



 Research Article

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING RELATIONS-THE CASE OF VIRGIN

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ABSTRACT

The promotion and protection of employee mental health at work is an extremely important factor for the scientific management of modern organizations. The advancement of positive mental health can lead to an improved workplace atmosphere and has been linked to positive work-related outcomes, at an employee-level. Especially during period of sudden change and forced reorganizations, as in the case of the latest COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of ensuring positive mental health in the workplace is becoming increasingly important. Until the pandemic broke out, remote work was mainly carried out by highly skilled and highly autonomous workers. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, working from home has been adopted by millions of workers in the EU and around the world. These changes may highlight the importance of understanding the concept of employment relations. The concept may have always been extremely important, but in today's world a deep consideration of its influencing factors is necessary, through the understanding of the ways of strengthening industrial relations in different circumstances (such as in the context of teleworking, hybrid models of physical presence in the office and remote working, etc.). In order for the above to be done, there has to be a deeper comprehension of the ways of strengthening relationships, in different reference contexts and conditions (which requires an increased understanding of the “deep” nature of the concept under study). As a result of the changes brought about by the pandemic, employee stress has increased significantly. This stress was caused by many factors, such as health threats, numerous constraints, isolation, lack of social support, disrupted work-life balance at home, etc.

KEYWORDS

Working relations, mental health, Trust, satisfaction, happiness, Virgin, expectations, strong culture, Self-awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The promotion and protection of employee mental health at work is an extremely important factor for the scientific management of modern organizations (Davenport et al., 2016). The advancement of positive mental health can lead to an improved workplace atmosphere and has been linked to positive work-related outcomes, at an employee-level (Meyers, Van Woerkom & Bakker, 2013). Especially during period of sudden change and forced reorganizations, as in the case of the latest COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of ensuring positive mental health in the workplace is becoming increasingly important.

Until the pandemic broke out, remote work was mainly carried out by highly skilled and highly autonomous workers. In 2018, in EU countries, around 40% of workers in the IT and other communication services sectors, worked partly from home (Telework in the EU Before and After the COVID-19, 2021). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, working from home has been adopted by millions of workers in the EU and around the world. According to Eurofound (Eurofound, 2020), almost 40% of people working in the EU have started working remotely on a full-time basis, as a result of the pandemic.

These changes may highlight the importance of understanding the concept of employment relations. The concept may have always been extremely important, but in today's world a deep consideration of its influencing factors is necessary, through the understanding of the ways of strengthening industrial relations in different circumstances (such as in the context of teleworking, hybrid models of physical presence in the office and remote working, etc.).

In order for the above to be done, there has to be a deeper comprehension of the ways of strengthening

relationships, in different reference contexts and conditions (which requires an increased understanding of the “deep” nature of the concept under study). As a result of the changes brought about by the pandemic, employee stress has increased significantly. This stress was caused by many factors, such as health threats, numerous constraints, isolation, lack of social support, disrupted work-life balance at home, etc. (Bulinska-Stangrecka & Bagienska, 2021).

Work relationships refer to the ties that can be developed between employees, between employees and external partners (or interest groups in general) and between employees and managers at every level (as well as between employees and top management). These relationships are considered vital.

It is important that there can be a realization, that a working relationship is different from a personal one. A personal relationship involves the exchange of feelings and individual truths, whereas a working relationship is a formal association and serves the specific purpose of ensuring good teamwork and organizational productivity. Therefore, in the case of professional relationships, it is necessary for organizations to ensure that the internal conditions can lead to mutual understandings in relation to professional roles, duties and various related complexities.

Building strong and positive, working relationships is one of the most important dimensions of work reality and there are multiple benefits, in this regard (indeed, 2023):

- Increased teamwork effectiveness: positive relationships can influence the performance of different teams. Good relationships include the

concepts of respect and open and honest communication. It can be argued that good/healthy relationships at the organizational level can also increase the understanding between the different teams within the organization, therefore they can contribute to overall performance

- Improved morale: People who enjoy good working relationships tend to manage conflict effectively and tend to treat each other with respect and goodwill. In a work environment that promotes this kind of culture, employees tend to be happier and more fulfilled.
- Increased productivity and job satisfaction: when employees have good workplace relationships and work effectively as team members, they are more productive. Improved productivity, can lead to increased satisfaction and motivation
- Improved personal development: positive working relationships with colleagues can free up time (and energy) in relation to achieving more meaningful goals. Positive relationships with managers can also lead to benefits, through good mentoring and knowledge sharing

Employees are now considered as the most valuable asset of modern organizations, as they can have a major contribution to organizational growth and long-term development. The progress of any organization depends on the quality of inputs/outputs made by employees (Arimie & Oronsaye, 2020). The latter are instrumental in the utilization of the resources such as technology, finance, information flow and other tools in terms of achieving organizational goals. Employees do not tend to simply perform functions; they interact and collaborate with others to do their jobs, and thus there is a growing interest in order to generate

positive, internal conditions and healthy, working environments.

Developing and ensuring positive working relationships among employees can mark the leaderships job, a bit easier, in relation to enhancing workplace motivation. This can contribute to the fulfillment of organizational goals (Galer et al., 2005). Therefore, positive working relationships can be central in relation to managing workplace motivation and the subsequent fulfillment of organizational goals.

Assuming that employees' higher needs (of high hierarchical power) are correlational and are primarily concerned with self-fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1985), healthy work relationships may contribute to both. On the one hand, for many individuals, finding and experiencing healthy work relationships can contribute directly to their sense of self-fulfillment (in the sense of feeling that they have accomplished something important/meaningful), and on the other hand, it can contribute significantly to enhancing individual performance, to the reorganization of priorities, goal fulfilment (through mutual reinforcement) and the resulting sense of self-integration.

According to Buckingham and Coffman, (2000), the existence of effective relationships among employees depends largely on the quality of the leadership and the management practices. These relationships involve concerted and systematic efforts within an organization, to maintain a conducive work environment.

Moreover, for organizations to be able to maintain positive relationships with employees, they must first and foremost approach employees as partners and important influencers of organizational progress and success. This, can encourage employers and managers,

to be more open in regards to valuing and taking into account the views and voice of employees. Employee working relationships can also help to avoid and resolve negative issues that may arise during the completion of various duties. These relationships involve the creation of a “fertile” environment where the aim is to meet the needs of both employers and employees by improving communication, providing grievance mechanisms, and developing a culture based on the values of trust, mutual respect and dialogue.

According to Stallard, (2009) positive working relationships in an organization tend to lead to enhanced loyalty and effectiveness in relation to task performance and a reduction in the likelihood of leaving the organization (turnover). In addition, an organization that manages to develop healthy relationships internally, may enjoy higher levels of trust, cooperation and collegiality. The above, can help towards the enhancement of the skills and competencies of the employees, in terms of achieving organizational goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of working relations is dynamic and evolving in the context of the contemporary organizational reality. The emphasis on employees and their relationships could be attributed to the adoption of the human relations approach/perspective, in regards to scientific management.

The human relations approach can be attributed to the research work of Mayo, who has been regarded as one of the pioneers of the human relations school of thought (Arimie & Oronsaye, 2020). According to Tonwe, (2009b), Mayo pioneered the intensive study of human relations through focusing attention on employee behavior and productive capacity, taking into account the psychological, physical, economic

dimensions and the aspects of individual physiology. Crainer, (1998), pointed out that these studies provided significant evidence, in relation to the fact that managers' behavior and attitudes were an important factor, influencing motivation and improving employee performance.

According to Akrani (2011), the human relations approach, viewed organizations as social systems characterized by interpersonal and intergroup relationships. This may indicate that, the existence of an appropriate work environment that tends to develop healthy and sustainable relationships can have a central role, in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations.

The human relations approach emerged as a reaction to Taylor's scientific management, which involved the proliferation of standardized methods for performing tasks. This approach emphasized that employees, simply attend work, in order to satisfy a range of complex/deep needs and not just for monetary rewards.

In the same context, Hallowell, (1999), stated that scientific research conducted by neuroscientists revealed that developing connections within organizations, and the act of focusing on the needs of the human element, can lead to enhanced organizational effectiveness. The development of positive, human relationships was linked to a reduction in stress hormones and a simultaneous increase in attention and pleasure. According to Hallowell, (1999) positive relationships tend to increase hormone levels which have been associated with enhancing trust and strong bonds between individuals in organizations.

The human relations approach emphasizes that employees tend to perceive the organization they work for, through the values and behaviors of their

supervisors and colleagues. For this reason, the values demonstrated by leadership can be of central importance.

The concept of workplace relationships has attracted considerable academic attention, and the importance of creating a positive, work environment that is conducive to interpersonal relationships and oriented towards the effective promotion of organizational goals has also been emphasized. Effective working relationships can lead to higher work engagement, motivation and productivity.

In fact, Yongcai, (2010) argued that working relations are a specialized, discipline within HRM. Jing (2013), argued that working relations involve the concerted effort of organizations, through the adoption of appropriate mechanisms, towards the achievement of organizational goals.

It has further been found that trust and organizational loyalty are gained through open communication, the existence of a regular/fair feedback system and delegation of tasks to staff (Janssens et al., 2003).

According to Nikoloski et al., (2014), employer-employee relationships involve the providing of information to employees regarding the organization's goals, in order to achieve a clear understanding of the organization. In addition, the possibility of expression can be very important (in terms of ideas, complaints, etc.). According to Janssen et al. (2003) every employee has an innate desire to be treated with respect, dignity and in fair ways.

Job satisfaction has been approached as a positive affective state resulting from employees' work experience (Locke, 1976). Job satisfaction can be seen as a multidimensional concept that is co-constructed by many work-related aspects (Credé, 2018), and is

considered as a component of individual well-being and of central importance to the organizations.

For this reason, a central aspect of organizational research is to identify the influential factors of job satisfaction. Satisfaction can be researched at both the organizational and individual level (different levels of analysis):

- Organizational factors include pay, promotion opportunities, communication with supervisors and benefits
- individual factors include personal values, personality and mental health (Sinval & Marôco, 2020)

Job satisfaction is one of the central procedures/ measures for assessing the quality of work life and internal reality. A person who is able to talk with colleagues and exchange information, tends to create strong, long-term bonds within the organization. In addition, if he/she feels actively supported by the organization, he/she will tend to develop positive perceptions for the job at hand. Social interaction appears to play an important role in shaping job satisfaction (Dimotakis, Scott & Koopman, 2010).

In the same context, the literature has argued that organizational trust can partake a very important role in the functioning of any organization (Hasche, Höglund & Mårtensson, 2020).

A specific type of intra-organizational trust is interpersonal trust, which refers to the relationships between the members of an organization (Stranes, Truhon & McCarthy, 2015). Thanks to this type of trust in colleagues and the emotional bonds that can develop, employees know that they can rely on the support of other individuals to solve problems.

Trust is an important influencing factor in the development of positive attitudes and employee behaviors (Yu et al., 2018). In addition, trust activates learning processes through the use of a wide range of communication channels (Gołuchowski, Filipczyk &

Paliszkievicz, 2012). When trust levels are high, a secure work climate is created, where employees tend to build long-term relationships. These have been linked to workplace participation in decision-making processes.

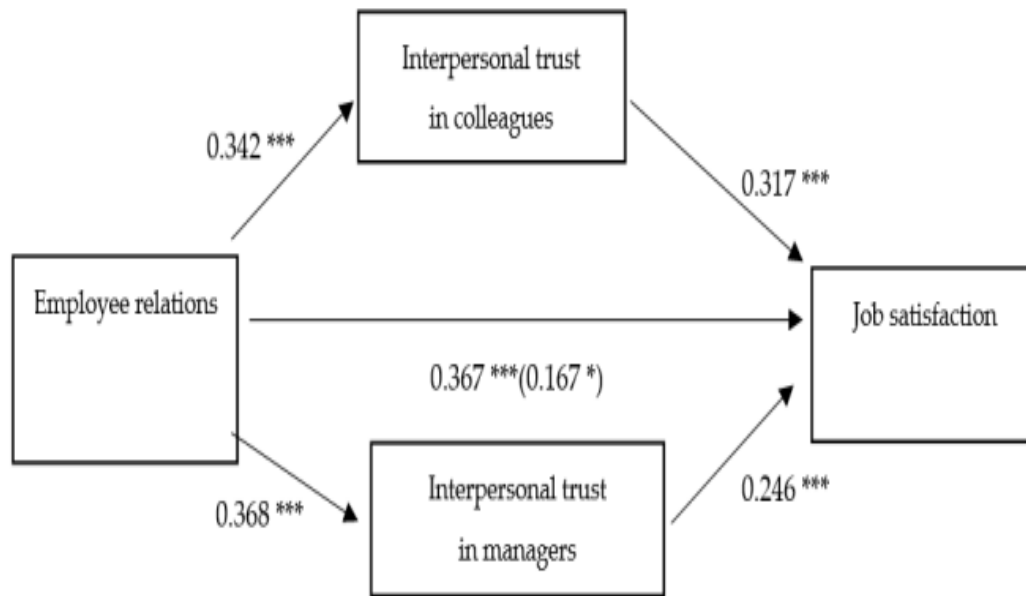


Figure 1: working relations, trust and employee satisfaction

Source: Bulinska-Stangrecka & Bagienska, (2021)

From the above figure, it can be seen that work relationships have a significant impact on job satisfaction, through (mediation) the development of interpersonal trust in colleagues and managers.

It is important to be understood, that organizations and employers are not simply recruiting a workforce but are initiating a new dynamic of novel relationships. Therefore, relationship management is very critical for organizational success (Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Persson & Wasieleski, 2015). Most of the time, the relationships that develop between employers and employees (or even between employees) can be

instrumental in achieving organizational goals (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2016).

In order to increase performance, understanding the dynamics of employer-employee relationships must be at the heart of management's focus. Understanding the social aspect of organizations can be extremely important; business processes must be continuously improved at the same time that favorable conditions develop in relation to fostering an atmosphere that supports risk-taking, innovation, self-improvement and teamwork (Kooij et al., 2013).

In modern times, it is essential for the organizations, to develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills

(Khoreva, Vaiman, & Van Zalk, 2017). Several studies have emphasized that strong relationships can contribute to the success of an organization and that there is a positive link between ensuring strong relationships and organizational performance (Burns, 2012).

The adoption of appropriate practices in terms of managing the relationship between employers and employees can provide better solutions to conflicts, process and performance issues (Vickers-Willis, 2008). In addition, it can avoid unnecessary friction, which may delay organizational progress.

In relation to the above, Schein stressed the importance of the concept of psychological contract (Ansah et al., 2020). Psychological contract, refers to the tacit agreement between employees and potential employees, in relation to a range of issues. Consequently, before being hired, employees have developed a set of expectations and on a number of dimensions (such as climate, fairness, opportunities provided, internal communication, etc.). Having these expectations dashed can lead to deep feelings of dissatisfaction.

In any organization, developing and maintaining trust is vital for both long-term and short-term effectiveness. The consequences of losing trust, can be devastating. To improve trust, adopting strategies such as striving to ensure the integrity of organizational behavior, internal behavioral consistency, effective communication, having connectivity and different modes of communication (between employees and between leadership/employees), sharing control and showing concern for employees, can be of vital importance (Hunt et al., 2009).

Building strong relationships at work can take time and patience, but can lead to excellent results (indeed, 2023) Some guidelines in relation to improving workplace relationships are as follows:

- frequent communication-one of the most important aspects of relationship building is effective communication, which includes both listening and dialogue making. The achievement of the above, requires interpersonal skills (the ability to understand behavior, manage impressions, persuade and use power appropriately). It is important for individuals to learn to 'listen' and provide constructive feedback. Efforts should also be made in relation to understanding their personal circumstances and self-management
- Consistency and trustworthiness-trust is a very important aspect of any relationship
- Avoidance of gossip and meaningless commentary. Cultivating healthy working relationships requires the adopting of a serious attitude and avoiding dwelling on micro-conflicts (capturing the "big picture" is essential).
- Supporting colleagues- support and the adoption of a positive outlook can be very important elements
- Knowledge of the organizational culture

Therefore, the development of positive working relationships can be primarily about adopting new attitudes. Individuals can become aware of the value of working relationships and adopt positive attitudes. The same can be true at the leadership level. It does not require extraordinary measures, but the adoption of a different perspective, in relation to long-term, organizational success.

Finally, Haar et al, (2019) conducted an interesting study, on working relationships and happiness at work.

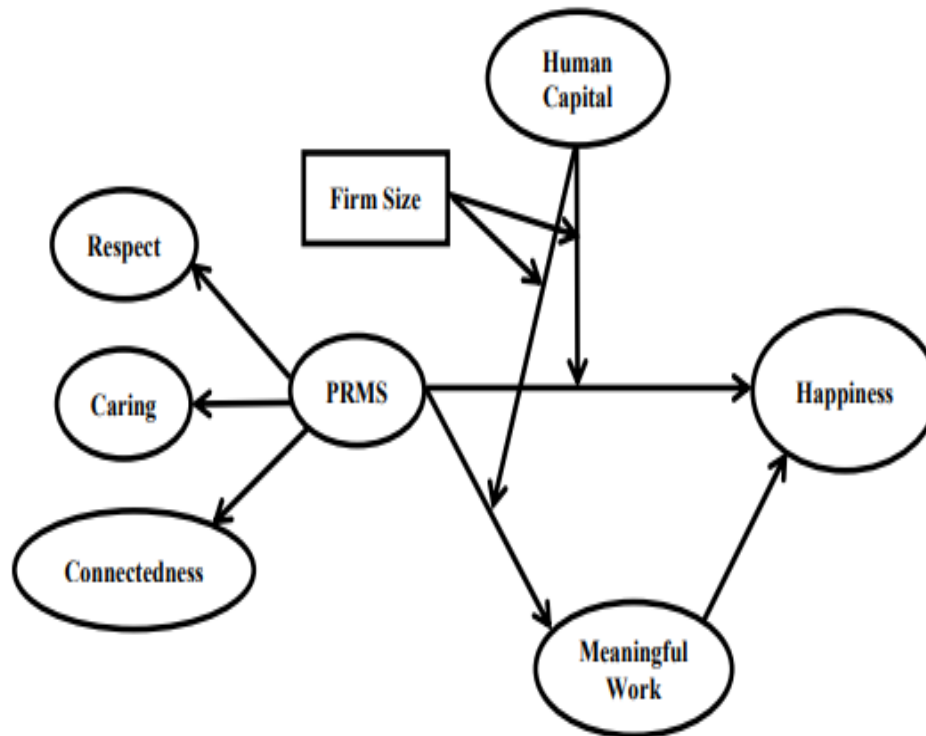


Figure 2: working relations and happiness

Source: Haar et al., (2019)

They adopted the leaders' perspective, believing that their happiness can be spread within the organization. They concluded that adopting leadership behaviors based on caring, showing respect and connectivity can lead to happiness at work through increased work meaning (mediating role). The quality of human resources and the company size can act as a moderator, influencing the direction and strength of the relationship between leadership behaviors and happiness.

3. Company Profile (Virgin)

“Richard, you'll either end up a millionaire or in jail,” the headmaster of the private school said in 1967 to the then 17-year-old Richard Branson, when he was informed of his decision to leave school. Nevertheless, the young student managed, in a few years, to create a huge and diverse business entity, and to become one of the most recognizable businessmen in the world (Protopapadakis, 2018).

Born to a poor family in Britain, Richard Branson stood out early from other children because of his excessive energy. At first, he channeled his energy into sports,

but after a serious injury, he was forced to pursue something else, such as entrepreneurship.

These early failures did not deter Branson, who shortly before he turned 16, was active in publishing a student magazine. In 1968, to the great surprise of his parents, the first magazine, which contained interesting and original articles and interviews with popular artists, would be an unprecedented success, selling over 100,000 copies (Protopapadakis, 2018).

He soon embarked on another business move, that of selling records by mail order. At the time when records were very expensive, he seized the opportunity by selling them at a 15% cheaper rate, thanks to his comparative cost advantage over traditional stores.

However, a British postal strike forced the British entrepreneur to change his strategy by opening a discount record shop, which was a success. A rebellion by nature, Branson chose an unconventional name, Virgin, to symbolize his 'maiden' business venture. This would be the philosophy of the founder, who, when expanding his business into new industries, would use this name.

In 1987, he attempted to cross the Atlantic in a hot air balloon in an attempt to attract the spotlight to the airline company he had just founded. Naturally, he soon sought other business opportunities, such as establishing a pioneering airline that would provide quality service at affordable prices.

Today, Virgin's business group, which employs 25,000 people, is worth close to \$3.5 billion. The insight and boundless entrepreneurial spirit of the eccentric creator of this entire empire have given him a prominent position.

However, Richard Branson, unlike other businessmen, remains "down to earth". His activities are not only

limited to the business sector, but also to that of charity. It is quite difficult to understand precisely the success of the organization under study. The personality of the organization may have played an important role, in line with the personality of the founder. The company devised innovative new products and services that would make air travel more fun. In addition, it went on to recruit happy/positive people with strong personalities

The company was small in the beginning, so consumers were given fun innovative communication messages on the basis of trying to be a radical, fresh company. Richard Branson, did everything to get attention for his businesses, such as balloon flights, parachuting from tall Manhattan buildings, etc. The more he occupied the news about his adventures, the more the company became known as the most "carefree" airline company. His personality became the personality of the airline (virgin atlantic, 2021).

RESEARCH-ANALYSIS

According to Lincoln Turvey, an executive of the organization under study, at Virgin, the concept of flexibility has been strongly adopted and strongly supported by the technology department (Bell, 2021). The organization fervently intends, to enhance workplace flexibility, emphasizing that "We will continue to work much more flexibly compared to the pre-Covid era and we believe this will enhance the overall value proposition to our employees".

He further stressed that "expectations will be set in terms of timelines and when people should be physically present, because it is essential, to create that genuine human connection through physical interaction." Turvey noted that this shift towards adopting agility will also bring positive changes at a cultural level, as meaningful successes (in relation to

plain organizational goals) will be rewarded/recognized, rather than simply being in the office. In other words, it will be recognized that the meaningful contribution of employees can be more important, than inefficiently staying in the office for long hours at the expense of personal life.

It goes without saying, however, that any significant change in working habits will be accompanied by new challenges. Before the pandemic, many leaders had little or no experience of leading teams remotely and some still do not consider it a productive way of working.

Turvey said that in order to win the hearts and the minds, strong leadership skills are needed. It would be naïve for most leaders to believe that the demand for work flexibility will soon disappear (Bell, 2021).

Continuing to foster a strong culture, high levels of engagement and supporting of the mental wellbeing of remote workers will be top priorities for HR leaders with a flexible workforce. But Turvey believes that, strong relationships between leaders and employees will lay the necessary foundation. Here's what can be seen here-establishing flexibility, at the level of hours, may require a deep understanding of labor relations.

Virgin Atlantic was founded on the principles of excellent customer service, value, reliability, accountability and fun. Today, the Virgin Atlantic group employs more than 10,000 employees worldwide. In 2016, Virgin Atlantic conducted an internal investigation of the company to identify strengths and vulnerabilities. The survey revealed that a large number of employees held a sense of detachment and disconnection and that there were perceptions of a lack of transparency at the leadership level. Through research, it also became apparent that

Virgin Atlantic needed a tool that would facilitate remote working.

Virgin Atlantic Group adopted Workplace from Meta, an online communication tool, creating stronger connections internally, increasing organizational connectivity, communication and collaboration between organizational teams. The results, among others, were the following (Linezero, 2023):

- Improved corporate culture: Increased connectivity and communication capabilities led to increased collaboration, understanding and exchange of ideas, which can contribute to the development of an open, healthy culture. Employees can communicate easily both with each other and with leadership.
- Instant translation capabilities made it simple for employees who did not speak the same language, to understand each other. The language barrier was therefore largely resolved, freeing up communicative and creative forces
- Two-way communication with leadership and managers using instant messaging, live chat and video conferencing
- Collaboration and real-time information exchange between air and ground crews.

The power of Workplace from Meta lies in its ability to connect the organization as a whole, at all levels, from the trainee to the CEO. Virgin Atlantic started using Open Groups and broadcasts, and in doing so reduced internal communication barriers and brought teams together on a simplified platform. This can help develop a more aligned, open culture where expression, sharing of ideas, knowledge transfer and development is encouraged.

In addition, the use of the Workplace translation feature for comments and posts, can break down language barriers. One of the most popular benefits for Virgin Atlantic staff was free air travel. But booking was not always an easy process.

With Workplace, Virgin Atlantic Group has completely redesigned this experience by developing a robot that automates the entire process. Now, employees simply open a new chat window in Workplace and ask the robot how many seats are available on an upcoming flight. The bot answers immediately, simplifying the process.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to develop healthy working relationships within organizations, it has been suggested (among others) (Oades et al., 2016), to enhance employees' empowerment and self-determination, protect their emotional safety, protect their demonstration of gratitude and show respect.

The organization under study has chosen the route of flexibility in relation to remote working. This is something that can contribute to the perceived empowerment of employees, as they are given opportunities for control and work/life balance. Something important that was highlighted, is that in this way, the meaningful contribution of employees can be rewarded, rather than unnecessary time spent in offices. It can be observed here that a 'toxic' mentality can often develop in workplaces, where employees are reluctant to leave, as they can be perceived as 'not caring about the organization'.

In this way, caring, concern and respect for the needs of employees can also be demonstrated. The question is how to implement it - the employees should be consulted and the way to implement it should be

decided after some fermentation. As far as it has become clear, there is a 'happy medium' when it comes to flexibility. Most employees seem to want a degree of telecommuting (it may be 1 or 2 days a week), were no doubt, the assumption of flexibility will be seen as a positive thing.

It therefore appears in this case how a policy (such as providing flexibility) can satisfy the conditions for improving working relations. Furthermore, the organization has undertaken extensive, internal research, demonstrating in practice that it cares about employees, their views, their well-being and their voice. It found weakness areas, in leadership transparency and took immediate action. Through technology, the organization was able to improve internal communication and connectivity. Employees can communicate more easily with each other and with leadership. This can be argued that can provide them with opportunities for empowerment, self-expression, enhance trust (Asamani, 2015) and that it signals that leadership cares about them and their views.

Organizations should adopt the working relations perspective as this is how organizational knowledge can be developed. Something very important, is that knowledge transfer and development depends significantly on the quality of internal relations. Organizations usually overlook this way of looking at social reality, focusing on concepts such as efficiency. The problem is this-the changing external environment favors organizations that have thoroughly addressed working relations and the consequent development of the capacity for organizational flexibility.

EPILOGUE

As the world changes, the value of relationships is becoming more and more understood, while at the same time the importance of developing and

protecting deep, meaningful relationships is emphasized. Today, the success of an organization depends largely on the degree of understanding of the emotions and thoughts of its workforce (or understanding the holistic work experience). As it has been shown, developing positive relationships and trust within organizations can be extremely important as (among other things) they can lead to the transfer and development of knowledge

However, many employees may not be satisfied in this area and may not feel connected to organizations. It is important for leaders to understand the 'human domain' of engagement to enable them to act as 'social engineers'. It is of central importance for organizations to adopt a long-term view, so that employees can feel judged more fairly and meaningful relationships can be developed.

Important dimensions of industrial relations are (Arimie & Oronsaye, 2020):

- Emotional intelligence (of managers and employees); abilities to understand, develop relationships and manage daily pressures and demands (Hassan et al. (2014)
- Self-awareness-the ability to be aware of the emotional state (Feldman & Mulle, 2007)
- Empathy
- Trust
- The ability to manage conflict

According to Khawaja et al., (2020), working relationships are based on certain patterns: rewards should be mutually beneficial to all parties, each party should consider that there is mutual and significant investment in the relationship, the sustainability of relationships is based on trust and belief that the other party has positive intentions. All of the above entail's significant investment in organizations, at the

leadership, managerial and individual levels. Emotional intelligence, self-awareness and the ability to manage conflict may not be self-evident for all individuals. They must be developed through appropriate training and also through individual, proactive effort. It is the responsibility of organizations to raise awareness of the importance of working relationships and to communicate internally.

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