgamated sample distribution by positions.

Respondents	Technology	Agriculture	Retail	Banking	Agro-Industrial	Food	Insurance	Industrial	Building	Education	MNCs (Mining)	MNCs (Beverages)	Total
Population (Organisations)	6	17	5	13	8	3	4	11	12	11	14	8	112
Sample (Organisations)	2	3	1	5	3	2	2	2	3	3	6	3	35
Sample (respondents0)													
HR Managers	5	5	1	5	4	2	2	2	4	9	6	6	51
HR Department employees	20	9	4	8	10	6	3	14	20	12	30	40	176
IT Professionals	2	3	1	5	3	2	2	2	3	3	6	3	35
Line Managers	2	3	1	5	3	2	2	2	3	6	6	3	38
Total	29	20	7	23	20	12	9	20	30	30	48	52	300

3.2. Survey questionnaire

To assess the comparative effect of different e-HRM configurations on organizational consequences in a developing economy context, measures of e-HRM use operational, relational, and transformational consequences were assessed.

3.2.1. e-HRM use scale

The 6-item e-HRM instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale. The items were developed and validated by Ruel et al. (2007) and Wahyudi and Park (2014). In this study, e-HRM use is an independent variable meant to bring forth different elements of organizational consequences.

3.2.2. Operational consequences scale

A 3-item operational consequences scale was developed. These items were originally developed by Parry and Tyson (2011), Bondarouk and Ruel (2013), and Panos and Bellou (2016). In this study, the construct is a dependent variable.

3.2.3. Relational consequences scale

This study uses a 3-item operational consequences scale. This scale was originally developed by Bondarouk and Ruel (2013) and Panos and Bellou (2016).

3.2.4. Transformational consequences scale

This study used a 3-item transformational consequences scale. It was originally developed by Bondarouk and Ruel (2013) and Panos and Bellou (2016). The scale items for all variables are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Measures of variables.

Construct	Number of Items	Questions
e-HRM use	6	I have the necessary knowledge to use e-HRM systems. Use of e-HRM applications do not require a lot of mental effort The e-HRM system is clear and understandable. The e-HRM system helps me improve my job performance I find the e-HRM system useful for performing my daily job-related activities at lower costs e-HRM allows employees to perform job related activities faster
Operational consequences	3	There is standardization of HR processes Employees are saving on time spent doing routine tasks There is increased efficiency in most departments
Relational consequences	3	There is improved HR service to employees. There is increased responsiveness to employee needs Improved line managers' responsibility to meet HR responsibilities
Transformational consequences	3	e-HRM allows HR staff to redirect time onto strategic initiatives. e-HRM allows HR professionals to focus on tasks that provide increased value e-HRM allows the HR function to spend more time on HR planning activities

3.3. Data analysis

Linear regression was performed to establish the effect of e-HRM types on three types of e-HRM consequences (operational, relational, and transformational) in MNCs

and local companies. The e-HRM configurations of ‘local companies with no international presence’, and MNCs were presented.

4. Results

The data were checked for suitability for linear regression analysis. The correlation (R) statistic is 0.52. High correlations ($r > 0.90$) indicate that the data could have a multicollinearity problem. Low correlations of 0.3 and below ($r < 0.30$) indicate a lack of patterned relationships. The residuals are also independent. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 1.85, close to the recommended value of 2 (Kline, 2016). The scatter plot showed the homoscedasticity of residuals. The Cook’s distance statistic of 0.272 (with a value greater than 1 being a cause for concern) and the P-P plot of the regression standardized residual showed the normal distribution of residuals (Kline, 2016).

4.1. Factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring (PAF) was conducted to identify the underlying patterns of e-HRM use and e-HRM macro-level consequences. The EFA of e-HRM use revealed two latent factors: perceived ease of use and system usefulness. Together, the two factors explained 71.8% of the variance. Goodness of Fit Indices were used to evaluate the confirmatory factor analysis that was performed to confirm the constructs. The statistics indicated a good fit (CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.041; SRMR = 0.027; GFI = 0.98; χ^2/df = 1.55; and NFI = 0.98).

EFA was also performed to identify latent factors associated with ‘e-HRM macro-level consequences’. Three latent factors (operational, relational, and transformational consequences) emanated from this EFA. The three latent variable factors cumulatively accounted for 70.31% of the variance. A good model fit was observed (CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.029; SRMR = 0.026; GFI = 0.99; χ^2/df = 1.27; and NFI = 0.98).

4.2. Descriptive statistics

4.2.1. Size of organizations

The MNCs employ between a minimum of 1200 and a maximum of 2100 employees in their Zimbabwean operations. The ‘local companies with no international presence’ employ a minimum of 62 and a maximum of 850 employees. The average depth of e-HRM applications is 40.3% for MNCs and 33.6% for ‘local companies with no international presence’, respectively.

4.2.2. Demography of employees

MNCs have a high proportion of young employees, with 58% of employees aged 40 years and below. A small proportion of its employees are older than 41 years. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of MNC employees have at least a first degree. On the other hand, ‘local companies with no international presence’ have a low proportion of young employees, with only 34% of their employees aged 40 years and below. A large proportion of its employees are over the age of 41. In terms of qualifications, 34% of employees possess a minimum of a first degree.

4.2.3. Use of e-HRM applications

MNCs enjoy higher utilization levels of all e-HRM applications than ‘local companies with no international presence’ as shown in **Figure 1**. Surprisingly, the e-HRM relational application (MSS) utilization level is almost equal for both groups of companies. However, ESS utilization is higher for MNCs than ‘local companies with no international presence’. As shown in **Figure 1**, the utilization of e-HRM operational applications of e-payroll, e-time management, and e-administration is higher for MNCs than for ‘local companies with no international presence’.

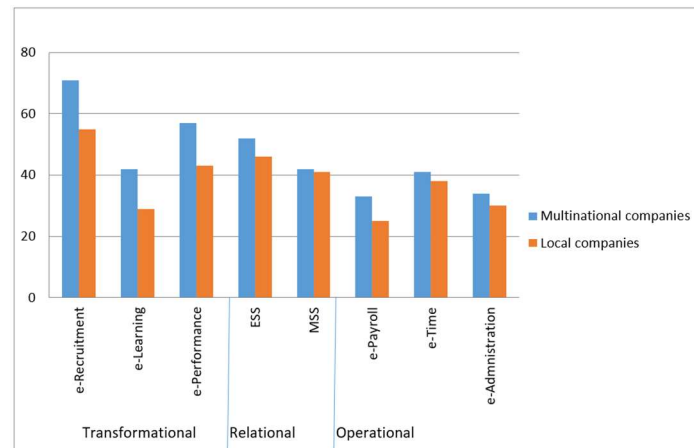


Figure 1. Use of e-HRM applications.

4.3 Hypotheses testing

- H₁: The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’.

The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences among MNCs was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < 0.01$). The use of e-HRM explained 9.5% of the operational consequences ($R^2 = 0.095$). The effect of using e-HRM on operational consequences amongst ‘local companies with no international presence’ is also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.306$, $p < 0.01$). It explains 9.4% of the operational consequences ($R^2 = 0.094$). The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences is marginally higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’ (see **Table 3**). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

- H₂: The effect of e-HRM use on relational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in local companies.

The effect of e-HRM on relational consequences among MNCs is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.01$) (see **Table 3**). The effect of e-HRM use explains 15% of the relational consequences ($R^2 = 0.15$). The effect of e-HRM on relational consequences amongst ‘local companies with no international presence’ is also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.237$, $p < 0.05$). This effect is less, explaining only 5.6% of the relational consequences ($R^2 = 0.056$). The effect of using e-HRM on relational consequences is higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is accepted.

- H₃: The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’.

The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences among MNCs is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.352, p < 0.01$). The effect explains 12.4% of the transformational consequences ($R^2 = 0.124$, see **Table 3**). The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences in ‘local companies with no international presence’ is also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.285, p < 0.01$). However, this effect is less significant, explaining only 8.1% of the transformational consequences ($R^2 = 0.081$). Therefore, hypothesis 3 is accepted:

Table 3. Paths coefficients.

Path	MNCs			Local companies		
	β	p	R^2	β	p	R^2
e-HRM → e-HRM operational consequences	0.309	0.01	0.095	0.306	0.01	0.094
e-HRM → e-HRM relational consequences	0.389	0.01	0.151	0.237	0.05	0.056
e-HRM → e-HRM transformational consequences	0.352	0.01	0.124	0.285	0.01	0.081

5. Discussion

5.1. H1: The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences is positive, and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’

Different e-HRM systems positively and significantly impact operational consequences. This effect is slightly higher in MNCs compared to ‘local firms without international presence’. Hypothesis 1 has been accepted. The near-equal effect can be attributed to the moderate investment requirements needed in information technology to achieve time and cost advantages (Galanaki et al., 2019). Organizational size, competition in international markets, employee profiles, and the presence of a strategic HR function are not decisive factors. Small companies’ budgets permit the capital outlay needed to improve operational consequences. Consequently, the adoption of IT amongst corporations has increased due to its ease of use, usefulness, and growing employee digital literacy. Other studies have validated this result, despite limited research in the area (Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014).

5.2. H2: The effect of e-HRM use on relational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’

The effect of e-HRM on relational consequences among MNCs is positive and significant. The effect is greater among MNCs compared to that in ‘local companies with no international presence’. Geographical space motivates employees in MNC settings to desire relational e-HRM technologies for effective interaction. “In smaller organizations, face-to-face interactions are preferable to any electronic interactions” (Strohmeier and Kabst, 2009, p. 346). As a result, management in small companies sees little need to invest in relational e-HRM applications. Hypothesis 2 is accepted. Although the impact is modest, other factors also contribute to the narrowing of the gap between small and large companies. Even smaller organizations with little need for relational e-HRM applications have been able to afford the relevant applications due to their relatively low cost. From 2000 to 2017, developing countries experienced

a faster increase in IT usage than developed countries (Louw and Venter, 2019). The findings from this study correspond with those of other studies (Galanaki et al., 2019; Martini et al., 2020; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014).

5.3. H3: The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences is positive and higher in MNCs than in 'local companies with no international presence'

The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences is higher in MNCs than in 'local companies with no international presence'. Hypothesis 3 is accepted. The adoption of e-HRM and the attainment of transformational consequences are more widespread among large organizations, such as MNCs, due in part to the strategic orientation of the HR function (Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014) and ability to finance huge investment in information technology. Strategic orientation enhances the link between organizational and human resource management goals (Bondarouk et al., 2017). As a result, e-recruitment, e-performance management, and e-learning are clearly oriented. Therefore, the integrated use of e-HRM applications is partly dependent on this clear strategy orientation. Several studies validate this finding (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Galanaki et al., 2019; Marler and Fisher, 2013; Parry, 2011; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2009). MNCs adopt e-HRM when they satisfy a critical threshold in terms of the number of employees, which justifies the need to invest substantial resources in information technology (Galanaki et al., 2019). In summary, big organizations employ a full range of operational, relational, and transformational e-HRM applications. MNCs are therefore expected to have a wider range of IT applications than local organizations. However, the difference is marginal, indicating that organizational size and strategic orientation are not the only factors that define configuration types. There is a need to look at national policies triggering innovation in analysing e-HRM configurations (Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014).

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study have two theoretical implications. The study's results strengthen the theoretical relationship between e-HRM implementation and the desired organizational consequences. Any e-HRM configuration deployment brings about organizational effects, with the level of achievement differing. The digitization of the HR function contributes to organizational performance, as shown in this study.

This study confirms the relationship between e-HRM configuration and contextual factors. A 'power user' (or 'integrated e-HRM' or extended relational) configuration is more likely than other types to ensure organizational success (Galanaki et al., 2019; L'Ecuyer and Raymond, 2023; Njoku et al., 2016; Parry, 2011; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). In this setup, IT plays a significant role in HRM. In large multinational corporations, the HR function plays a strategic role. Configurations with lower IT for HRM emphasis still support organizational success, although to a lesser degree.

Despite being in the same socio-economic context, distinct e-HRM configurations yield diverse desired organizational consequences. Success depends on the degree of IT sophistication. e-HRM success rates differ between MNCs and 'local companies with no international presence'. In developing economies, the use of advanced e-HRM systems has led to increased value creation. Geographical, socio-economic, and contextual factors, therefore, do not influence the effectiveness of e-HRM systems (Galanaki et al., 2019).

6.2. Managerial implications

The results of this study have practical implications. Consequences for organizations do not stem solely from IT implementation. The e-HRM system's level of sophistication is also a factor. By aligning actors' e-HRM configurations to organizational goals, desired organizational consequences can be attained. Specific configurations lead to superior organizational performance (Galanaki et al., 2019; L'Ecuyer and Raymond, 2023; Strohmeier and Kabst, 2014). To effectively enhance organizational success, e-HRM actors should utilize advanced applications emphasizing HRM capabilities. In developing economies' small- to medium-sized organizations, e-HRM's full potential is not fully realized due to the absence of such applications.

Despite having low IT for HRM, the 'operational-user' e-HRM configuration still plays a role in achieving moderate organizational success. A minimal IT component in HRM does not hinder organizational success. Effective e-HRM configurations are grounded in strategic HRM. HR practices and policies are crucial for the implementation of e-HRM. Consequently, management should prioritize this.

7. Limitations and future research

This study utilized cross-sectional research. This approach makes it difficult to observe variables that evolve slowly. As a result, it is difficult to establish causal links among the variables under study. This causes the Neyman bias. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach in order to establish the existence of causality, if any. Research data have been collected in the specific context of a developing country. Socio-cultural factors may limit the generalization of these findings to broader contexts. Additional research in other developing country settings should be considered to enhance this study's population validity. Future research should also focus on the influence of national culture on e-HRM systems.

This study analyzes the effects of e-HRM systems on organizational consequences in MNC subsidiaries and in 'local companies with no international presence'. This study acknowledges the differences in e-HRM outcomes between two groups of organizations. Contextual variables such as size, institutionalization of the HR function, and presence in global markets influence the operational, relational, and transformational consequences of e-HRM systems. However, the difference in operational consequences is negligible. Although e-HRM configuration categorization currently follows a national-specific trend, a company-specific trend is also feasible. A generalization of e-HRM configuration based on a country's technological development is inadequate.

The study has not integrated the impact of global trends such as remote work and artificial intelligence on e-HRM configurations. The growth and application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace are likely to compete against the relevance of e-HRM. Artificial intelligence provides an alternative to IT for HRM. Future research should explore the effects of AI in order to provide a forward-looking perspective.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the variance in e-HRM use between multinational corporations (MNCs) and ‘local companies with no international presence’. The study, employing a quantitative survey design, revealed the following results.

- The effect of e-HRM on operational consequences is positive, and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’,
- The effect of e-HRM on relational consequences is positive, and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’, and
- The effect of e-HRM on transformational consequences is positive, and higher in MNCs than in ‘local companies with no international presence’.

The study reveals the need for additional factors impacting e-HRM configurations. The effectiveness of e-HRM configurations cannot be fully explained by organizational size, employee profile, geographical market presence, and strategic orientation of the HRM function alone. Other factors like national policies and artificial intelligence should be considered. Successful e-HRM systems are predominantly implemented in large corporations in developed economies. This study maintains that MNCs can transfer effective e-HRM systems to developing economies through their subsidiaries. Extensive e-HRM systems are therefore not confined to developed economies, but can also be implemented in different socio-economic contexts such as those prevailing in developing economies.

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Article

Exploring non-disclosure practices among male university job seekers through communication privacy management theory

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of non-disclosure of personal information among male individuals, employing the Communication Privacy Management Theory as a guiding framework. The objectives of the study encompass identifying the specific types of personal information male students refrain from disclosing, examining the underlying reasons for their non-disclosure practices, and assessing the impact of non-disclosure on their interpersonal relationships. Qualitative research methods, primarily in-depth interviews, were employed to gather insights, with six male students from Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI) participating in the interviews. The findings reveal that male students at UPSI do engage in non-disclosure of personal information, albeit to a certain extent. Specifically, the findings discovered four types of personal information—secrets, traumas, dark history, and family matters—that these students commonly choose not to disclose. Notably, there are four categories of personal information they tend to withhold, namely secrets, traumas, dark history, and family matters. The reluctance to disclose stems from factors such as insecure attachment, a reluctance to worry about their parents, and strained relationships with their family members. Furthermore, the study highlights that non-disclosure of personal information has both negative and positive repercussions on the participants' relationships with others. Moreover, the study underscores that non-disclosure of personal information can have both negative and positive effects on the participants' relationships, shedding light on the complexities of navigating personal privacy choices in the university and job-seeking context. The study contributes valuable insights into the challenges of employability dilemmas faced by male university students concerning the management of personal information.

Keywords: communication privacy management; non-disclosure; personal information; in-depth interviews; job seekers

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have become powerful spaces for individuals to express themselves, share experiences, and engage in conversations that resonate with diverse audiences. Among these platforms, TikTok has risen as a widely accessible center, surpassing age barriers through its captivating content. While exploring TikTok, a widely embraced social media platform across age groups, a video shared by the user “vroken4ever” caught the researcher’s attention. In this video, a thought-provoking question was posed by a girl: “Be honest, who do you call when you’re at your lowest? Who is that one person?” The answers that followed, mostly from men, highlighted a significant reluctance to discuss their personal struggles and difficulties. The reasons they provided included societal expectations tied to masculinity, which discourage vulnerability; a belief that others are indifferent to their

problems; feelings of isolation and being disconnected from others; and a fear of being judged or criticized if they open up. Prompted by these fascinating findings, the researcher embarked on a study to unravel the underlying reasons driving men's non-disclosure of personal information. Building upon Keum et al., (2021) insights, the study acknowledges the potential influence of traditional masculinity ideology. This ideology suggests that societal expectations contribute to men refraining from sharing their feelings, fearing vulnerability, perceived weakness, or a departure from traditional notions of manliness (Addis and Mahalik, 2003). The men's responses in the TikTok videos align with the notion that conforming to traditional masculinity norms often involves concealing personal challenges.

Furthermore, recent study draws on research conducted by Geena Institute on Gender in Media (2020), highlighting stereotypes men encounter, including the expectation to exhibit toughness and suppress emotions. This research posits that the men who participated in the TikTok video might be influenced by these societal norms. It is crucial, however, to emphasize that the primary focus of the current study is not to definitively establish a link between masculinity and non-disclosure. Instead, the mention of masculinity serves as a signpost, directing attention to the broader societal context and underlining the study's intent to illuminate the stereotypes faced by men without making conclusive assertions about the relationship between masculinity and non-disclosure. Embarking on the proverb that 'A problem shared is a problem halved', this study scrutinizes its relevance to men, considering the challenge men face in disclosing personal information compared to women. Previous studies have shown that men showed a higher tendency towards non-disclosure of difficult feelings that would result to the loss of masculine power (Mérelle et al., 2018). Complementing this, earlier works by several scholars (Mérelle et al., 2018; Petronio and Martin, 1986) collectively establish a pattern where males tend to lean towards non-disclosure of personal information. Despite an abundance of studies highlighting this trend, limited attention has been devoted to unraveling the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon, beyond the socialization differences between men and women. Petronio and Martin (1986) assert that women are socialized in an environment that encourages empathy, openness, and disclosure, whereas men are conditioned to be more concealing, less expressive, and unemotional. This assumption implies that, despite sharing the same criteria for personal disclosure, men possess a higher propensity to share less about themselves than women do.

Further enriching our understanding of this phenomenon, recent research emphasizes that the inclination for women to share more than men is profoundly shaped by the nature of the shared information. Although studies show that women tend to share more than men, but it depends on what kind of information it is. The type of information plays a big role in how much people share. This insight comes from a study by Carbone et al., (2024) which highlights that while both men and women exhibit a similar readiness to disclose positive information, men notably express a lower desire and likelihood to share negative details compared to women. The pervasive stereotypes of masculinity, emphasizing toughness (Geena Institute on Gender in Media, 2020), contribute to the suppression of emotions instilled in men from an early age. According to societal conditioning, men tend to believe that disclosing their feelings may lead to negative consequences, whereas emotional

restraint is perceived as yielding positive outcomes (Petronio and Martin, 1986). Within this intricate landscape, stigma emerges as a prominent deterrent for men, with the potential disclosure of personal information seen as a risk of being perceived as ‘weak’, ‘soft’, and ‘unmanly’ (Addis and Mahalik, 2003; Keum et al., 2021) discourages men from sharing personal information. In simpler terms, in this complex situation, stigma stands out as a big reason why men hesitate to talk openly about their feelings or personal issues. They worry that if they do, they might be seen as less strong or less manly. This fear stops them from opening up. These multifaceted insights highlight the challenges men face in navigating societal expectations and stereotypes, illuminating the intricate interplay between disclosure tendencies and cultural norms.

For workers or job seekers, sharing information with employers carries risks linked to concerns about privacy invasion and the potential loss of control over one’s personal details (Bhave et al., 2019). On the positive side, the act of sharing pertinent information can serve as a bridge, closing the information gap between employees and employers. This, in turn, contributes to favorable employment outcomes, such as securing a job. Notably, the significant expansion of access to human resource (HR) technology, encompassing human resource information systems (HRISs), cloud platforms, and apps, has empowered HR departments with enhanced capabilities (McCartney and Fu, 2021). They can now efficiently collect, manage, and analyze substantial volumes of employee data. This technological advancement underscores the evolving landscape of HR practices and the increasing reliance on sophisticated tools to streamline the management of employee information. Employees weigh these risks and benefits when deciding how much information to share, forming their privacy considerations (Bhave et al., 2019). From an organizational perspective, the main risk in collecting information from employees or job applicants is the potential invasion of their privacy, which can negatively impact employee morale and the organization’s employment brand (Bhave et al., 2019). On the flip side, the organization benefits by gaining superior information about its employees, enabling better decision-making related to employment, enhancing organizational security, and reducing legal liabilities. Thus, the present study seeks to:

- (1) To discover the categories of non-disclosure of personal information that male university job seekers chose to hide.
- (2) To explore the reasons for non-disclosure of personal information among male university job seekers.
- (3) To investigate the effects of non-disclosure among male university job seekers on their relationship with others.
- (4) Following the present research objectives, the researchers aim to answer the following research questions:
- (5) What are the categories of non-disclosure of personal information that male university job seekers choose to hide?
- (6) What are the reasons for the non-disclosure of personal information among male university job seekers?
- (7) How does non-disclosure of personal information affect male university job seekers in their relationships with others?

2. Literature review

2.1. Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory

Embedded in empirical evidence, Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory helps us understand why people decide to share or keep such information to themselves (Petronio, 2013). In this way, it provides insights into the dynamics of how individuals navigate the management of private information (Petronio, 1991, 2013; Petronio and Martin, 1986). The theory delineates two key aspects within its first domain, namely privacy ownership. Firstly, individuals inherently perceive themselves as the rightful owners of their private information. Secondly, CPM suggests that there are instances where individuals choose to extend partial ownership of their private information to others through the act of disclosure (Ebersole and Hernandez, 2016; Petronio, 2013). This dual perspective within the privacy ownership domain forms the foundation of CPM's framework for understanding how individuals grapple with the boundaries of their private information in social interactions. According to CPM theory, both males and females adhere to distinct rules governing the disclosure or non-disclosure of their personal information. The choices individuals make regarding sharing or withholding personal details significantly influence their relationships with others (West and Turner, 2021). CPM posits that navigating the decision of what to share and what to keep private requires a delicate balance, with both disclosure and non-disclosure carrying their own set of consequences. In this theory, personal information is seen as important to people, and when they share it with others, it's called personal disclosure within relationships (West and Turner, 2021).

What sets CPM apart from other theories is its emphasis on self-disclosure, specifically in its definition of disclosure, distinguishing it from conventional self-disclosure literature. CPM defines disclosure in three key ways: it focuses on the personal content of the disclosure, examines adherence to disclosure rules, and challenges the idea that self-disclosure is the sole determinant of importance in communication (West and Turner, 2021). This theory highlights a crucial aspect - the act of revealing private information induces a feeling of vulnerability, prompting a natural inclination to control access to that information (Petronio, 2013; Smith and Brunner, 2017). In simpler terms, sharing something personal makes people feel exposed or at risk. This vulnerability sparks a desire to control who knows about that information. This inherent need for control becomes a way for individuals to protect themselves from potential negative consequences or judgments associated with sharing personal details (Petronio, 2013; Smith and Brunner, 2017). This nuanced perspective offered by CPM enriches our understanding of how individuals manage the complex dynamics of disclosing or concealing personal information within their relationships. As the upcoming section delves into non-disclosure and its various types, this groundwork will serve as a foundation for comprehending the multifaceted nature of personal information management in relationships.

2.2. Non-disclosure and type of non-disclosure

Navigating the intricacies of human behavior, non-disclosure also referred to as

self-concealment (for consistency throughout this study), is characterized by the intentional and proactive hiding or concealing of negative personal information (Geng et al., 2022). Alternatively, non-disclosure can be defined as the inclination of an individual to withhold personal information, encompassing thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences, from others (Demir et al., 2020). Secrets, a ubiquitous aspect of human existence, entail the desire to keep personal information from being discovered by others (Jaffé and Douneva, 2020). Drawing parallels between the definitions of secrecy and non-disclosure, both involve the suppression of personal information, including problems, emotions, and experiences. Consequently, it can be inferred that non-disclosure and secrecy are correlated, with non-disclosure serving as a psychological construct that propels individuals towards the practice of secrecy (Uysal, 2019). Both concepts involve the concealment of personal matters, such as problems or emotions, indicating a fundamental similarity. The act of withholding information appears to be inherently connected to the act of keeping secrets, suggesting that the decision not to disclose information often initiates the process of secret-keeping.

In this study, non-disclosure is categorized into avoidance, lying, preoccupation, and emotion suppression, following the classification by Uysal (2019). However, the researcher remains open to exploring other types of non-disclosure that may manifest among male university students at UPSI. A comprehensive meta-analysis involving 137 studies conducted by Larson et al. (2015) illuminated the negative consequences associated with non-disclosure. Individuals practicing non-disclosure were found to experience adverse psychological and physical effects, including anxiety, depression, disease. In extreme cases, they may engage in negative behaviors such as eating disorders and suicidal tendencies. In essence, non-disclosure emerges as a factor that can significantly impact one's overall well-being.

Diving deeper into the multifaceted impacts of non-disclosure, it extends beyond individual health concerns, particularly mental health, and significantly influences interpersonal relationships. The act of keeping secrets not only hinders an individual's willingness to seek assistance from others but also affects perceptions of trustworthiness. Individuals who prefer non-disclosure are often perceived as untrustworthy and are subject to negative judgments (Larson et al., 2015; John et al., 2016). Bedrov and Leary (2021) illuminates a nuanced aspect: people often engage in non-disclosure to maintain connection and closeness with others. Disclosing personal information, in certain cases, may lead to conflict or stress, thus prompting individuals to opt for non-disclosure to preserve interpersonal relationships. This suggests that the motivation behind non-disclosure is rooted in the desire to avoid conflict, fostering the maintenance or enhancement of closeness (Bedrov and Leary, 2021).

Moreover, in broader terms, individuals commonly resort to non-disclosure as a protective mechanism against negative judgment, aiming to sustain positive relationships with others (Bedrov and Leary, 2021). The negative impact of keeping secrets, such as feelings of shame and guilt, largely depends on how much people dwell on them (Davis, 2024). He further emphasized that when people ruminate—constantly think about their secrets—they amplify their distress and negative emotions (Davis, 2024). Furthermore, people are less likely to share their secret if they don't have enough trusted and close relationships. Loved ones are essential for discussing

problem, secret and offering support, often even more than professionals. Studies show that lacking these intimate connections makes it more likely for individuals to keep their negative feelings and experiences to themselves (Wagner and Reifegerste, 2024). So, the fewer close and trusted relationships someone has, the more likely they are to hide their negative feelings and experiences. Ultimately, this interplay between non-disclosure and interpersonal dynamics illuminates the delicate balance individuals navigate to protect themselves, maintain positive relationships, and preserve the trust of those around them.

2.3. Personal information

Building on Petronio's definition in West and Turner's book (2019), personal information is perceived by individuals as significant and deeply meaningful to them. In the context of this study, where the focus is on understanding why male university job seekers opt not to disclose personal information, this definition is particularly relevant. Personal information also encompasses data recorded electronically or any information that, either independently or in combination with other details, can identify an individual (Fan et al., 2021). Another study frames personal information as data exploitable for identity revelation and profile building (Rafique, 2017). This suggests that personal information, when disclosed publicly, can potentially be used against the individual. Hence, the fear of personal information being misused might be a contributing factor to male non-disclosure, aligning with the concerns expressed in the aforementioned TikTok video.

Highlighting the ongoing challenge of male non-disclosure, particularly in contrast to females, a body of research, including studies by Petronio and Martin (1986), consistently reinforces the notion that men exhibit a lesser inclination to share personal information compared to women. In this study, we concur with the prevailing view among researchers that private includes any data related to an identifiable individual and not intended for public disclosure (Smith and Brunner, 2017; Starcher and Child, 2022). While individuals may be comfortable sharing certain personal details like their name, gender, email address, and place of birth, other information such as social security numbers, home addresses, health records, sexual orientation, and financial details are considered highly personal and are typically kept confidential. This literature review sets the foundation for selecting the appropriate methodology to delve into the complexities of male non-disclosure, which will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative research design

The selection of a qualitative research design for this study was driven by its ability to enhance understanding of human experiences, events, cultures, beliefs, and values (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Given the focus on participants' experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed more suitable, allowing the researcher to delve into the intricacies of these experiences and their influence on decisions related to the non-disclosure of personal information. To ensure the richness of data, six male university

students from UPSI were recruited through interviews, with each participant providing informed consent. According to Robert Yin, a prominent figure in qualitative research methodology, he emphasized the importance in qualitative study is to maximize information and no reference to any larger population is relevant, particularly in-depth interviews (Yin, 2016). According to Yin, information power refers to the extent to which each participant can contribute rich and relevant data to the research objectives (Yin, 2016). In the case of in-depth interviews, the emphasis is on the depth and richness of data obtained from each participant rather than the sheer number of participants. Yin argues that even a small sample size can be sufficient if the participants possess a wealth of knowledge and experiences relevant to the research questions (Yin, 2016). Moreover, the interviews were conducted over in two months from April to May 2023, accommodating participants' schedules. Each interview, held in empty classrooms, lasted approximately 30 minutes. The questioning sequence commenced with general inquiries about age, faculty, and program details, gradually progressing to more specific queries aimed at unveiling the subtleties of personal information disclosure and non-disclosure.

The interview questions included:

- (1) What personal information would you share with others?
- (2) Why do you share that personal information?
- (3) What personal information would you not share with others?
- (4) Why are you hiding those personal pieces of information?
- (5) How did it affect your relationship with others when you hide that personal information?
- (6) Do you think that if you share that personal information, your friends and family will stay away from you?

Additional questions were added during the interview when deemed necessary. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and backed up to prevent data loss. The transcription process involved the researcher's annotations, thoughts, and ideas related to the collected data.

3.2. Data analysis

Moving to the analysis phase, the researcher engaged in coding, categorizing, and theming. Similar codes were grouped, leading to the identification of emerging themes. This iterative process, complemented by memo writing, facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the data. The final step involved interpreting the data by exploring patterns, connections, and relationships within the identified categories and themes. The cyclical nature of this approach, guided by memo analysis, allowed for a nuanced and in-depth exploration of the male university job seekers' perspectives on non-disclosure of personal information.

4. Results and discussion

In our investigation of the phenomenon of non-disclosure among male university students at UPSI, we employed a qualitative research design to gain insight into their diverse experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes. By focusing on the male perspective, we aimed to understand the intricate dynamics surrounding the disclosure

and non-disclosure of personal information. Through the recruitment of six participants, we were able to explore the nuanced reasons behind their choices to share or conceal personal information, as well as the specific types of non-disclosure they opted for. Over the course of two months, interviews provided a platform for participants to openly articulate their thoughts, offering valuable insights into the factors influencing their decisions. As the analysis and interpretation stages unfold, the subsequent sections will unravel the emergent themes, illuminating the complex dynamics that underlie non-disclosure practices among male university job seekers. Through this exploration, we aim to uncover deeper insights into the motivations, challenges and implications associated with non-disclosure behavior in this specific context.

Theme 1: Selective Disclosure Practices.

Drawing insights from the perspectives of the six interviewed participants, a prominent theme emerged, challenging the preconceived assumption that male university job seekers universally engage in non-disclosure of personal information and thus, adding depth to the understanding of how personal information is navigated. The participants' responses shed light on this aspect, revealing a nuanced picture of their selective disclosure practices.

I would not share my personal information willingly with people that I've just met. I will share my secrets only with my close friends.

(Participant 1)

Some of it (personal information), I can disclose to others that I can trust and some, I cannot share such as my fear. I have a fear of arthropods and my housemate knew about this. Recently, he chased me around the house holding an arthropod.

(Participant 2)

I share my secrets and my past trauma with my close friends. Usually, before we go to sleep, we will talk about it first.

(Participant 3)

For me, trauma is a part of personal information. I will not share them unless that person is someone whom I am close with.

(Participant 4)

If necessary, I would share my personal information. For example, some secrets I can share, and other secrets I cannot share.

(Participant 5)

For me, if I am close to someone, I would share them (personal information). It is not a problem for me. I think that if we keep hiding our true selves from others, they will not know about us, so we need to share with them little by little and eventually they will know who we are.

(Participant 6)

The recurring theme, derived from the participants' responses revolves around the selective nature of personal information disclosure among male university job seekers. Essentially, these individuals expressed a willingness to share personal details, but this openness is contingent upon their familiarity, trust, or longstanding relationships with the individuals involved. In essence, male university job seekers demonstrated a propensity to share their personal lives exclusively with those they

have a genuine connection with, trust implicitly, or have built a longstanding relationship with over time. This finding adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of how personal information is navigated, emphasizing the significance of relational dynamics and trust in the disclosure process.

In the earlier discussion of this paper, three antecedents or categories of personal information that male students might be hesitant to share were identified: traumas, insecure attachment orientations, and dispositional social evaluation concerns (Larson et al., 2015). The initial finding indicates that male university job seekers exhibit a tendency not to disclose personal information, albeit with certain limitations. Before delving into the specific types of personal information participants opted to conceal, the researcher first inquired about their understanding of the concept of personal information.

Upon examining the participants' interpretations of personal information presented in **Table 1**, it became evident that all six individuals shared a unanimous understanding—personal information, according to their perspective, is not willingly disclosed. However, the nuances emerged when participants elaborated on the specific details of personal information they might be reluctant to share. Among the personal information that male university job seekers prefer to hide were: 1) secrets; 2) traumas; 3) dark history; 4) bad experiences and 5) family problems. These insights provide the significance of understanding the diverse reasons behind individuals' reluctance to disclose certain aspects of their personal lives, particularly in the context of seeking employment opportunities.

Table 1. Participants' interpretations of personal information.

Participant	Individual Perspective on Personal Information
Participant 1	In my understanding, personal information comprises data that we cannot reveal willingly. It is only disclosed when there is official business.
Participant 2	To me, personal information revolves around one's thoughts or problems that are challenging to share, either due to difficulty or the absence of someone to confide in.
Participant 3	Personal information, for me, pertains to details about ourselves that we guard, and others do not have the right to know. It's information that only we are privy to.
Participant 4	Personal information is something that is related to someone, which is their background and something that is related to them.
Participant 5	Personal information, in my understanding, is related to privacy or important information about someone.
Participant 6	Personally, I would define personal information as something very private and individual. It depends on the person whether they choose to share it with the public or not. Everyone has their own personal information.

In terms of insecure attachment orientations and dispositional social evaluation concerns, these are not necessarily the types of personal information that participants opt to withhold; instead, they may serve as reasons for refraining from disclosing their personal information.

4.1. Reasons for non-disclosure of personal information

As highlighted earlier, participants do engage in disclosing personal information to some extent. However, unanimous among all six participants was the preference for

sharing with close friends initially, rather than with family or other individuals. The reasons for this inclination are multifaceted and are explored below:

4.1.1. Insecure attachment orientation

Insecure attachment orientation, characterized as a contributor to social risk factors for psychopathology, has been linked to poor emotional regulation and a lack of close support (Nor Ba'yah Abdul Kadir, 2017). This type of attachment becomes a significant factor influencing the non-disclosure of personal information, as participants seek to avoid negative impacts on their relationships. Consequently, they selectively share personal information only with individuals they trust, based on shared experiences or a long-established relationship. Participant 2 expressed, "When I decide to share my personal information, I let the other person share about themselves first. If that person has the same experience or fate or maybe worse than ours, maybe we can share our story. We are in the same situation. Moreover, the response from Participant 4 stressed that "it doesn't matter whether they are old friends or new friends, as long as I am comfortable with them. I mean they are willing to listen and give their opinion."

Participants, driven by concerns about distrust and anxious attachment orientations, limit personal disclosures to those who have gained their trust, creating a supportive and understanding environment.

4.1.2. Not wanting parents to worry

Two participants in the study conveyed a hesitation to disclose personal information to their families, citing a wish to protect them from unnecessary worry. Participant 3 emphasized their less-than-close relationship with family members, especially as they grew older, leading to a preference for keeping secrets from family. Participant 4 echoed this sentiment, expressing a preference for sharing personal matters with close friends rather than family, with the underlying concern of not wanting to burden family members with worries about their problems. Concerns about burdening their families with worries lead these participants to opt for secrecy, sharing their personal information selectively with friends rather than family members.

4.1.3. Strained family relationships

One participant attributed their non-disclosure to a strained relationship with their family, especially with their parents. Participant 2 shared, "Some people have good relationships with their parents, some people are close to their siblings. Like me, I have a good relationship with my siblings, but when it comes to my parents, to have a close relationship with them, it's a bit hard." The participant expressed a desire for a closer familial bond, citing observations of others' relationships on social media. However, past mischievous actions during their younger years led to strained family ties, making them hesitant to seek support from their family.

In summary, the reasons for non-disclosure among male university students extend beyond personal insecurities and encompass concerns about family worry and strained relationships, shedding light on the complexity of personal information-sharing practices.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with male university job seekers at UPSI, uncovering recurring themes that shed light on their personal information disclosure practices. Despite initial assumptions that these individuals might exhibit a tendency towards non-disclosure, the findings revealed a more nuanced picture. It was concluded that male university job seekers do engage in personal information disclosure, albeit selectively and with specific individuals. The interviews revealed both the willingness and reluctance of male university students to share various types of personal information. Notably, personal information encompassed a range of topics such as secrets, past traumas, dark histories, and family problems. Contrary to the literature review, where insecure attachment orientations and dispositional social-evaluation concerns were presented as types of personal information that might not be shared, further analysis clarified that these are reasons influencing the non-disclosure of personal information. Moreover, this chapter delves into the consequences of both disclosing and not disclosing personal information. Through a comprehensive examination of these dynamics, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how male university job seekers navigate the complexities of personal information disclosure in their pursuit of employment opportunities.

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Review

Does board structure influence employee retention?: A systematic literature review

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Abstract: Employee Engagement (EE) has become a crucial element for the success of any organization. While psychology has conducted extensive research on EE, accounting has yet to give it the attention it deserves. This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to explore the linkage between corporate governance (CG) practices and factors that drive employee engagement (EED) in greater detail. The review identified several key factors influencing EED: board composition, audit committees, top leadership expertise, network power, other stakeholders' supervision, and above-board application. In particular, the study revealed that effective CG practices have positive EE consequences, such as increased staff morale, job satisfaction, and productivity, and decreased employee turnover rates. The study underlined the importance of an employee-centric culture that encourages empowerment and fosters a sense of belonging in achieving maximum business success. It suggests that companies must create a work environment that promotes EE, provides opportunities for growth and development, recognizes employee contributions, and fosters open communication and collaboration. By leveraging these insights, companies can enhance their business operations and achieve maximum success by fostering a culture of EE and empowerment. The study concludes that businesses prioritizing EE as a core value can create a sustainable competitive advantage, increase their reputation, and attract and retain top talent.

Keywords: board composition; corporate governance; employee engagement drivers; stakeholders

1. Introduction

A company's sustainability and success heavily rely on its employees' engagement, especially during tough competition and external uncertainties. (Anand, 2017; Antony, 2018). To reach their objectives, companies should use all their human resources instead of depending solely on owners and senior leadership teams (Brownson et al., 2009). Employees at all levels should collaborate to achieve the company's shared goals (Milliman et al., 2001). The old-fashioned steam train operates by having only the foremost carriage, which consists of owners and top management responsible for propelling the carriages behind it. This method results in slower speeds than the present superspeed train, which uses thrust at the head, the principal, and the leader, and pushers at the tail carriage, which employs men. As a result, dedicated and motivated staff provide excellent customer service, superior work quality, improved output, and better innovation, delivering higher client satisfaction, revenue, and profits for shareholders (Lightle et al., 2015). This study is intended to complement the previously conducted research on entrepreneurial opportunities by

focusing on internal factors that contribute to a firm's competitive advantage (Gholizadeh and Mohammadkazemi, 2022). Specifically, this research aims to investigate the internal mechanisms that drive a firm's competitive advantage, rather than external factors. By exploring these internal factors, this study will provide a deeper understanding of how firms can create a sustainable competitive advantage in the market.

Employee engagement (EE) refers to how individuals utilize all aspects of themselves during work functions. This definition includes their physical, cognitive, and emotional expressions. The cognitive viewpoint involves people's beliefs and thoughts regarding their organization, leaders, and working conditions. This aspect is crucial as it shapes an employee's overall attitude towards their job. The emotional standpoint is equally crucial, as it influences employees' feelings towards their organization and its leaders, resulting in positive or negative attitudes. Lastly, the physical part involves the energy exerted by individuals to fulfill their duties. Employee engagement entails being fully immersed mentally and physically in work-related tasks, which is vital in promoting job satisfaction and overall organizational success (Kahn, 1990).

The topic of how engagement is developed has been discussed, and one contributing factor is the organization's corporate governance. Previous studies have indicated that various factors influenced EE, such as a positive work environment, growth opportunities, recognition, and feedback from the company (Harter et al., 2002; Harter et al., 2003). Firms must prioritize employees' psychological and physical well-being to achieve high EE levels. This statement includes their happiness, enthusiasm, health, job satisfaction, job characteristics, organizational commitment, citizenship, communication, knowledge sharing, and the organization's reputation. Additionally, we must consider accountability, environmental influence, incentives, job autonomy, learning opportunities, workplace climate, and work-unit engagement. Trust between employees and the company, transformational leadership, and employer branding are also crucial. Organizations can create a culture of engagement by prioritizing these factors, which will make employees feel appreciated and driven to make meaningful contributions to the company's achievements. (Saks, 2006; Cawe, 2006; Bhatnagar, 2007; etc.)

The following segments will review different accounting perspectives on employee engagement, examine the systematic review methodology, thoroughly discuss, and conclude the findings. Finally, the last segment will conclude our study by discussing the limitations and implications.

1.1. The corporate governance and employee engagement drivers

1.1.1. Corporate governance

Adam Smith introduced an underlying value of corporate governance (CG) (Smith, 1776), with the statement that "being the managers of other people's money rather than their own, it cannot be expected that they (managers) should watch over it with the same anxious vigilance that they would watch over their own. Negligence and profusion, therefore, must always prevail in managing the affairs of such a company." The concept of agency principle, which was initially put forth by Fama and Jensen in

1983, has become a widely discussed topic among accounting researchers and scholars. It emphasizes the importance of splitting ownership and management as a key aspect of corporate governance.

The most significant factor in creating opportunities for entrepreneurship is the impact of leadership. This is followed by decision-making and strategy, which ranked second and third, respectively (Jamali et al., 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to have a well-composed board at the organizational level to ensure good corporate governance and efficient management.

Corporate governance in modern times can be explored from various disciplinary perspectives. It encompasses a multitude of organizational factors, such as accounting, business ethics and law, economics, finance, human resources, and strategic management. While the number of CG pillars identified in the literature ranges from three to seven or even more, the board and management's commitment to implementing good CG is the most critical factor. Based on Jain and Jamali's (2016) framework, we have identified four levels of CG.

1.1.1.1. The group level

Regarding corporate governance, the group level focuses on the board's role in overseeing managers to prevent conflicts of interest. There are three critical components at the group level: the first is board composition and compensation; the second is audit committees; and the third is the internal audit function (Jain and Jamali, 2016). The makeup of the board is closely tied to the firm's committees and the internal audit system. Providing compensation to the board is a common way to resolve conflicts between management and investors. This compensation should consist of a combination of flat and performance-based components. In a one-tier system, the audit committee oversees executive directors' actions (Velte, 2023).

1.1.1.2. The individual level

CG focuses on the demographic and socio-psychological uniqueness of key upper management team members. The most notable personnel in a firm are typically the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Although there are other chief-level positions in operations and commercial, the first two are the most recognized as key upper personnel. This individual level of scrutiny examines the personal and professional qualities that contribute to the effective functioning of these leaders within the organization. Such attention ensures that top decision-makers possess the necessary competencies and traits to navigate the complex landscape of the business world. These characteristics may include factors such as narcissism or tenure and are carefully considered to ensure effective organizational decision-making and leadership. The significance of individual-level factors in the success and performance of a company cannot be overstated. These factors are crucial in shaping the overall outcome of an organization, highlighting the importance of paying attention to employees' attributes and characteristics. Therefore, companies must consider these factors when formulating strategies and policies to enhance organizational performance. Failure to do so may lead to suboptimal outcomes that could have been avoided if individual-level factors were taken into account (Jain and Jamali, 2016).

1.1.1.3. The firm level

When it comes to CG, the focus at the firm level is typically on ownership structure. This fact can include factors like block holding and ownership concentration (Jain and Jamali, 2016). CG involves essential aspects, and ownership structure is one of the most crucial components. There are various forms of ownership structures that an organization can adopt. These include institutional ownership, which involves ownership by corporations or other institutions; family ownership, where the business is owned and operated by family members; state ownership, which entails ownership by the government; and foreign ownership, whereby individuals or organizations from different countries own the business. Each of these ownership structures has its own unique benefits and drawbacks, and it is essential to consider them carefully before deciding on the best fit for the business. It is essential to comprehend and manage ownership structures appropriately to ensure effective CG, which can significantly impact the prosperity and longevity of a company. Therefore, carefully examining and analyzing ownership structures is vital for any business or academic institution aiming to enhance its CG practices. Previous research has concentrated on institutional ownership as the dominant factor in this category (Velte, 2023).

1.1.1.4. The institutional level

There are various levels of institutional involvement in CG. These institutions include political, legal, financial, and information systems. Political systems refer to the governing bodies that enforce laws and policies. Legal systems, on the other hand, are responsible for interpreting and enforcing laws and regulations. Financial systems encompass all the institutions and mechanisms that facilitate the flow of capital and credit within an economy. Lastly, information institutions collect, organize, and disseminate information to the public. Together, these institutions form the backbone of modern society, providing the necessary infrastructure for social, economic, and political development. Institutions encompass socially valued beliefs and norms that hold considerable sway over the governance and management of companies. It is essential to consider both formal and informal institutions when considering CG and how it can be improved (Jain and Jamali, 2016).

Table 1 presents a comprehensive account of corporate governance variables categorized by board level, along with their respective descriptions. This synopsis provides readers with a lucid comprehension that corporate governance is classified based on board levels, whereby each level has its own unique variables (Jain and Jamali, 2016; Velte, 2023).

Table 1. The variables of corporate governance.

Board level	Descriptions
Group-level	Board composition summary: The content delves into diverse factors that can impact the formation of political ties among executives, alongside their academic and professional qualifications. It also delves into the significance of board diversity, autonomy, and efficacy in deterring fraudulence and guaranteeing responsibility. Other considerations include the uniformity of executive backgrounds, their abilities and expertise, and their affiliations with external entities and social circles. Lastly, the piece explores the function of autonomous directors and their associations with founders, as well as the frequency and scale of board meetings and the proportion of independent directors located near a company's headquarters. Board compensation summary: Executive compensation is a critical aspect of corporate governance. Factors to consider when determining executive pay include claw-back provisions, managerial ownership, pay-to-performance sensitivities, supervisory board stock ownership, and tournament incentives. Claw-back provisions hold executives responsible for negative performance results. Managers with a significant ownership stake in the company are more likely to make decisions that benefit the company's long-term success. Supervisory boards play a significant role in executive compensation decisions. Tournament incentives can impact executive compensation and must be evaluated for their potential impact on employee morale and overall company performance. Audit committees summary: In order to ensure that audit and compensation committees are effectively managed, it is imperative that the individuals leading these committees possess the required expertise. Furthermore, gender diversity among members is crucial for promoting equitable decision-making. The efficacy of such committees is vital for identifying and resolving any concerns that may arise. Additionally, cultural diversity and independence should be taken into account, as varying perspectives can yield invaluable insights. Committees comprised of individuals with differing tenures can benefit from diverse experiences and knowledge. Finally, committees with independent tenures and multiple directorships can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the company and its operations, resulting in superior decision-making.
Individual-level	CEO/CFO characteristics summary: During earnings conference calls, the CEO's background, including their past military service, business degree, professional experience, and education, is often discussed. Additionally, traits such as hubris, narcissism, and over-confidence may be examined. The CFO's inside debt holdings, in-the-money option value, pay ratio, and equity-based compensation may also be scrutinized. Pay for performance, power, and outside directorships are other areas of potential discussion for both the CEO and CFO. Tenure and gender may also be factors, as well as social network connections, sensitivity, and directorship roles. Political connections of the CEO and chairman may also be examined, as well as their relationships with the top four non-CEO executives and directors. Finally, vocal markers of cognitive dissonance may also be noted.
Firm-level	Ownership structure summary: Within the realm of finance, there exist multiple ownership structures. One such structure is dedicated institutional ownership, which occurs when institutions hold substantial stakes in a company. Blockholder ownership, on the other hand, involves a single investor or group holding a significant portion of shares. Ownership concentration refers to the level of consolidation among a few investors, while diffused ownership occurs when no investor or group holds a controlling interest. Family ownership comes into play when a family is in control of a company, and foreign ownership occurs when investors from another country hold stakes. State ownership takes place when a government owns a company. Lastly, investors may hold differing opinions regarding a company's future prospects, based on factors such as financial performance or management team. Monitoring by other stakeholders summary: Companies can manipulate their earnings to portray higher profits, especially when the analyst forecast indicates it. However, it is essential to keep in mind that there could be a significant discrepancy between what analysts and auditors expect in terms of earnings. This difference could serve as a warning sign that further investigation is needed. In order to effectively monitor financial analyst coverage and avoid conflicts of interest, industry expertise is crucial. Additionally, the strength of labor unions and the quality of public governance can significantly impact earnings management. It is also wise to consider securities analysts' recommendations, as they can provide important insights into financial performance to help investors make informed decisions.
Institutional-level	Legal enforcement summary: The Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB) conducts triennial and annual evaluations of accounting firms in the US to ensure compliance with auditing standards and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, the PCAOB limits the tax services auditors provide to maintain objectivity and independence. The Shareholder Rights Index, or G-index, measures the level of protection provided to shareholders across various countries. Finally, tax enforcement efforts are crucial in promoting tax compliance, ensuring compliance with tax laws, and generating revenue for governments.

Source: Revised processed data from Velte (2023).

1.1.2. Employee engagement

Various vital factors significantly impact EE within an organization. These factors are behavioral engagement, emotional feeling, encompass cognitive, and the perception of being valued and included within the workplace. Additionally, a supportive leadership team, trust and integrity within the organization, the nature of the job, strong employee connections, corporate performance, growth opportunities for employees, a stress-free work environment, and effective change management strategies all contribute to EE. Organizations must consider and prioritize these factors to foster an engaged and productive workforce. The study highlights the importance of considering these factors to improve EE, as they are all crucial components that contribute to a positive and productive work culture (Imandin et al., 2015).

2. Methodology

The aim of this research is to review the literature on CG techniques implemented in the workplace. This analysis will specifically focus on the correlation between these techniques and the factors that drive EE. Our systematic literature collection approach is based on previous reviews conducted from 2009–2021 (Velte, 2023). We employ a mapping process to categorize CG drivers into EE drivers, utilizing an analysis of comparable drivers as identified by prior researchers. **Figure 1** presents our research framework.

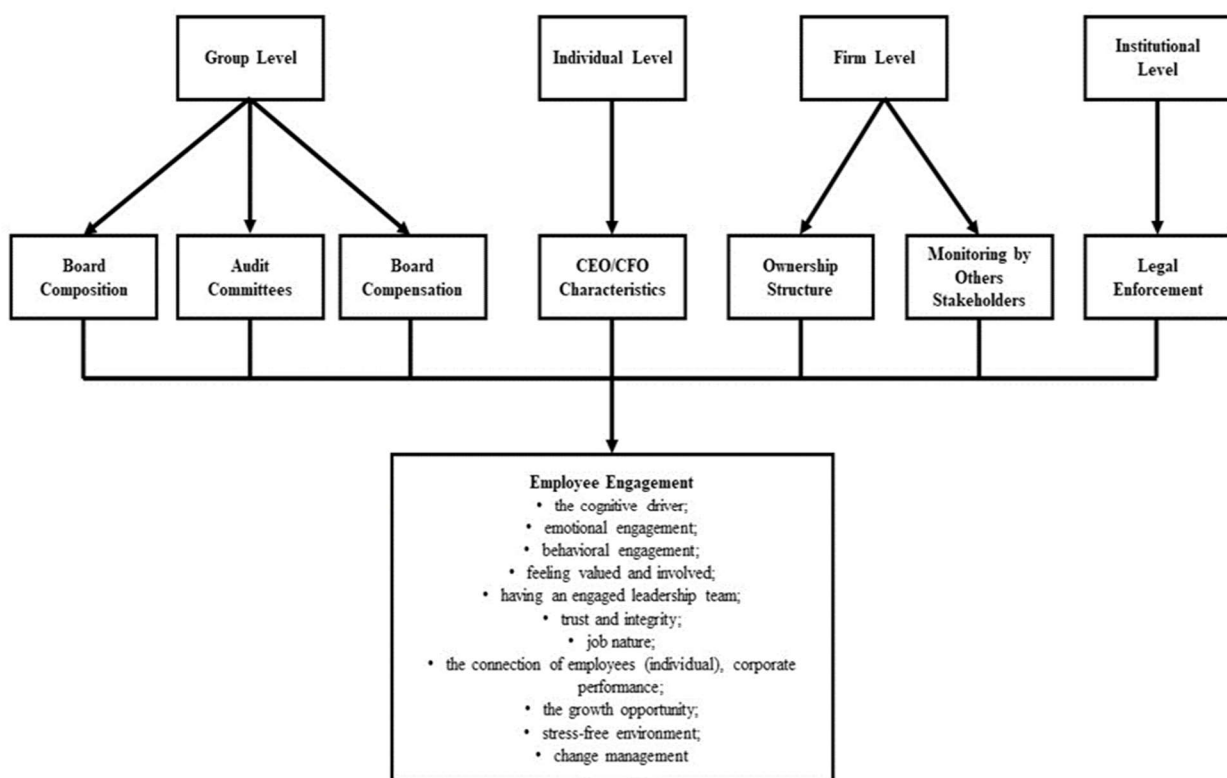


Figure 1. Framework on corporate governance and employee engagement drivers.

Source: Processed data from the research.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Mapping results

Table 2 provides a comprehensive summary of the publication year and CG variables contained in the paper. This overview gives readers a clear understanding of the key themes and trends that emerge from the research. By examining the data across different years and governance variables, readers can understand the components that impact CG outcomes. This table offers an easy reference for scholars and practitioners looking for an in-depth understanding of the CG's complexities in today's business landscape.

Table 2. Citation of published articles.

Publication and variables	Years and group levels
By publication year Total: ninety-eight	2021: 4
	2020: 11
	2019: 16
	2018: 17
	2017: 10
	2016: 10
	2015: 7
	2014: 4
	2013: 9
	2012: 8
	2010: 1
	2009: 1
By CG variables Total: ninety-eight	Group level: fifty-six Individual: thirty Firm: twenty Institutional: six

Source: Processed data from Velte (2023).

3.2. Discussion on the linkage of corporate governance and employee engagement

3.2.1. The group level

3.2.1.1. Board composition

The board's expertise led to engagement because their impartiality and fairness led to employee trust (Verriest et al., 2011; Zhang, 2019). The more extensive board network, size, and meeting frequency mean there are growth opportunities for employees and the board's desire to listen to employees (Kong et al., 2019; Kuang and Lee, 2017; Mohd Salleh and Othman, 2016). Meanwhile, more prominent board age may lead to disengagement because older people's thoughts may be different from those of younger people working right now (Xu et al., 2017).

3.2.1.2. Board compensation

The compensation of board members can affect how engaged and involved employees feel in an organization. Each employee has their own idea of fair compensation; therefore, they may disengage from the company's mission and values if they feel inadequate. Organizations need to factor in the impact of their board

compensation policies on building a positive and productive work environment (Armstrong et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2018).

3.2.1.3. The function of committees and internal audits

An independent and functional internal audit and committee creates a stress-free and fair working environment that promotes engagement (Khoufi and Khoufi, 2018; Marzuki et al., 2019). However, it is essential to note that a more extensive network, size, tenure, and meeting frequency of an audit committee may lead to disengagement as it can be perceived as a lack of independence by employees (Cheng et al., 2018; Omer et al., 2019; Wahid and Li, 2017).

3.2.2. The individual level

3.2.2.1. CEO or CFO expertise, networks, power, and duality

The CEO or CFO holds a crucial role in corporate governance as they make important decisions for the company. Suppose the CEO or CFO is an experienced professional with a vast network and a fair approach. This condition will lead to positive EE and offer growth opportunities in an encouraging work environment (Wu et al., 2012; Lisic et al., 2016; Altunbaş et al., 2018).

3.2.2.2. CEO/CFO compensation

The compensation of key upper-level personnel can significantly influence employee engagement and overall satisfaction in the workplace. As with board compensation, individual employees may have varying opinions on what constitutes fair compensation for top-level executives and how it influences their sense of fairness within the organization. These perceptions can ultimately affect their commitment and motivation towards their work, highlighting the importance of fair and transparent compensation practices (Ghafoor et al., 2019; Natarajan and Zheng, 2017).

3.2.2.3. The negative traits of key upper teams' hubris, overconfidence, and narcissism

When a key upper-team member exhibits hubris, overconfidence, and narcissism, it often leads to a disengaged workforce. This is because such leadership qualities tend to create an unfair and chaotic work environment where management becomes ineffective and inefficient. The negative impact of such behavior on employee morale undermines trust and respect within the workplace, leading to disengagement. Therefore, leaders must prioritize humility, self-awareness, and empathy to foster a positive and productive work culture (Ham et al., 2017; McManus, 2018; Presley and Abbott, 2013).

3.2.3. The firm level

3.2.3.1. Ownership structure

The type of ownership structure can have varying effects on employee perspectives towards their organization. However, studies have shown that ownership does not significantly impact how employees view their workplace (Sue et al., 2013; Shan et al., 2013; Inya et al., 2018; Ghafoor et al., 2019).

3.2.3.2. Monitoring by other stakeholders

Regularly monitoring the performance of the organization leads to increased employee engagement. Employees must feel valued in creating a fair and supportive work environment with growth opportunities. This can be achieved by consistently monitoring stakeholder feedback (Bradley et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2017; Newton, 2018).

3.2.4. The institutional level

Ensuring legal enforcement at the organizational level is crucial to promoting employee perceptions of fairness and engagement in their work. A fair environment can only be established when all aspects of the organization are aligned with legal regulations. This means that all policies, procedures, and practices must comply with the law, and any violations must be addressed promptly and fairly. By creating a legally compliant environment, organizations can foster a culture of fairness and promote employee engagement, which ultimately drives success and prosperity for both the employees and the organization (Khurana et al., 2020).

4. Conclusions

In this review, we thoroughly analyze archival studies concerning how CG affects employee engagement. Considering the perspectives of employee engagement based on Imandin et al. (2015), consisting of 11 drivers, and corporate governance based on 98 archival studies conducted between 2009 and 2021 (Velte, 2023), this comprehensive analysis delves into how corporate governance can positively impact EE across multiple levels, such as group, individual, firm, and institutional. We can better understand how to foster a more engaged and motivated workforce by exploring these crucial aspects.

When it comes to ensuring a stress-free work environment and promoting employee trust, integrity, and engagement, the effectiveness of a firm's board and its audit committees' cannot be understated. By having a diverse and knowledgeable board, companies can ensure that all voices are heard and decisions are made with the company's and its employees' best interests in mind. Additionally, strong audit committees can provide transparency and accountability, further fostering employee trust and engagement. Ultimately, when a company prioritizes fair and equitable practices at the group level, it sets the foundation for a positive and productive workplace culture. In contrast, board compensation is linked to disengagement. When it comes to the individual level, CEO/CFO expertise, networks, power, and duality foster a valued feeling, a stress-free work environment, job nature, growth opportunities, change management, and fairness, which lead to employee trust, integrity, and engagement. Conversely, CEO/CFO compensation, hubris, overconfidence, and narcissism tie to disengagement.

At the firm level, monitoring by other stakeholders creates a sense of being valued and a fair work environment, leading to employee trust, integrity, and engagement. The ownership structure is also linked to engagement, although it did not significantly impact. At the institutional level, legal enforcement is vital in ensuring that all organizational activities are conducted according to legal law, thereby creating a fair environment that fosters employee trust and engagement.

To create or develop a successful business, it's important to ensure a good fit between the entrepreneurial opportunity and business model. This means designing a model that can capture market opportunities and evaluating opportunities that align with the business's strengths (Yadollahi Farsi et al., 2019). Therefore, this study adds to the existing research on the positive correlation between board structure and employee retention and engagement. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the compatibility between these two factors.

5. Future research

The study in question has noted a few previous studies exploring the connection between CG and employee engagement. However, it should be noted that the research results present a valuable starting point for more empirical studies that can corroborate the conclusions drawn here. By continuing to explore this topic, we can further refine our understanding of the relationship between these two essential factors in the operation and success of modern businesses. To enrich understanding of both board structure and employee engagement, future research can incorporate previous studies on the concept of international entrepreneurial orientation (Kazemi et al., 2019). Furthermore, future research on employee retention could benefit from incorporating research insights regarding the impact of enterprise architecture-driven dynamic capabilities and operational digital ambidexterity on enhancing business value (van de Wetering, 2022). This is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

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Perspective

A balanced work-life relationship helps boost employee performance

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Abstract: The current research note is written for personnel managers and MBA students, aiming to raise awareness of the importance of work-life balance in employee management policies. In the intersection of work and personal life, the work-life balance is the equilibrium between the two; more specifically, the work-life balance explains the relationship and interaction between an individual's job and their private life. In the research note, we first introduce the concept and characteristics of work-life balance through relevant literature. We then argue the significance of incorporating work-life balance into employee management practices, as the concept of work-life balance helps managers appreciate individual differences and develop more human-oriented awareness in management. We encourage managers to adopt transformational leadership in their management, in which the concept of work-life balance should be embedded in the design and implementation of employee management policies. By giving more autonomy to the employees through work-life balance policies and practices, employees are more likely to appreciate the work and make more contributions accordingly. Practitioner points are also recommended.

Keywords: autonomy; employee management; employee performance; work-life balance

1. Introduction to the research note

The current research note is written for MBA students and personnel managers, aiming to introduce the latest knowledge of work-life balance (WLB) and offer suggestions for improving the efficacy of existing work-life balance policies and practices. The research note is more like a summary-oriented article than a full-length academic article or conventional investigation report. For the same reason, our research note does not follow the orthogonal layout, such as Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Findings, and Discussion. Instead, we focus on the highlights and findings of three cited journal articles (Iteboje and Chang, 2021; Kuo et al., 2024; Sani and Adisa, 2024), and, more importantly, we are keen to explain how managers may benefit from our viewpoints in their work-life policies and practices. By doing so, we may support personnel managers and HR practitioners in improving the efficacy of their employee management policies. Moreover, through the research findings (based on three cited journal articles), we are also keen to elaborate on evidence-based insights into the ‘work-life balance’ literature. By doing so, we may support MBA students in acquiring the latest knowledge of ‘work-life balance’, which in turn enriches their business acumen in the field of ‘work-life balance management: challenges and constraints’.

Broadly speaking, ‘work-life balance (WLB)’ explains the intersection between one’s work and private life. In the workplace, more specifically, work often interferes with personal life, and personal life interferes with work too. These interferences jointly explain why the work-life interaction is bi-directional, in which work and life

are mutually affected. Until recently, researchers have found that work-life balance has the potential to stimulate employee performance, drawing the attention of personnel managers and management scholars. For instance, in our latest research project conducted in 2024 (Sani and Adisa, 2024), we analyze whether leadership style generates any impact on employees' use of WLB policies. Interestingly, we have discovered that managers may use transformational leadership styles to establish strong reciprocal relationships between themselves and employees in terms of using WLB policies and practices. We have also found that, more often than not, managers sanction the use of WLB policies and practices only as a reward for excellent performance or when they are completely sure the outcome will favor the organization.

Inspired by the aforementioned research findings, in the current research note, we will first clarify the concept of WLB and elaborate on its diverse characteristics, laying a solid knowledge base for MBA students who study work-life balance and cognate themes. Next, based on the summary of literature reviews (cited from three journal articles), we are keen to propose practical suggestions to WLB policy makers and management authorities, helping improve the efficacy of their WLB practices. Finally, we will consolidate our WLB knowledge and recommend intervention strategies to personnel managers and HR practitioners, so employees and the general workforce can benefit from our research as well.

2. Work-life balance: Concept and characteristics

Scholars have proposed various views and theories to explain the concept and characteristics of work-life balance, such as spillover theory, conflict theory, border boundary theory, enrichment theory, facilitation theory, compensation theory, and other cognate perspectives. These theories are all sound in their respective arguments, and the evolution of the theoretical framework has gradually enriched our understanding of WLB characteristics over the years. The nature and argument(s) of these theories are not the same, but they seem to share one thing in common: that the concept of work-life balance does not necessarily mean an equal distribution of resources (for instance, energy and time) between work duties and non-work duties. WLB is not privacy-intrusive either. Rather, employees' work and non-work domains are often permeable and interconnected, which helps explain the phenomenon of a vague work-life membrane.

Following the same logic, it would be logical and ethically sound for managers to incorporate the concept of WLB into their employee management policies and practices. The rationale is that when WLB-driven policies and practices are well designed and implemented, employees are more likely to engage in a flexible work environment and benefit. Common WLB-driven practices include a variety of on-site schemes and off-side arrangements. Take 'flexible work arrangement' for example, in which employees with young children may benefit from flexible work arrangements so they can do school runs more effectively and without worrying about late penalties. Flexible work arrangements (fulltime vs. agency employees) have both advantages and disadvantages, so their design and implementation must be managed with caution (Iteboje and Chang, 2021). Another example is 'distancing work arrangement', in which employees with care duties may benefit from distancing work arrangements

(e.g., home, hospital, and hospice), so they can maintain the care duties along with work duties more competently. Simply put, the concept of WLB considers individual needs and expectations. When WLB-driven practices are in place, the chance of conflicts between work and personal life is likely to dwindle.

3. Suggestions to the WLB policymakers and authorities

As aforementioned in the introduction, the application of WLB in employee management may help managers appreciate individual differences and develop more human-oriented policies and practices in management. Having said this, however, we sincerely advise managers not to use WLB practices only as a reward for meeting targets and for excellent performance. Our proposition is: If managers do so, their employees may experience incessant work-life conflict, leading to poor job engagement, deteriorated well-being, and less performance. Very likely, a toxic workplace environment will emerge, in which negative and antagonistic behaviors may flourish.

In the current research note, we would like to recommend ‘transformational leadership’ to managers and HR practitioners, as such leadership style is crucial to the design and implementation of WLB-driven policies and practices (Sani and Adisa, 2024). Specifically, managers with a transformational leadership style can help their employees maintain the psychological equilibrium between work and personal life because such a style not only appreciates employees’ work performance but also considers the implications of non-work outcomes on individual performance. Managers who adopt a transformational leadership style are more likely to understand their employee needs and accept employee expectations, which in turn helps create an amicable professional relationship between the two parties.

To help employees create a sound work-life balance, the practice of transformational leadership is suggested, in which managers should focus on transparent communication, listening, and positive reinforcement in their managerial policies and practices rather than the use of rewards and/or punishment (Kuo et al., 2024). Simply put, to ensure a healthy and supportive work environment, managers are encouraged to adopt transformational leadership in their management, in which the concept of work-life balance should be embedded in the design and implementation of employee management policies.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

Stimulating employee performance is never easy. To enhance the quality and quantity of performance, scholars and managers have proposed a variety of performance enhancement strategies, but the actual efficacy of these strategies remains mixed. Inspired by the transformational leadership literature, we have consulted empirical research (Sani and Adisa, 2024), examining whether work-life balance (WLB) helps boost employee performance. In the analysis, we found that managers’ transformational leadership style is crucial in managing employee performance. By adopting WLB-empowered policies and practices, strong reciprocal relationships between leaders and employees are more likely to emerge and develop. Following the same logic, the desire to achieve work-life balance has often led many employees to

go the extra mile in carrying out their work duties, which in turn helps improve individual performance and attain organizational goals. That is, by giving more autonomy to the employees through work-life balance policies and practices, both managers and employees win. Of course, their organizations benefit too!

To sum up, in the current research note, we have clarified the concept of WLB and elaborated on its diverse characteristics, helping MBA students acquire the latest knowledge of work-life balance. Based on the integration of literature reviews (cited from three journal articles), we have offered practical suggestions to WLB policymakers and management authorities, helping improve the efficacy of their WLB practices. We have consolidated our WLB knowledge and recommended intervention strategies to personnel managers and HR practitioners, so employees and the general workforce can benefit from our research as well. Finally, we have prudently explained how the current research note has enriched the understanding of work-life balance and clarified its implication on employee management through four practitioner points. These are:

- Work and non-work domains are often permeable and interconnected.
- Good managers appreciate the implications of ‘work-life balance’ in employee management.
- Work-life balance should be incorporated into employee management policies.
- A balanced work-life relationship helps boost job satisfaction and performance.

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Opinion

HR under fire—The role of HR in war time

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Abstract: On the morning of the 7th of October, the Hamas organization launched an attack on Israel, causing over 1200 casualties and kidnapping over 250 Israeli citizens. Israeli workers, their families, and the country's economy were all directly impacted by the war. The effects of the war were vast and created many challenges for the HR departments in various organizations. The HR departments had to respond to these issues with promptness, determination, and thoroughness. I will discuss the functions of HR departments during times of war in this opinion piece. They include eliminating ambiguity and uncertainty; providing managers with the tools they need to handle such circumstances; maintaining resilience and high morale; overseeing volunteer programs; maintaining contact with the reserve forces; providing support to war-affected families; carrying out an effective workforce reduction without jeopardizing the company's ability to continue operations; and managing workplace tensions.

Keywords: HR practices; crisis management; internal communication plan; business continuity plan; organizational resilience

1. Introduction

1.1. HR Challenges during wartime

The attack that began on the seventh of October was an unusual national emergency, even for a country as familiar with crises as Israel, which had known its share of wars and conflicts. Beyond the existential threat, the attack unavoidably had a significant impact on the Israeli economy and all institutions and businesses operating in Israel. Numerous workers were called up to the reserves, and a significant portion of business activity was impacted (certain industries, such as tourism or leisure, were obviously impacted more than others).

This resulted in many workers going on an unpaid vacation, having their salaries cut, or facing layoffs. Many factories located in combat zones or targeted areas were promptly closed, and many workers were unable to report to work due to the threat of missiles, a lack of protected spaces, or restrictions to the educational system (which meant that parents had to stay at home).

Furthermore, companies that depend on foreign labor, whether it be Palestinian or other foreign laborers (many countries immediately evacuated their citizens), suddenly found themselves without manpower (thousands of Israeli citizens volunteered to help with various agricultural tasks because agriculture was particularly damaged). As in many crises, beyond the economic implications, the events of the war influenced organizational and personal resilience, morale, satisfaction, and productivity at work (Markovits et al., 2014; Sharifian et al., 2023; Beam and Spratt, 2009).

There are certain distinctive features of the war that started on 7 October 2023, that set it apart from past conflicts. First, there was a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty during the war. There was a great deal of confusion, and organizations had no idea how long the conflict would last. Naturally, this also has to do with a lack of information regarding paying compensation to organizations whose operations were hampered by the conflict. Second, the scale of the conflict. Israel had not seen a war of such magnitude in at least fifty years. In this current war, most citizens know someone who has been murdered, maimed, raped, or abducted. The scope of it also involves the horrors of this particular kind of assault. This includes severe violent rapes, the decapitation of victims, the kidnapping of children, and occasionally massacres involving the entire populace of a settlement. Thirdly, even though some nations, like the United States and Germany, backed Israel internationally, Israel was forced to deal with antisemitic sentiment and the prosecution of Jewish communities abroad.

1.2. HR role during wartime

Any organization's HR department's work is greatly impacted by each of these concerns. The organizational human-related infrastructures that enable proper organizational conduct even in an emergency are mostly the responsibility of human resources departments (Vardarlier, 2016). This includes organizational processes that these personnel are directly in charge of. These processes include information about employees' status, termination of employment, recruitment of employees, employees' mental health, emergency preparedness training, and giving managers the tools necessary to handle a wide range of challenges that they are not accustomed to facing (Wooten and James, 2008).

In this section, I will examine the six major roles of HR during the recent war in Israel:

1.2.1. Handling tensions and anxieties among employees

Following an incident of this nature, which can be characterized as a national trauma, workers feel extremely scared, anxious, fearful of what lies ahead, and powerless (Collings et al., 2021; Elhadi et al., 2020). Many organizations strive to be a source of stability for their employees, if only in their specific realm. In this context, organizations and HR departments try to reduce feelings of isolation by fostering a sense of community within the organization (Palovac, 2020). They also try to reduce feelings of hopelessness and despair by offering employees and their families mental health hotlines, counseling services, and employee assistance programs.

Another important aspect of helping the employees is restoring routine (Rabenu and Tziner, 2021; Kim, 2020). Reestablishing a routine for organization is crucial for providing stability in a turbulent world. It also helps to divert attention, restore control, and eradicate the sense of powerlessness that permeates the circumstances (Channa et al., 2019). Organizations can also provide guidance and training on a psychological or mental level (many have provided personal resilience training for their employees and their families), much like many organizations did during the COVID-19 crisis (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020).

1.2.2. Internal communication plan

Effective internal communication is associated with higher organizational and personal resilience, which in turn boosts employees' sense of belonging to the organization (Alhuwaymil, 2022). This relationship has been identified in several studies as a predictor of various organizational outcomes, including turnover, productivity, profits, and satisfaction (Quirke, 2017; Kulachai et al., 2018). This is especially important during times of crisis or war, when information is extremely needed (Covello, 2003).

There are several key elements for a successful internal communication plan. Firstly, it should be a continuous storyline of messages that are recurring (Rogala et al., 2016). All information channels should convey factual, accurate information that is consistent. In times of war, these messages might include the security and safety of the workers, gratitude for the employees' hard work, a sense of unity, nationalism, and business continuity. Secondly, the plan should include frequent updates. Since everyone is constantly in need of information, it's critical that there be frequent updates—ideally daily, but at the very least once a week (Heide and Simonsson, 2021). Thirdly, the information must be customized and accessible. It's critical that all staff members have access to this information, not just those with access to organizational software such as e-mail. The information should be accessible for employees who might not frequently check a single channel by using a variety of channels (Björck and Guhl, 2023). Fourth, as things change, organizations must be ready to modify the internal communication plan and make sure the plan stays relevant and effective. They should be receptive to criticism and make the necessary modifications (Ma and Zhang, 2022). Lastly, the content needs to be modified for every kind of population. The organization must consider the various needs and backgrounds of the employees when creating and executing the internal communication plan. (Björck and Guhl, 2023). An internal communication program during wartime should include the following issues:

1.2.2.1. A coherent explanation of the organization's current state

Companies must present as accurate a picture of their current state of operations as they can. The employees ought to be aware of the financial effects of the war on the organization as well as what lies ahead. Rumors and pessimistic predictions replace information when it is scarce (Zaumane, 2021). In this regard, it is advised to inform the staff of both what the management knows and what they don't know, as it is reasonable to assume that a great deal of information is unknown, or, in other words, to be honest and transparent with the employees (Connolly, 2021).

1.2.2.2. Up-to-date and accurate information

The internal communication program should include relevant information concerning the immediate needs of the employees. This may include emergency protocols (for example, what to do during missile attacks), evacuation procedures, emergency shelters, communication protocols, and reporting safety concerns. Also, information should contain details on salary or benefits concerns that were affected because of the crisis (Lu et al., 2017).

1.2.2.3. Establishing channels for sharing information higher up the organization

It's critical to stay in touch with the "organizational pulse", so the plan should include a call to action for employees to communicate their struggles, anxieties, and administrative concerns (Zhang et al., 2022). This could be carried out by "round tables", surveys, discussion forums, and open meetings with managers. (Seebauer et al., 2019). Organizations need to provide staff members with a way to voice their concerns, make suggestions, and ask questions. Also, managers and HR personnel need to engage in active listening while promptly and openly addressing their concerns (Cristófol et al., 2020).

1.2.2.4. Policy in all areas pertaining to diversity and inclusion

Companies frequently hire people from a range of backgrounds, including Muslims and Jews, ultra-orthodox and secular, and leftists and rightists. During such an explosive time, the organization needs to know how to establish some rules for organizational conduct while still being sensitive to all populations (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2021). For example, some organizations had to confront situations in which employees posted messages on social media who were supportive of the Hamas. On the other hand, organizations had to make sure that Muslims and Arab employees wouldn't feel threatened coming to work because of the general sentiment in Israel.

1.3. Administrative procedures and preserving employee function

Even in times of war, which are certainly quite emotional, an organization must ultimately continue to operate (Janka et al., 2015). In this regard, it is noteworthy that the employee's continued employment at the company depends on the organization's survival. The organization's management and HR personnel must balance conducting themselves in a way that demonstrates consideration, empathy, and care while keeping their company operating smoothly (König et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020).

Human resources play a variety of roles in this section. These roles include personnel planning that fits the organization's tasks and needs, occasionally carrying out painful cost-saving procedures (such as salary reductions, unemployment benefit expenditures, and organizational reductions), and managing a contact list (which entails knowing the whereabouts of every employee in the organization). One of these roles is also keeping clear and updated status reports so that management can see the most recent and updated information (Vardarlier, 2016).

Preserving the continuous functionality of the organization also includes applying procedures for remote working for employees who can't come to work since there are no safe spaces, their spouses are in the reserved forces, or their children have no schools because of the missile threat. The organization had to make sure to establish clear guidelines for working from home or supply employees with relevant equipment such as laptops, cameras, Zoom licenses, etc. (Schulz et al., 2023).

1.4. Training managers to handle the challenges of war

The role of human resources ultimately consists of providing guidance, outlining policies, and communicating, but ultimately, managers are the ones who will work with employees daily (Jones and Saundry, 2012). We must remember that managers are also people and are not emotionally detached from the situation, and therefore there

is no reason to assume that they can handle the emotional complexity of the situation (Ketelaars et al., 2024). Nevertheless, they still need to set a personal example for their staff and model resilience. Organizations should provide managers with a range of tools from human resources to facilitate talks, stay in touch with staff, listen to their employees, be inclusive, and create a safe emotional space (Longweni and Kroon, 2018). Past studies have shown that organizational resilience, as well as the resilience of individuals and teams, can be enhanced by training (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2015).

1.5. Supporting the employees

During times of war, HR must be especially compassionate and caring to every employee and recognize the crisis' emotional toll on their employees. The HR department is ultimately responsible for ensuring that all employees are contacted and that they also need to maintain contact with their families. Managers within the organization may assist with this.

During the war, a few companies made changes to their benefit plans to make them more appropriate for the circumstances. For instance, companies purchased goods for their employees from companies located close to the Gaza Strip. Another example is that many company events were cancelled due to safety concerns or the inappropriateness of celebrating or rejoicing during these hard times. Naturally, some benefits were specifically directed to employees who were on the reserved forces or supporting their families (such as care packages).

1.6. Managing volunteer programs

The war's most poignant and likely only good outcome was an increase in volunteerism across Israel. This rise in volunteering is common in times of crisis (Gray et al., 2023; Yang, 2021), but even compared to other crises, it was quite extraordinary. Families that were forced to leave war zones were housed by families from safer areas; soldiers were fed hot meals by civilians, and there were endless queues for blood donations. Additionally, thousands of psychologists and other therapists volunteered to work with traumatized civilians; actors and singers visited hospitals to entertain and cheer up injured patients; and during the war, civilians donated money, food, clothing, toys, and furniture for those who had lost everything.

There was also this enormous volunteerism and caring wave within organizations. Numerous organizations have launched extensive volunteer programs. Some of the programs focused on organization personnel who were directly impacted by the conflict, while others were more general in nature and supported a range of causes, such as evicted citizens, soldiers, aiding in agricultural tasks (such as harvesting), purchasing produce, etc.

Beside the benefit of helping other people, recent research has indicated a positive correlation between volunteering and certain workplace attitudes, including organizational identification, retention (Bauer and Lim, 2019), organizational commitment (Jones, 2010), happiness, and self-esteem (Stukas et al., 2016).

2. Conclusions and practical implications

The term “human resources” encompasses the intricate nature of HR work, particularly in times of war. Although people are the organization’s most valuable resource, we are constantly reminded of the “human” aspect of “human resources,” that people are not machines or materials, and how challenging it is to function at work in these hard times.

The role of HR during the war contains this important balance between being empathetic or caring for this objectively difficult situation and the continuous functioning of the organization. In this section, I will elaborate on the key takeaways from this paper:

HR ought to be able to support the employees and their well-being (Maddox-Daines, 2023). HR can give the employees access to counseling services and mental health resources to help them deal with the emotional and psychological effects of the conflict. They should adapt their guidelines for more flexible work arrangements. Allowing employees to work from home, adjusting schedules, and implementing leave of absence procedures can all assist the employees in juggling personal obligations and needs during trying times.

I have mentioned the importance of communication and transparency (Erickson, 2021): Anxiety can be reduced, and a sense of security can be promoted, by regularly informing all employees about the circumstances, corporate guidelines, and available support resources. They should also initiate activities that can foster a sense of community among employees and give them a sense of belonging during trying times.

Alongside being empathetic and reducing anxiety, HR still must maintain operational continuity and business resilience (Herbane et al., 2004). This means planning and mobilizing the workforce. HR may be involved in handling staff shortages brought on by relocation, leave, or deployment. This can entail hiring temporary workers, reassigning current employees, making salary cuts, or rearranging the workload and priorities. This also means they need to review policies and procedures, examining and updating leave, security, and safety policies to make sure they remain relevant in the present circumstances. HR should be able to supply management with an accurate picture of the HR data relevant to understand the possible implications of any potential disruptions or modifications to operations brought on by the conflict.

Maintaining this balance is especially important during periods of high employee stress and conflict, as is the case in Israel’s complex and diverse workplace (where Jews and Muslims work side by side, for example). Due to the increased stress and emotional strain of workplace conflicts, HR may need to get involved by ensuring that every employee feels safe and respected, irrespective of their nationality, background, or viewpoints on the conflict (Pradies et al., 2021).

3. Limitations and future research

It is significant to remember that this paper was written in the midst of the ongoing conflict, which is a highly extreme and unclear circumstance. As time passes, organizations and various institutions gradually return to a routine that has a different

nature and challenges. This return to some sort of routine occurs even though the war is still ongoing and will likely continue in some capacity for a long time in some parts of the nation.

Organizations will need to find more long-term solutions for a variety of problems once the emergency starts to subside. These solutions include policies for working from home, ongoing absences of key personnel, new locations (for structures that were damaged or evicted from), new training requirements, new performance evaluation standards, etc. These new issues and the long-term effects of the solutions this paper suggests should be the focus of future research.

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