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NEW CHALLENGES IN EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIGITALISED POST-PANDEMIC ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Abstract

One of the biggest challenges for businesses experiencing a digital transformation was to build and maintain strong positive relations with employees. To do so, companies should develop a proper organisational culture. Despite the recognised importance of organisational relationships, only a limited number of studies focus explicitly on the challenges of relationships among managers and employees in the digitalised organisational culture. Trying to fill the gap, this paper discusses the challenges for employers based on literature review and explorative research.

The main purpose of the study is to identify key challenges influencing the employee relationships in the new, post pandemic, digitalised workplace.

The theoretical deliberations, based on critical literature review, are supplemented by empirical research conducted in a form of a focus groups with 34 participants (3 focus groups) employed on managerial and non-managerial positions. Authors interviewed informants who had experienced both in-person and remote working pattern. The research was conducted between March and May 2022.

The main challenges were identified in the research process. Zoom fatigue, lack of in-person relations, technical issues and life-work balance were the main challenges perceived for employees, while technology limitations, employee governance and

HR related issues were experienced by employers. To address these challenges and be able to build and maintain strong and positive employee relations in the digitalised environment, employers should provide trust, motivation, remuneration, support, effective communication, sustainable working environment and employee-centred culture. Taking the above factors into consideration, a reference to the proposed 6Cs model is noticeable.

Keywords: *employee relationships, organisational culture, digital transformation, challenges, pandemics.*

Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has significantly transformed contemporary businesses. The notion of digitalisation has been acknowledged to become a major factor of innovation in the business environment (Von Tonder et al., 2020, pp. 111-112; Nwaiwu, 2018, pp. 86-88). Several studies have recently focused on the importance of the digital phenomenon (Zimmermannova, 2022, p.1). Regarding general studies, Hofmann (2021, p. 124) underlines that digitalisation enables new, previously unimagined, innovative business models. Companies can achieve superior performance, can be faster and more flexible in developing new business ideas and new products, thanks to more direct contacts with their stakeholders and a larger amount of data to be processed.

Van Tonder et al. (2020, pp. 111 – 112) claim that digital technologies not only modified traditional business structures but are exclusively responsible for contemporary business transformation through Business Model Innovation (BMI). As relatively new phenomenon, BMI gains a fierce discussion on its core components and characteristics, but generally refers to the internal process of a business and its relationships with their stakeholders based on dynamic capabilities, i.e., "the company's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (Teece, 2018, p. 173; Mitręga, Pfajfar, 2015, p. 194, Mitręga, Choi, 2021, p. 3).

Dynamic capabilities of business entities (but also employees) were tested during Covid-19 pandemic. In a strongly connected and integrated world, the impacts of the disease were immense. The pandemic brought unparalleled challenges in terms of effective business models, employment patterns, building and maintaining

relationships with employees (and other stakeholders), motivation and leadership. Companies and workers had to adapt to new situation, under which remote or hybrid working was a key factor in the continuity of business, and to explore new ways of conducting the work as well as the new role of the office (Gartner, 2020). Digital technologies made an invaluable contribution to businesses operating on the market in pandemic and post-pandemic times.

Recent studies carried by researchers (Pradana et al., 2022, p.2; Lartey et al., 2021, p. 220; Tuukkanen et al., 2022, p. 4) and practitioners (Capgemini 2017, Boston Consulting Group, 2021, McKinsey 2022) clearly prove that the use of digital technology cannot guarantee the success of its implementation. According to Rogers, Chief Digital Officer at LVMH, "the big moment for an organisation is when they have embraced the fact that digital transformation is not a technical issue, but a cultural change. […] Culture change is a prerequisite of digital transformation" (Capgemini, 2017). Organisational culture is the basis of relationships built and maintained in a workplace among employees and managers.

The key term emerging during times of change is relationship: strong bonds built with employees are a remedy for companies in troubled times of market fluctuations, allowing companies to survive and develop the businesses. The concept of employee relationships became a dominant logic in recent years, reflected both in relationship marketing concept and in relationship paradigm in management. However, the relationships are not the same. Although the full economic consequences of the pandemic are still unclear, we know that the relationships in the workplace have changed for good.

Despite the recognised importance of organisational relationships, only a limited number of studies focus explicitly on the challenges of relationships among managers and employees in the digitalised organisational culture. Trying to fill the gap, this paper discusses the challenges for employers based on literature review and explorative research.

The main purpose of the study is to identify key challenges influencing the employee relationships in the new, post pandemic, digitalised workplace.

The theoretical deliberations, based on critical literature review, are supplemented by empirical research conducted in a form of a focus groups with 34

participants employed on managerial and non-managerial positions. Further fields of study are also identified.

From an academic point of view, the research suggests and examines the 6C model of employee relationships, with focus on culture. From a managerial perspective, the presented study brings several contributions to HR professionals, especially gives examples how to build and maintain strong positive relationships with employees.

Literature review

Relationships as the predominant paradigm in management sciences

Business relationships in general are widely researched, becoming a subject of interest of many academics and practitioners with its developed concepts and constructs (Iankova, 2019, p. 169, Dewalska-Opitek, 2020, p. 89). In general aspect, relationship is comprehended as interactions, connections and partnership among subjects or entities. Relationship in the economic context may be perceived as long-term interactions with company 's stakeholders when their aims may be achieved by mutual, beneficial exchange of values (Grönroos 2004, p. 35; Vargo, 2009, p. 373).

According to Ledingham (2003, pp.182-183), there are four pivotal developments which spurred emergence of the relational perspective in management:

- Recognition of the leading role of relationships in management,
- Reconceptualizing relations as a management function. The notion of managing organization–stakeholders relationships introduced managerial concepts and processes to the business practice
- Identification of components and types of organization–stakeholders' relationships, and relationship measurement strategies.
- Development of organization–stakeholders relationship models that accommodate relationship antecedents, process, and consequences. Pioneering models of the organization–stakeholders relationships

included antecedents, properties, consequences, and maintenance as well as monitoring strategies.

Stakeholders, who gained particular importance in the resource-based theory (RBT) are employees (Yin et al., 2021, p. 1371). Employees are closely integrated with the organisations, and this gives them a "peculiar role among stakeholders" (Crane, Matten, 2004, p. 224). They contribute to the company in fundamental ways. They create, manufacture, or provide, sell, and deliver company's goods and services onto the market. They are crucial to businesses' success or failure. Furthermore, employees constitute the firm – they are in many cases the most crucial resource of organisations, they represent the company towards other stakeholders, and they act in the name of the organisation (Crane, Matten, 2004, p.225).

Employee relations is a term used to describe relations between employers and employees. This concept which was drawn by western scholars in the 20th century to replace the industrial relation. It focuses on the right and responsibility, management and obeying caused by the interest between the organization and the employees as a total of cooperating, conflict, strengthen and power relations and is influenced by economic, technology, legal system, and socio-cultural background in a certain community (Yongcai, 2010, p. 952).

Employee relation is also defined as the relationship between managers and employees to enhance engagement, commitment, and trust of employees and to create suitable working environment which enables to create and cultivate highly motivated and productive workforce (Bajaj et al., 2013, p. 93; Brhane, Zewide, 2018, p. 63).

Contemporary organizations are striving to become more agile, faster, and transparent. For that reason, the focus on employee communications and relations is bigger than ever before. The main goal of every employee relations strategy is to improve relationships and collaboration in the workplace (Martic, 2022).

The relational paradigm gained even more importance in the times of Covid-19 pandemic which created a challenging context for organisations and particularly for human resource management: how to build and maintain strong and positive employee relationships through digital technologies and remote/ hybrid working patterns?

De la Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez (2021, pp. 5-6) based of research conducted by Kahn (1990, pp. 692-724), Sorge and Witteloostuijn (2004, pp. 1205-1231), Kelloway et al. (2005, pp. 223-235) and Grawitch et al. (2007, pp. 275-293), suggested a model of employee relationships, reinforcing employees' engagement and wellbeing in the digitalised working environment. The model is referred to as 5Cs model and consists of the following elements:

- Conciliation – reconciling work and home life, with remote working and flexibility acquiring considerable importance,
- Cultivation – development schemes for employees,
- Confidence – through the health and safety, as well as employee privacy,
- Compensation – rewarding employees' efforts and covering additional costs,
- Communication – achieving employee participation and engagements.

The discussed model is presented in Fig. 1

Figure 1. 5Cs model of employee relations for reinforcing employee engagement and assessment indicators

Category	Factors	Indicators
1. Conciliation	Remote working Professional-private life Family diversity	Physical and relational separation Productivity Sustainability
2. Cultivation	Professional career New technology Development opportunities	Geographical and communication barriers Furlough (ERTE in Spain) vs. redundancy Coaching
3. Confidence	Health Safety Leadership	Health measures at work Psychological support Employee privacy
4. Compensation	Remuneration Endeavor Non-Monetary benefits	Risk and remote working allowances Services and help for parents Performance incentives
5. Communication	Networking Job and career feedback Involvement	IT resources Two-way dialogue Performance reviews

Source: (De La Calle-Duran, Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2021, p. 6)

Tuukkanen et al (2022, p. 4), Cichosz et al. (2020, pp. 209-238), Vial (2019, pp.118-144) and Hartl, Hess (2017, pp. 1-10) prove that change is an inevitable part of every organisation's life due to our rapid global, economic, and digital development. Change and transformation are crucial for building an organisation that can thrive in the digital age. Furthermore, digital transformation requires fundamental changes in an organisation, including structure, processes, strategy, and culture (Vial, 2019, p.121). There is a widespread consensus about the impact of culture in management, especially in employee relationship in the digitalised environment (Hartl, Hess, 2017, p. 3; Vogelsand et al., p. 4; Karimi, Valter, 2015, p. 42). A study performed by BCG revealed that companies that consider culture in the digital transformation were five times more likely to succeed than organisations that neglected the cultural influence (BCG, 2021).

Taking the abovementioned arguments into consideration, a sixth element of the employee relationship model shall be added: the culture. Therefore, the suggested model of employee relations consisting of 6Cs is presented in figure 2.

Figure 2. The complemented 6Cs model
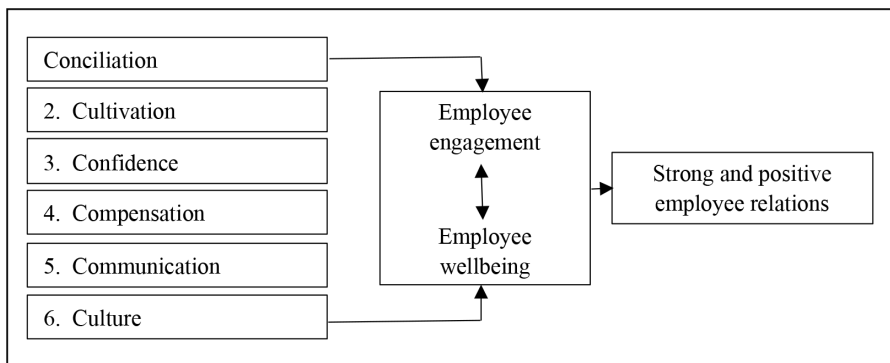
Source: Own elaboration

In the model presented in Fig.2, there are six components influencing employee engagement, and wellbeing. To the beforehand ones indicated by De la Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez (2021, p. 11), culture was added,

as the organizational climate and the environment in which employees work, also referred to as organisational culture.

Multiple studies developed the concept of organisational culture, which has become the attention of practitioners and management researchers (Zhen et al., 2021, p. 2). It is defined as the beliefs, assumptions and the complex set of values via an organization conducts its business activities (Basu, 2015, p. 294). Due to the emergence of the technologies and massive online business activities around the world, the culture of the organizations expands in order to include its digital workplace practices (Duerr et al., 2018, p. 5127). In this sense, the term of digital organizational culture is conceptualized as the shared beliefs, understanding, and set of values about the organization of the business activities in a digital domain (Zhen, 2021, p. 3). The digital organizational culture becomes an integrated part of the organizational life in the era of the advanced technologies (Müller et al., 2019, p.4).

According to Tuukkanen et al. (2022, pp. 5-6), the digital organisation culture is driven by the following values:

- Openness towards change,
- Agility, concerning flexibility and adaptability towards change,
- Innovation, perceived as the organisational encouragement of entrepreneurial initiatives,
- Continuous improvements, as the positive attitude towards the constant revision of processes and conditions of better performance,
- Tolerance towards failure which refers to the attitudes towards mistakes not caused by irresponsibility,
- Risk affinity, described as the organisation's willingness to manage decision making under uncertain circumstances,
- Trust between the organisation and its members as a premise for digitalised working conditions,
- Participation, which refers to non-hierarchical openness in decision making,
- Cooperation, related to the organisation's positive attitude towards work, cross – functional collaboration and cooperation among all organisation's stakeholders,

- Communication with employees, which leads to higher motivation and engagement of workers.

Employee engagement is a source of a physical and emotional connection between employees and the organization (Tanwar, Kumar, 2019, p. 801). It aligns employees' personal goals with the vision of the organization, which increases the productivity of the employees and, hence, the organization (Bakker, Albrecht, 2018, p. 2). An engaged employee is concentrated on tasks, enthusiastic and emotionally connected with the goals of the organization, which portrays and governs the involvement of the employee in the organizational objectives (Schaufeli, Bakker, 2004, p. 296). An engaged employee will work with a progressive attitude, which will build the repute and value of the organization. Organizations cultivate environments to encourage and indulge high engagement of employees, and engaged employees are enthusiastic for all support from their organizations (Kaliannan, Adjovu, 2015, p. 163). Employee engagement is also perceived to be a positive method to avoid burnout and disengagement of the employees and indulge their emotions into positivity and patronized ethical behaviour at the place of work (Rasool et al., 2021, pp. 3-4).

Employee wellbeing is defined as "the overall mental, physical, emotional, and economic health of employees. It's influenced by several factors, such as their relationships with co-workers and managers, the decisions they make, and the tools and resources they have access to. Hours, pay, and workplace safety also have a significant impact on employee wellbeing" (Wajda, 2021). While it will vary from person to person, employee wellbeing should generally allow for a productive and healthy workplace. Outside factors contribute to employee wellbeing too. Stress around issues such as housing, health, and family all play a role in performance at work.

Juchnowicz and Kinowska (2021, p. 2) claim that in the work process, psychological well-being is the most important well-being factor (Johnson et al, 2018, p. 23). Well-being may be described by six dimensions: positive attitudes toward oneself, trusting interpersonal relationships, a sense of freedom from unacceptable norms governing everyday life, opportunities to control and contribute to one's environment, a sense of purpose in life, and opportunities

to develop one's potential. The first three dimensions are derived from theories of self-actualisation and self-determination (Ryff 1998, p. 1072; Deci et al., 2001, p.933). The last three are derived from the concepts of mastery and optimal functioning (Juchnowicz, Kinowska, 2021, p. 3).

Employees' engagement and wellbeing are interrelated and would also affect (and be affected) by employee relationships. Without strong and positive relations in the workplace, workers will not develop their engagement and wellbeing, but also the level of employees' engagement and perceived wellbeing will influence employee relationships.

Lack of employee wellbeing and engagement, as well as poor employee relations may have a negative impact on company's performance. An exemplification of the imperative need for proper employee relations is the Great Resignation, also referred to as the Big Quit, a widespread phenomenon that was started in the USA, and then observed in other parts of the world (Serenko, 2022, p.1). In 2021, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, over 47 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs — an unprecedented mass exit from the workforce, spurred on by Covid-19. This phenomenon is said to affect all industries. More-innovative companies are experiencing higher attrition rates than their staider competitors. The pattern is not limited to technology-intensive industries. Not surprisingly, companies with a reputation for a healthy culture, experienced lower-than-average turnover during the first six months of the Great Resignation, which proves the irrefutable role of employee relations in the digital culture (Sull et al., 2022).

Research metodology

The main purpose of the study is to identify key factors influencing the employee relationships in the new, post pandemic, digitalised workplace. The following research questions were formulated:

To what extent Covid-19 pandemic has changed the contemporary workplace?

What are the main challenges influencing employee relationships in the digitalised environment?

How can companies address these challenges to build and maintain strong employee engagement?

Data collection was accomplished through a method of qualitative research in the form of focus groups (FG).

According to Bloor et al. (2001, p. 48), focus groups have a well-documented history as a method of data collection, but only recently they have become an established and accepted part of the range of methodological methods available to academic researchers. According to Parker and Tritter (2006, p. 23) the growing popularity of focus groups among social scientists is caused by the fact that they are often more cost and time effective than traditional methods and adaptable to a range of research approaches and designs. According to Nyumba et al. (2018, p. 26) focus group discissions are mainly used to explore people's understanding, interpretation, and validation of reality and allow to understand people's notions, perceptions, and perspectives of researched phenomena.

The research in question was conducted in the form of single focus groups – the key feature of a single focus group is the interactive discussion of a topic by a collection of all participants and a team of facilitators as one group in one place (Nyumba et al., 2018, p. 24). The research was conducted between March and May 2022 and on Polish and foreign employees of 3 companies: Panattoni, Cap Gemini and Genesis – Science and Technology Park. There were 34 participants of 3 focus groups, each of them composed of 8 to 12 participants (FG1 N=10, FG2 N = 12, FG3 N=12) employed on both managerial and non-managerial positions.

The subjects of the research were mainly women, aged 35-44, with higher education, employed on permanent contracts on non-managerial positions, with 6 – 10 years of working experience. Table 1. illustrates the sample characteristics.

Sampling method may be described as purposeful (Miles, Huberman, 1994, p. 27). According to Morse (1994, p. 129), purposeful sample is one of four types of sampling used in qualitative research, among the nominated sample, the volunteer sample and the sample that consists of the total population. The purposeful sampling is directed by a desire to include a range of variations of the phenomenon of the study (Coyne, 1997, p. 628) and is similar to the type

of sampling called "phenomenal variation" described by Sandelowski (1995, p. 181–82) as "decision often made a priori in order to have representative coverage of variables likely to be important in understanding how diverse factors configure as a whole".

Table 1. Focus groups' sample characteristics (N=34).

Specification	Sample (in %)	Specification	Sample (in %)
1. Gender		4. Employment pattern	
a. Male	47	a. Permanent contract	44,1
b. Female	53	b. Fixed-time contract	20,6
c. Other/ not declared	0	c. Self-employed/ outsourced	35,3
2. Age		5. Position	
a. 18 – 24	8,8	a. Managerial	29,4
b. 25 – 34	38	b. Non-managerial	70,6
c. 35 – 44	32,3		
d. 45 – 54	11,7		
e. 55 – 64	9,2		
f. 65 and more	0		
3. Education		4. Years of working experience	
a. Primary and junior high school	0	a. Up to 2 years	11,7
b. Vocational	0	b. 3 – 5 years	20,6
c. Secondary	23,5	c. 6 – 10 years	32,4
d. Higher	76,5	d. 11 – 20 years	23,5
		e. 21 – 30 years	2,9
		f. 31 and more	8,9

Source: Own elaboration

In the research in question the Authors interviewed informants who had experienced both offline and online working patterns. Then, as the study progressed, more specific information was gathered from participants with particular knowledge (i.e., human resource and IT department employees). Finally, participants with atypical experiences were sought (i.e., managers), so that the entire range of experiences and the breadth of the concept of the phenomena could be understood. The described process was suggested by Morse (1994, p. 129) and followed by Coyne (1997, p. 628). According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006, p. 59) purposive sampling is the most used form of non-probabilistic sampling, and its size typically relies on the concept of saturation, i.e., the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data. More interviewed focus groups would follow similar patterns, and another interview might not provide any new information about research problem.

The conducted research may be characterised as exploratory in nature, conducted to determine the nature of the problem, and was not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but to have a better understanding of the problem (Henson and Roberts 2006, p. 403). It allowed for becoming familiar with challenges in employee relations in the digitalised environment introduced or accelerated by Covid-19 pandemic. Although the study lacks stochastic confirmation, the focus groups provide a qualitative method of data collection and thus does not require statistical confirmation.

Research results

General information on working environment during Covid-19 pandemic

All the research participants agreed that Covid-19 pandemic has had an unexpectedly strong impact on their work, both negative and positive. Managers and employees found themselves in working environments changed on an inconceivable scale, and the adjustment process took a while.

Respondents declared they had observed pre-pandemic HR management strategies being tested. Many companies, including the researched ones, declared their employer branding strategies were based on strong corporate values, like "integrity," "responding quickly and flexibly to employees' needs", "team spirit and collaborative attitude", "mutual trust and understanding", "employees' personal and professional development" and more. Pandemics, lockdowns, decreased revenues, and profits, high uncertainty about future made some employers "optimise" their human resources and deploy workers. This was perceived by the respondents as the biggest failure in terms of employer branding.

Respondents also noticed that while in the past organisations were simply theorizing about new forms of work, the crisis of Covid-19 has forced them to undertake actions, such as completely new ways of working and re-shape the resources used in business processes. Work patterns will never be the same and remote or hybrid models will stay for good according to the study participants.

Perceived challenges for employees

After the introductory part, the participants were asked about challenges and merits of work provided in the digitalised culture. All respondents stated that working from home had been one of the key forms of adjustment implemented by companies due to legal regulations and healthy concerns.

Before pandemic, remote working was a marginal experience, only 2 research participants declared having worked this way regularly before pandemics. These respondents already experienced the unique drawbacks of virtual work. The research subjects pointed at 4 main challenges, i.e.:

- Zoom fatigue – they noted that the increased frequency of meetings was unnecessary and mostly unproductive: „too much zoom" (they were waiting for „Zoom-free Fridays"), „too many meetings, at first there was no time to work", "I was invited to any possible meeting held in the company, while issues discussed were none of my business concern").
- Lack of in-person relations – respondents declared they had missed "face-to-face meetings" or "spontaneous interactions among employees or teams", "collaboration – I experienced an impending sense I was left alone with my tasks".
- Difficult experience transitioning to remote work due to outdated, limiting tools and processes – some research participants stated that before they could benefit from new, digitalized working environment, they experience chaos.
- Life-work balance – respondents had to reconcile personal and business affairs: „life-work balance was hard to maintain at first", they had a feeling they „were constantly at work" or the contrary, they could not „focus on work because every member of the family seemed to disturb, especially children, pets or jobs around the house".

Study participants stated, there were also advantages of digitalised working environment and they considerably prevail over drawbacks. They pointed at the following benefits:

- Increased work flexibility – „more overall flexibility", they could eventually find „a way to have work done", "better work efficiency and

productivity" as they were not controlled so closely: „when work was done, I was free to take up any other activity".

- More job opportunities (regardless the place) due to remote work pattern – 3 respondents declared they had changed their job during Covid-19 pandemics, and they found it easier because of unique competences they had ("that was the right please in the right time for me to apply to").

It may be noticed that employees' perception of the digitalised environment depended on their previous online experience – these who had experienced remote work in pre-pandemic times, found it easier to adopt to new working conditions and were less resistant to digital culture.

Perceived challenges for employers

Asked about challenges for employers, the focus groups participants mentioned that companies had also experienced challenges, but „mainly connected with the general business and legal conditions (lockdowns, customer service limitations, etc.)".

As far as employee relationships are concerned, the main challenges were pointed at:

- Technology limitations – respondents mentioned "communication and file sharing tools", "IT support" or "company's intranet" as the main drawbacks they had problem with, and most serious one: "a necessity to accelerate digitalized environment in no time at all".
- Governance – study participants employed on managerial positions mentioned they experienced "lack of or decreased digital workplace governance over their subordinates".
- HR related issues – "employee performance feedback", "motivation and employees' engagement", "maintain employees' wellbeing".

Main factors influencing employer-employee relationships in the digital culture

Respondents asked about the main factors influencing employee relations indicated the following factors and ranked them accordingly: trust, motivation to self-development, remuneration, support, effective communication (two-way dialog) and employee-centred, agile, and open culture.

Study participants asked to evaluate their overall experience of working in the digitalised environment declared they had "found a sense of belonging to the company and connectivity to their co-workers", "appreciated the digital culture", and "felt connected and engaged" with their work. Employees are more likely to feel a stronger sense of loyalty to their company and each other and perceive more psychological value in their daily work.

Respondents asked about good relationship-building and maintain practices they experienced, mentioned "video lunches", "birthday celebrations", "online group gaming" or more in-person, complementary to remote work: "canoe trips", "mountain hiking" or "Nordic walking".

Despite the challenges they had experienced, the respondents declared remote work would stay. The employment patters changed for good, some of the participants preferred to work remotely permanently, others would (and did) go back to in-person work sites full time, but the hybrid option gives employers and employees a flexible solution in digitalised working environment enhancing employees' engagement, wellbeing and tightens the employee relations.

Conclusions

Employee relations have never been so important as the are now in the digitalised working environment. Literature studies, as well as the conducted research allow for noticing that the positive interactions between employers and employees would affect the overall performance of a business.

Covid-19 pandemics has shaken up the world to the inconceivable extent. Many organisations were forced to implement new, effective business models based on remote or hybrid work and maintain high employee's engagement

and wellbeing arising from recently introduced digital culture. Work flexibility appears as a standard, not a privilege, modern technologies and processes need to be optimised to serve both organisations and employees. A general supposition may arise that pandemic had both positive and negative impacts on the contemporary workplace.

In response to the second research question, several challenges influencing employee relations in the digitalised environment were identified. From employees' perspective, the main challenges were identified as "zoom fatigue", lack of in-person relations, ineffective processes, and sometimes faulty technologies, as well as difficulties with achieving live-work balance. On the other hand, among challenges identified for employers' faulty technologies, lack of or limited governance over employees and HR management related issues were indicated.

To address these challenges and be able to build and maintain strong and positive employee relations in the digitalised environment, employers should provide trust, motivation to self-development, proper remuneration, support, effective (two-way) communication, sustainable working environment and employee-centred, agile, and open culture.

Taking the above factors into consideration, a reference to the proposed 6Cs model is noticeable: confidence, cultivation, compensation, communication, conciliation, and culture, respectively.

Satisfied workers feel engaged, which consequently reinforce their relations with employers (employee relations). Employees are more likely to feel a stronger sense of loyalty to their company and each other and perceive more psychological value in their daily work.

From academic perspective the study may enrich our understanding of factors influencing employee relations by suggesting and examining the 6C model of employee relationships, with focus on culture. From a managerial perspective, the presented study brings several contributions to HR professionals, especially gives examples how to build and maintain strong positive relationships with employees. The study findings have several limitations. A lack of quantitative evaluation prevents generalisability beyond theory. The research sample was not divided according to the generations they represented (Gen Z, Gen Y, Gen X, Baby boomers), which would provide more focused insight. Taking the above arguments into consideration, they leave space for a future study.

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