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THESIS

**"(UN)SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT:
HOW A TOXIC ORGANIZATION ENVIRONMENT AFFECTS JOB
SATISFACTION AND EMPLOYEES' PRODUCTIVITY"**

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Firma (signature)   *Alessandra Gulli*

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INTRODUCTION

In this analysis we will describe how unsustainable human resource management generates inefficiency, dissatisfaction, physical and mental issues.

The first product of a company is the creation of value for its employees: in fact, it not only provides for the economic sustenance of its employees, but it can enrich (or impoverish) their lives in term of physical and mental well-being. The profit (or the loss) that a company achieves at the end of the year is much more than a sum of money, but it is also the amount of well-being (or malaise) that it has generated on social level. Companies are not non-profit organizations, but it is superficial to untie the profit from the human capital that helped generate it. Without talented employees, the company would not have produced that profit. The company has a social function, it takes care of satisfying customers; but the first customers to be satisfied and retained are the employees.

Having a sustainable human resource management is an investment, and it has an economic as well as a social return: having loyal employees means having a lower turnover rate, so lower recruiting and training costs; having happy and satisfied employees means having a lower absenteeism rate; having motivated employees means having a higher productivity.

This reflection aims to highlight that Human Resource Management sustainability is not only a matter of non-profit organization, but it is also a long-term profitable investment.

We will investigate what are the factors that make an employee satisfied, and then why happy employees are more productive than sad ones. We will deal with the correlation between job satisfaction and productivity to demonstrate that investing in people also has an economic return. The organizational culture is promoted by leaders, and for this, we will analyze how much the bosses influence the productivity and the well-being of the employees. We will focus on despotic leadership and on all the attitudes that in the long run generate a toxic work environment. We will describe the various violent behaviors that an employee can suffer.

We cannot fail to begin our analysis without addressing the phenomenon of the Great Resignation that took place after the COVID-19 pandemic and retrace the reasons why many employees left their jobs during and after the pandemic. In support of the reflection, interviews with five employees who have decided to resign are report in the last chapter. Jamila, David, Anne, Jane, and Edward will help us to understand deeper what are the drivers that lead a resignation decision in a sensitive period like the one following a global pandemic.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT RESIGNATION

1.1 A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Before starting with the analysis of the unsustainable human resource management and all the issues that the employee could face in the workplaces, it is important to deal with the context in which the employees and the organizations are.

In 2022 we are facing a post global pandemic period; people have found or are reaching a new balance from the pre-pandemic period. The COVID-19 pandemic exploded in the first months of 2020 and first it endangered people's lives. But, month after month, we understood that it was not only a sanitary emergency, but also a transversal social crisis. The necessity of social distancing between people and the increasing number of infections, generated new social and working imperatives. Simple things such as going to work in the office, attending a meeting in presence, training people, exchanging information vis a vis was not more a possible scenario.

1.2 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HRM CHALLENGES

Talking about mental and physical well-being, it is impossible not to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 has suddenly changed everyone's life, and the working environment. Remote working was no more a possibility given by some multinational company, but it became the only way for working in the first months of 2020. Until the pandemic broke out, remote work was a possibility only for highly skilled employees with a high level of autonomy and the capability to do their daily task trough computer.

Eurofound reports that nearly 40% of EU employees have started working remotely after the pandemic. With remote work, employees' relations have also been transformed, and the level of communication and spillover of knowledge too. As we have already seen, employees' relationships affect the job satisfaction and, in more general terms, relationships affect the human well-being. With the pandemic, everyone has experienced isolation and health and life threats. Before the pandemic, the colleague was one of the teammates, now it is a potential health threat. The anxiety increases day by day because none knew how to cope with the virus, and the social well-being was seriously compromised. As Toscano e Zappalà (2020) highlighted, isolation and remote work strongly compromised the well-being and job satisfaction because it was more difficult to recreate interpersonal trust such as in presence, or knowledge spillover, or social interactions from home.

As Bienkowska, Koszela, Salamacha, and Tworek (2022) reported, social isolation due to Covid-19, compromising job satisfaction, indirectly reduces the individual job productivity. The level of stress increases among the employees, both remote working (because of the absence of interactions) and the employees who remain in the organization (because of the threat of being infected). Many employees have experienced the emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Another issue was that the sudden digitalization caught some employees off guard, using new technologies, new spaces, and a hybrid mode, they needed additional support for developing new skills. Additionally, supporting the employees in that specific moment, would also increase the loyalty and commitment in the organization, and they would perceive a dramatic situation as an opportunity to develop new skills and cope with difficulties.

1.3 THE GREAT RESIGNATION

A critical aspect that we cannot ignore is the phenomenon of the Great Resignation, occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic. The term was coined by Anthony Klotz, an associate professor of management at Texas A&M University in 2021, and it describes a short period of time affected by the departure of a huge number of employees.

If at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first months of 2020 employees were very reluctant to resign because of the general uncertainty, the global stagnation, and a frozen employment situation; from March 2021 a trend reversal has occurred. The percentage of monthly resignation in the US which did not exceed 2,4%, increased to 3% by November of the same year.

The resignation rate wasn't the same for all industries, for example the accommodation and food services sectors were particularly suffering from March to September 2021, they have lost more than 40% of their employees, reaching 6% of monthly turnover rate. More in general, the highest turnover rate is referred to knowledge intensive industries.

In addition, in a survey Microsoft predicts that the turnover will continue also in the next year and that the 41% of the employees are considering the possibility to leave their present company.

Figure 1 Percentage of monthly resignations in the US reported in Serenko (2022)

During COVID-19 pandemic many people have taken stock of their life, they have reviewed their priorities and objectives in the short and long term. Having to suspend life due to the pandemic has stirred consciences, many people have seen people they loved die without being able to do anything; many others have been deprived of their smaller freedoms such as being able to go to school, to work, to the pub with friends. Being trapped has generated on the one hand severe depressive and anxiety syndromes; and on the other hand, the desire to start over and this time to live with courage, changing what has not worked in the previous life: from the private sphere to work. As a result, many people decided to be more present in family and with friends, they started to be more careful to work-life balance and to their physical and mental well-being.

As the Great Resignation data highlighted, many people resigned but in a different way: from one hand some employees were dissatisfied with the workplace, with the leaders and colleagues, and they decided to maintain their profession but in another organization; on the other hand some employees (46% according to the Work Trend Index, 2021) have taken into consideration the possibility to completely change their working field, following the dreams they had when they were young or turning their hobby into a job.

In summary there are two main reasons behind the resignation: a toxic organization or a personal passion to which the employee wants to devote him/herself entirely. If for the second reason human resource management could not particularly affects the resignation decision; on the opposite site for the toxic organization could do a lot.

As we said before, a significant number of quitters are knowledge-intensive resources, and this is a further problem for the organization. Knowledge-based resources are difficult to replace, and they have a very high potential for value creation. Furthermore, tacit knowledge learned over the years is extremely difficult and costly to transfer to a potential new hire.

The challenge for the organizations was to live up to the new life perspectives of employees that during the COVID-19 pandemic they made it clear who they were and what the value of their professionalism was. Many employees were no longer willing to put up with bullying in the workplace or underestimating their work. The Covid-19 pandemic has weakened some individuals by compromising their physical and mental health; and made others stronger and more determined to take the life they truly wanted but they did not dare to want. When life freezes globally, some die and others risk dying, those who remain know that life is one and must not waste it.

As we have already said, at the beginning of 2021, more than 40% of employees where thinking about the possibility to leave their company; so more than 40% of employees for many reasons were dissatisfied with their job. In U.S. between April and September 2021 more than 24 million of employees left their jobs. The resignation rate is high on average, but there are some industries that present higher resignation rates. The graph below shows what are the industries with the highest resignation rates. On the top we find apparel retail, management consulting, internet, and enterprise software.
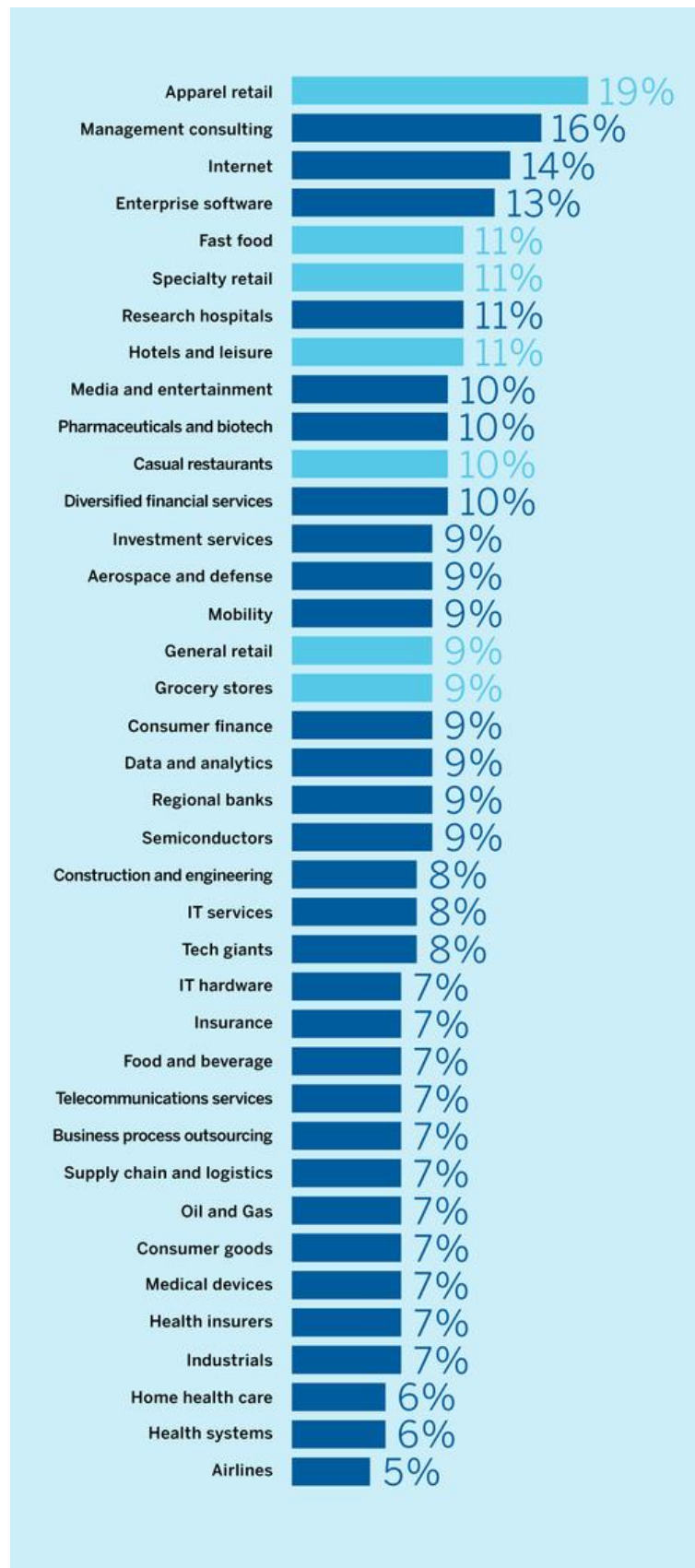
Figure 2 The turnover rate of "Great Resignation" in different sectors.

The phenomenon of the Great Resignation affected both blue- and white-collar sectors, the retention crisis is transversal and doesn't depend on the salary or on the job position. It is

demonstrated that, even in the same sector, the companies with a reputation for a healthy culture and more focused on the employees' well-being, are less suffering the departure of their employees. Below we have reported some examples of different level of attrition in the same sector. The company's attrition is calculated in comparison with the average attrition of the industry. In addition, the authors Sull and Zweing (2022) reported that toxic culture is driving the Great Resignation analyzed more than 1.4 million Glassdoor reviews to understand how people positively or negatively evaluate companies. The data put together provide the following results.
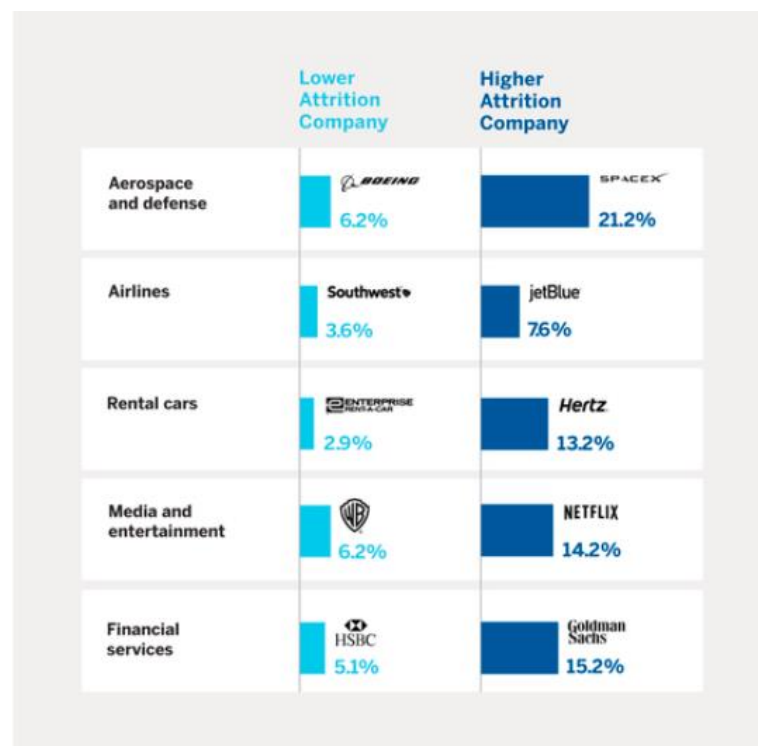
Figure 3 In the graph it is present a different level of attrition in the same sector, due to a different organization culture.

Faced with such high numbers of dismissals, it is interesting looking for the main reasons that led the employee to resign. Salary is generally thought to be one of the top predictors of employee turnover is wage but is not so. In fact, in the research of Rubenstein et al. (2018), the compensation only ranks 16th as a predictor of employee turnover. In the figure below, there are the five predictors of attrition compared to the compensation. As we can see toxic corporate culture is 10.4 times a more effective predictor of employee turnover. The data only confirm what we have already said dealing with the employees' feelings during and after COVID-19 pandemic. The first predictor for employees' turnover is the level of toxicity in the organization and that the reason why it is important to talk about toxicity to recognize it, reduce it and, finally, eliminate it.

Then job insecurity and reorganization are 3.5 times a better predictor than compensation, so employees don't positively perceive the instability or frequent changes inside the organization. The instability generates a general state of anxiety, and some people could choose to leave for this reason.

The third predictor is an unexpected one: the high levels of innovation. Many people leave very innovative companies because innovation often requires dedication that goes beyond working hours, and in the long term is a source of stress. In the highly innovative company, the work-life balance is a field with room for improvement.

Then the fourth turnover predictor is the failure to recognize employee performance that affects 2.9 times more the turnover rate than compensation. Employees whose don't feel recognize in the short-term lose motivation and productivity, in the long-term they leave the company. The recognition of employees is a hot topic for HRM, monetary rewards are not enough, employees need to be encouraged and valued.

Finally, the management of COVID-19 pandemic is a predictor of turnover rate too. Employees without or with an insufficient support for changing working methods (i.e., work-from-home, mental well-being) have more incentives to leave their company.

Figure 4 Turnover predictors compared to compensation.

The organization cannot ignore these feelings of its employees, it must instead support those who have been weakened by the pandemic and offer different and inspiring job position for those who are considering leaving the company. The pandemic gave the possibility to the companies to redesign roles and restructure the organization units to improve the sense of

belonging of employees, their job satisfaction and, consequently, their effectiveness and productivity.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN JOB SATISFACTION AND JOB PRODUCTIVITY

2.1 SUSTAINABILITY OF HRM

Organizations are made of people, and even highly automated companies have to deal with the management of their employees. The performance of the entire organization is strictly linked with the employees' performance. That is the reason why being aware of the most effective human resource management is not an option.

The old Maslow's hierarchical model of needs starts from the physiological needs, followed by those of safety, social, respect, and self-realization. This was the picture of employees' needs in 1954. The model has limitations and does not take into consideration that everyone has different character traits, a different personal and cultural background, and consequently has different needs.

All in all, Maslow's hierarchical model is an interesting starting point to analyze and then manage employees. For example, it could happen that a company has a very high turnover ratio, and the issue could be very simple to understand and fix: the salary is so low that the employee resigns as soon as she/he finds a better job; or the employee resigns if another employer offers her/him a more stable long-term employment contract. As Yang (2022) reported, salary and contract stability are two issues that HRM cannot neglect because they affect the employees' job satisfaction. On the other hand, sometimes understanding why the turnover rate is very high or why the absenteeism rate increases or why the team performance is decreasing is not so easy, particularly if the company is very complex and structured, and HR team has to manage and support people without knowing them personally.

Managers and leadership team are key roles that act as an intermediary between the employer and the employees. The cohesion and synergy between managers and HR are fundamental to understand what the employees' needs are and to actively intervene to fix the issues. Managers should keep in mind two main priorities: achieve specific goals for the organization and manage the employees. In the short-run a manager focused only on goals, neglecting the employees, could achieve objectives but in the long-run is not sustainable.

In these chapters we will deal with unsustainable organizational behaviors that not only compromises the psychological well-being of the employees, but also the productivity. At the beginning we will present the Happy-Productive worker model described by Peirò et al. (2019), explaining how the well-being and job satisfaction affect job performance and productivity, and

how COVID-19 pandemic and smart working have changed employees' working lives. Then we will introduce the concept of toxicity in the organization, analyzing the consequences of careless and ineffective human resource management. Furthermore, we will cope with toxic leadership and violent attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.

At the end we will analyze three interviews of three employees who decide for resignation, and we will provide a quality study based on empirical data.

2.2 HAPPY WORKERS PERFORM BETTER THAN SAD ONES

Well-being is not only a social and psychological goal that people have to achieve in private life, but it should be also an organizational goal. In fact, as Tandler et al. (2020) have demonstrated, happy workers perform better than sad ones. Mofoluwake et Oluremi (2013) have found that the mediator between happiness and productivity is job satisfaction. The literature reports the positive relation between job satisfaction and employees' performance and, in addition, the negative relationship between the increasing organizational stress and the worsening of performance. Be worried about the job satisfaction of the employees and invest to improve their well-being is not only a sustainable and ethical choice, but also a business profitable investment made for improve the individual and organizational performance.

The concept of happiness is rather complex to define because it refers to a private and subjective dimension; however, the literature agrees in identifying three orientations of happiness: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. In *Authentic Happiness* written by Seligman (2002) called these three parts: Positive Emotion, Strength and Virtue, and "In the Mansions of Life".

The pleasure orientation (hedonism), or the happiness due to positive emotion, conceives happiness in the maximization of pleasures and in the minimization of pains. The happiness is based on sensory and immediate gratification; and the sadness is also the momentary absence of pleasure. Managing a pleasure-oriented team means that the manager should be focused on short-term objectives and he or she has to recognize and reward every effort, to arouse constant positive emotions. The slightest discussion is an interruption of happiness, there is no improvement to achieve as important as their own sensory gratification. Pleasure-oriented workers are like hard-to-manage teenagers.

The engaged life orientation is based on flow-related experiences. Engaged-life-oriented people are very focused on their tasks and on goals, the happiness is inside the daily actions. Being oriented in a specific goal and work for it, it generates happiness. In the organization, engaged-

life-oriented are those people that are happy to be helpful with their work. They need tasks to do, they are unsatisfied if they stop.

The meaningful life is the deepest form of happiness. If the pleasure orientation is a material way of conceiving happiness, the engaged-life-orientation is the rational one, and the meaningful orientation is the spiritual one. The meaningful-life-oriented people are those that use their *signature strengths* to serve something larger than themselves. Seligman made a clear distinction between pleasure and gratification, starting from Aristotle's concept of "eudemonia", he claimed that gratification is the only result of working with noble purposes. An employee that is looking for a meaningful life, is not working for the salary or for being appreciate, but to develop the organization and maybe the entire world. His or her motivation is harder to scratch because the reason why is deeper. The employee is more likely to endure stressful situation.

It is demonstrated that the orientations to happiness (the engagement and meaningfulness orientations) are positively correlated with career development because of the positive attitudes and the ability to cope in difficult situation. In fact, research has shown that positive attitudes are crucial facilitators in stressful situations (i.e., COVID pandemic).

2.3 AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

The aim of Fogaca et al. (2016)'s study is to demonstrate the positive correlation between job satisfaction and employee's performance. To achieve the main objective, the authors have splitted it in smaller objectives: test the predictive effect of job satisfaction, well-being at work, and personal and professional variables on individual job performance; and test the moderating effect of the components of the organizational structure, and how they affect well-being, job satisfaction, and job performance. The aim of the study is explaining why happiness and self-realization lead to a better performance in an empirical way.

The literature suggests that the promotion of physical and mental well-being is a good way to motivate people to achieve their best job performance. The results of the study of Rego (2009), have reported that the affective well-being at work explains 23% of the variance of a significant measure of job performance. And Wright and Cropanzano (2000) in their research have tested job satisfaction and mental well-being as predictors of employees' job performance. In both studies the data collection shows a positive correlation between job satisfaction and well-being, and job performance. Other authors focus their research on the negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and job performance. In summary, well-being makes people more

productive; instead, situation of tension that generate anxiety and high level of stress makes people less effective.

It is important to mention some variables that can affect the job performance and that are not linked to the employee's well-being. One of these variables is the age: there is a consistent and modestly positive correlation between age (for the younger employees) and job performance. On the other hand, the veteran employees have more experience and perform better.

Furthermore, literature highlights that job performance is also affected by organizational structure and it is demonstrated that the level of autonomy influences the level of job satisfaction and so also job performance. People feel better if they have decision-making power, they are more committed and engaged in their job. If they can't decide anything, they feel like machines. It is important to balance the level of delegation with the standard organization procedure that employees have to follow. Employees need to have clear goals and ways to achieve them, otherwise too freedom would generate a chaotic way to proceed, and the objectives wouldn't be achieved.

For collecting data, the authors used the following instruments: self-assessment performance at work scale; well-being at work scale; job satisfaction scale; perception of components of organizational structure scale. The participants selected were 134 employees of a clinical laboratory and a federal court of justice. In the hypothesis the variables are four and in the statistical procedure it was used a multiple linear regression. The dependent variable is the individual job performance; the predictors variables are well-being, job satisfaction, and components of the organizational structures; the independent variables are personal and professional variables (age and experience).

In the first regression the analysis is focused on the predictive relationship of the variables well-being at work, job satisfaction, and personal and professional variables with the job performance.

Regression Results—Variable Criteria: Individual Job Performance

Predictor variable	Models (β values)		
	I	II	III
Positive affects	0.523***	0.506***	0.471***
Negative affects		-0.202*	-0.223**
Nature of the position			0.187*
R^2	0.274	0.314	0.348
R^2 adjusted	0.266	0.300	0.327
R	0.523	0.561	0.590

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; and *** $p < 0.001$.

This set of variables explain 35% of the variance (R²=0,348) of individual job performance. So the employees that experience positive emotions at work, increase their job performance; on the other hand, employees that experience negative feeling in the workplace, decrease their performance. This data suggest that the employees' workplace perception is relevant and could predict the trend of their performance.

Then the "nature of position" affects positively the job performance too. It means that employees that have more decision-making power in the organization, are more motivated and perform better than the others.

Regression Results With Components of Organizational Structure—Variable Criteria: Individual Job Performance

Predictor variable	Models (β values)				
	I	II	III	IV	V
Positive affects	0.593***	0.540***	0.494***	0.498***	0.491***
Formalization		0.455***	0.459***	0.482***	0.447***
Informal structure			0.196*	0.212**	0.260***
Age				0.176*	0.161*
Satisfaction with management					0.158*
R^2	0.351	0.556	0.592	0.622	0.643
R^2 adjusted	0.342	0.543	0.575	0.600	0.617
R	0.593	0.746	0.769	0.789	0.802

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; and *** $p < 0.001$.

In the second model the set of variables explain 64% of the variance (R²=0,643) of individual job performance. By adding the components of organizational structure, the explained variance of the dependent variable increases a lot. As we can see from the Table above, all the factors are predictors of job performance.
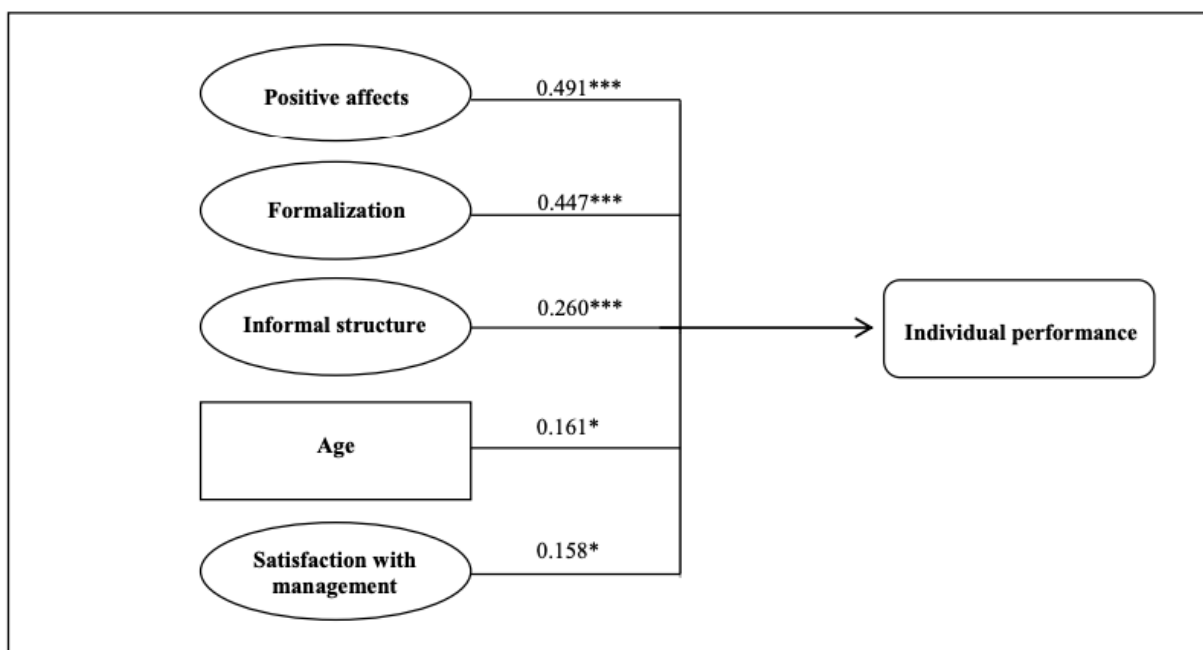

Figure 5 shows the regression model obtained in the study.

The results have confirmed the theoretical hypothesis according to which well-being and job satisfaction affect job performance. In addition, the organizational structure variable increases the explained variance of individual job performance until 64%. So, not only positive emotions and feelings perceived in the workplace make employees happy, they also are looking for autonomy and a relationship of trust with the management.

These results should motivate organizations to promote and invest in the employees' well-being, rewarding the positive attitudes and trying to minimize conflicts and negative situation in order to improve the individual and organization productivity.

2.4 EMPLOYEE RELATIONS AND JOB SATISFACTION

People need social support in private life and in the workplace. Employee relations affect the organizational climate, so the employee's well-being, job satisfaction and job performance.

In their research, Bulinska-Stangrecka et Bagienska (2021) have mentioned the Expectation states theory (EST) to explain how it is relevant the social support for the employee's well-being:

"The main premise of the theory is to assume that individuals are in a task relationship with each other and, on the basis of the available information, formulate expectations for the actions of others in relation to specific tasks. The behavior of the individual, on the other hand, is the origin of his or her expectations. Moreover, the behaviors reinforce existing expectations."

And:

"Having good relationships with colleagues, lead to the development of positive expectations, subsequently triggering positive group attitudes, leading to higher satisfaction with participation in the group."

A climate of trust facilitates teamwork, spillover of knowledge, and communication. Both vertical and horizontal trust relationships in the workplace produce positive attitudes and positive habits. Interpersonal trust incentivizes commitment, collaboration, loyalty; and reduces conflicts, tension, employee turnover intention.

EST explain in a simple way how employee's relationships affect organizational climate, social well-being, job satisfaction and, consequently job performance.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF LEADERS IN EMPLOYEES' RETENTION

3.1 HOW A LEADER AFFECTS RESIGNATION DECISION

The article of Goler et al (2018) published in Harvard Business Review focused on employee retention, begins like this: "People don't quit a job, they quit a boss".

One of the first things HR needs to do is align managers with the organization's values in the short and long-run. The spokespersons of the corporate culture are the managers, HRM cannot change anything without their commitment, support, and help. It could happen that a manager is more performance oriented, or people oriented, but the point is being as much as possible align with the organization values. If the company mission talks about the centrality of individuals, then managers have to spend time with the employees, try to understand their deep needs, and re-design their job in order to maximize their performance and productivity. A manager should not be judged only for volume of sales, costs savings or processes improvements. There is another dimension of value creation in an organization: social well-being of employees.

We have already talked about the happiness at work, and it is not a fairy tale, we are talking about business, HRM and leadership team have to maximize the organizational performance through employees' performance. And how can we do that if people are unsatisfied, and HR can only leverage on wages? At the end of this session, we will see in the interviews how the extreme dissatisfaction dragged on for years, leads to the resignation of talented employees.

The manager needs time to establish trust relationships, to understand what are the strengths and the weaknesses of the employee, and what are the tasks in which the employee gives her/his best. Employee needs to be listened, not only to feel involved but also because she/he is the person that best knows his/her work and can give suggestions for process improvement.

Manager has to involve employees and increase their commitment to the organization, giving them the opportunity to improve their skills and learn new ones through SMART (specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related) goals.

In the article of Yang (2022), when the author talks about HRM, he writes:

"It fully mobilizes the enthusiasm of employees to work, stimulates the potential of employees, and finally achieves the strategic goals of enterprise development. People are the active force of social development. If people cannot develop their knowledge and skills, the development of all new things will be hindered. [...] Development is not the same as training. Development

needs to improve the creativity and skills of employees, coordinate the personal goal of employees and corporate goals."

And:

"The turnover rate without promotion within 3 years is 25%. The turnover rate of job promotion is 10%."

As Maslow said in his model, for employees the salary is important but is not enough, they are also looking for self-realization. The career path should be designed and added to the external monetary remuneration. As we can see above, the turnover rate is 150% higher if the employee doesn't receive any promotion in three years.

In the article of Business Harvard Review mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, the authors underline that the main retention issue for a big company like Facebook is the inability of some managers to redesign job around the employee. Talented employees leave the company because his/her manager wasn't able to value them, to put them in the right place in the organization. The first thing to do is listening and spend time with employees, make them feel that the organization without them wouldn't be the same, and it is true. Replacing an employee is much more difficult and expensive than a machine.

Before talking about toxicity, it was necessary understanding the complexity of HRM even without severe behavior such as the various form of violence that we will analyze later.

3.2 LEADERSHIP STYLES: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

When we talk about leadership, we mean the ability of an individual to lead a group of people. The literature identifies various leadership styles in different organizational culture.

The five most cited leadership styles are: authoritarian (autocratic), participative (democratic), delegative (laissez-faire), transactional (managerial) and transformational (visionary) leadership.

In the authoritarian style, the leader is not interested in the involvement of the team, he or she takes decisions, and the subordinates execute. The pro of this approach is how quick decisions can be taken; the cons are the poor engagement and trust relation between the leader and the subordinates.

In the participative style, the team is involved in the decision process, subordinates feel part of the organization and valued. The pros of this approach are the commitment of employees, and the high degree of communication; instead, the cons are a long decision-making process also

for not relevant decisions, and the difficulty to reach conclusions if everyone tells his or her opinion, so effectiveness could be compromise.

The delegative style could be intentional or unintentional: on one hand the leader knows the subordinates and wants to give them autonomy; on the other hand, the leader experiences lack control over subordinates. In the unintentional delegative style, the issue is the leader's inability to manage the team. In the intentional delegative style, there is a trust relationship between the leader and the subordinates, so leader gives autonomy to the employees, let them free to work as they want. The pros are the development of the autonomy in subordinates and the commitment to their specific tasks. The cons are that some employees need to be guided and have clear directions, not all the subordinates feel confident with an entrepreneurial approach.

The transactional style is focused on routines and procedures used to achieve goals. Performance and productivity are the main leader's objective, and the subordinates don't have margin to explore new methods or implement different procedures. If the employees meet the targets, they receive rewards, otherwise penalties. The pro of this approach is the clarity of objectives and methods to achieve them; the cons is giving for granted that the reward is the only remuneration that the employee is looking for.

The transformational leadership style has the purpose of developing employees' skills and, consequently, the organization. The leader has long-term vision, he or she takes care of subordinates, pays attention at their needs, explores their new ideas. Subordinates feel empowered and loyal, and consequently, they are motivated and engaged. The issue of transformational leadership is the timing in which the objectives will be achieved: if the leader is long-term oriented, the short-time results could be sacrificed.

3.3 DESPOTIC LEADERSHIP

After having quickly described the pros and cons of various leadership styles, the analysis will be focused on a particular form of autocratic leader: the despotic one. The objective is understanding how job satisfaction is negatively affected and, job performance too.

The despotic leader has three main traits: first, lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates; second, personal attitudes that affect organization climate; third, subordinates perceive that the leader is motivated by self-interest.

The despotic leader[1] is characterized by negative traits such as arrogance, manipulation, and authoritarianism. The despotic leader is focused on his or her own interest and short-term result.

Subordinates are afraid of the leader, the communication is reduced to the essential, and sometimes they prefer not to ask for clarification about specific tasks or goals. The climate of fear generates anxiety and stress even for small requests. Employees adopt silent and submissive behavior toward toxic leadership.

As the literature report, the critical factor that affects the resignation decision is job satisfaction, that is the sum of personal judgment on salary, psychological well-being, leadership behaviors, organizational climate and organizational values, relations with colleagues, opportunities to grow within the company. Furthermore, the literature demonstrates how the despotic leadership and toxic workplace affect turnover rate. On the opposite side the transformational leadership affects positively the psychological well-being of employees.

In the study of Iqbal et al. (2022), the authors investigate the impact of despotic leadership, toxic workplace, and cognitive distractions, on employee turnover intention. The data were collected through a quantitative survey of 240 employees working at higher education institutions in China. The participants were selected randomly and the data collection lasted six months. The questionnaires were distributed twice to collect reliable data. Toxic workplace environment and cognitive distraction were used as mediating variables between despotic leadership and employee turnover intention.
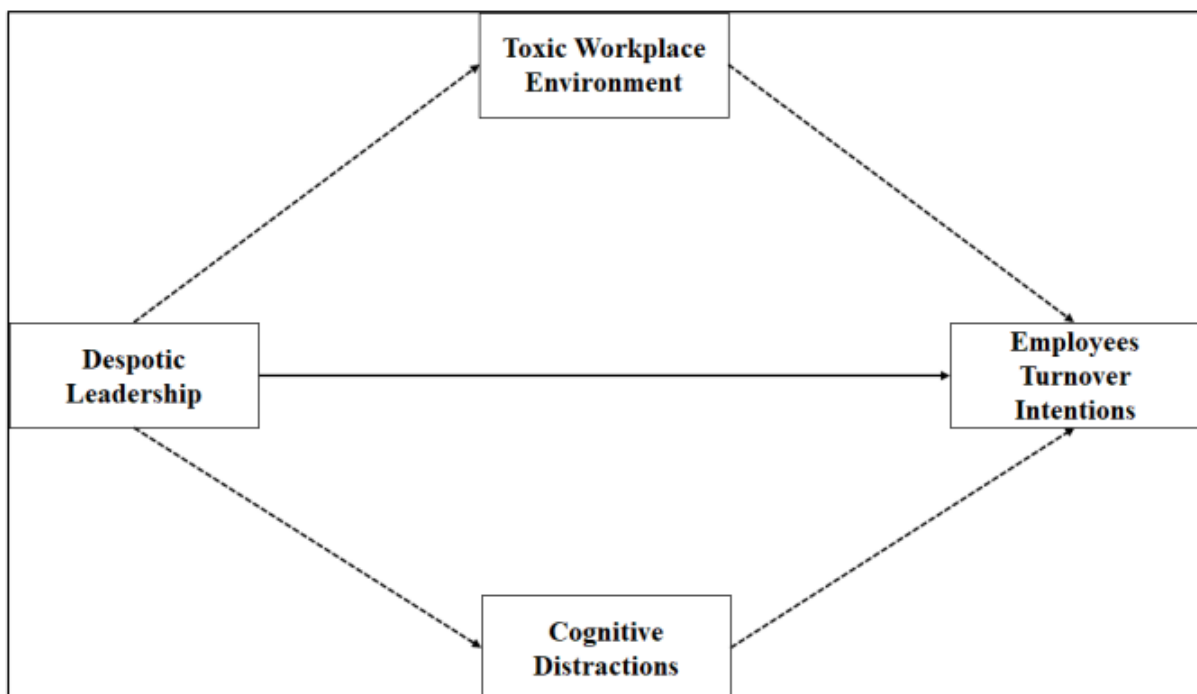

Figure 1. Research model

In the research they used three theories: the social exchange theory (SET), the behavioral intention formation theories, and the leadership theory.

The social exchange theory (SET) is widely used to explain the nature of the employee-employer relationship, based on mutual obligations and norms. For example, employees who receive rewards from their employer, are more motivated, they put more efforts and commitment in their tasks, they are engaged, and they have fewer intentions to leave the organization. In summary, employee behavior depends on the quality of social exchange relationships. If the employee perceives reciprocity with the organization, he or she will positively act. The employer may recognition, rewards, benefit, and career development in exchange for employee's commitment and loyalty. Hence, job satisfaction is affected by the fairness of the relationship between the employer and the employee.

The behavioral intention formation theories assume that an intention is the result of the satisfaction of a specific need raised by social, personal, and situational factors. One of the theories analyzed is the theory of reasoned action (TRA) presented by Ajzen and Fishbein, and it is one of the first models in social psychology for explaining intentions. TRA suggests that intentions are affected by attitudes and subjective norms. Later, Ajzen also introduced behavioral control into the TRA model, considering situation where a person may lose the control. In the research they conclude the intentions analysis like this:

"By keeping in mind, the different intention formation theories mentioned above, we view turnover intention as a function of an external factor (i.e., despotic leadership), a sociological factor (i.e., toxic workplace environment), and a psychological factor (i.e., cognitive distraction)."

And:

"Furthermore, employee productivity and creativity are damaged in a toxic workplace environment that features cognitive distraction, leading employees to want to leave their current jobs."

Finally, in the study authors made a portrait of despotic leader, highlighting four distinctive features. The first trait is the relationship of absolute obedience between the leader and the subordinates, nobody should question what the leader said. Second, the leader never takes into consideration ideas suggested by subordinates, they are treated as incapable. If the objectives are achieved, the credit goes entirely to the leader; if there are failures, the fault lies with the subordinates. Third, despotic leaders want to be respected and keep all the subordinated under control. They analyze others' weaknesses and use them to generate a fear climate. Fourth, despotic leaders overload subordinates with work and they are never completely satisfied with their job. Despotic leadership affects the employees' motivation, self-confidence, morale, and job satisfaction. All these feelings repeated for months or years, increase the level of anxiety and stress, and could give rise to physical and psychological ailment such as panic attacks,

gastritis, or burnout. Despotic leaders not only affect the individual productivity, but also affect the team effectiveness because of the toxic workplace he or she has generated. In a collaborative workplace, colleagues help each other and feel part of the team; in toxic workplace everyone is committed to surviving and achieving the goals that the leader has given them. Toxic workplace is characterized by aggressive and offensive behaviors, lack of relationships with colleagues and leader, ostracism, harassment, and bullying. In the next chapter we will present these, and others forms of violence that affect employees' well-being and performance.

High levels of tension and exhaustion erode the employees' well-being day by day. An employee with mental or psychological health compromised, has a worst performance than a healthy employee. People wellness is not only a social matter, but also a business matter because it affects the productivity of the organization in short-run (i.e., failure to achieve goals, or absenteeism) and in long-run (i.e., resignation).

The study results confirmed the previous studies, so despotic leadership and toxic workplace affect employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and turnover intention.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOXIC ORGANIZATION

4.1 SOME DATA ON THE ORGANIZATIONS' TOXICITY

When we talk about toxicity we immediately think about a chemical toxicity or unhealthy conditions that could harm human health or the ecosystem. A company may have to deal with toxic substances and must be able to safeguard its employees through adequate safety systems; but this is not the only risk that an organization should avoid.

The data updated to November 30, 2021of Inail, the National Institute against Accidents at Work, show that the reports of accidents at work filed between January and February were 448.110, 6,3% more than 2020, and 1.017 fatal accidents. Pathologies of occupational origins increased by 24%.

An occupational disease is a pathology that develops slowly due to unhealthy working conditions. The occupational disease can relate to physical or mental health.

In the decree n.212 September 12, 2014, of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, it is published the updated list of occupational diseases, among which we find mental and psychosomatic diseases due to work organization dysfunctions.

In 2019 the World Health Organization recognized burnout as a work-related disease.

In Italy, according to the monitoring carried out in 2008 by Ispesl, the Institute for the prevention and safety of work, about one and half million Italian workers are victims of bullying out of 21 million employed. The phenomenon is more pronounced in the North (65%) and it mostly affects women (52%).

The most recent ISTAT data (Survey on the Safety of citizens, 2018) attest to the spread of the phenomenon of violence in the workplace, especially among female workers. An estimated 3.177.000 women between the ages of 15 and 65 who have suffered at least one harassment or sexual blackmail at work, especially verbal and during the job interview or during hiring. In particular victims work in the North-East and Central Italy. If we look at physical harassment in the workplace, 1.404.000 women between ages of 15 and 65 have experienced it at least once during their working life by a colleague or by their employer.

Toxic seems to be a very extreme judgement for an organization, but we can think about a poison, if you take it in large quantities, you can risk your life, but if you take it in small doses, you may not notice it.

In 2008 a Swiss pharmaceutical company discovered that viper serum contains a protein that acts on the skin by reducing muscle contractions to reduce the formation of wrinkles. The main results demonstrated by constant use of viper venom-based cream are uniform complexion and smoother and luminous skin.

July, 2021 a 56-year-old man living in a small town in Trento was bitten by a viper, he was hospitalized in intensive care. The animal is the same but the effects on humans are very different. A single bad behavior in an organization would not affect much but recurrence of bad behavior can poison.

A full-time worker spends 40 hours per week in the workplace; if we deduct 8hr a day to sleep, in a week it remains 112 hours, so he/she spends 35% of his/her time at work. The percentage increases if the worker doesn't live in front of his/her organization and he/she has to take the car, the bus, the train to come to the office. Work cannot fail to influence the state of mind of the employee, it can improve well-being or ruin it. Employees' well-being or malaise are intangible, but their effects are not.

Between March 6 and April 24, 2012, Comitato unico di garanzia per le pari opportunità, la valorizzazione del benessere di chi lavora contro le discriminazioni, conducted a survey among the employees of the Institute to collect information on well-being organizational and identify strengths and possible discomfort in the workplace. 1.725 individuals (73%) participated in the survey.

The survey has these following focuses: the characteristics of the work performed; the employees' satisfaction for their job and for the work life balance; the evaluation of specific aspects of the workplace; the most urgent issues to solve in the workplace; the perception that employees' friends and family have about the workplace. Below is the table with the aspects to be improved most urgently in the workplace, so the main issues of the organization in human resource management.

PROSPETTO 10. VALUTAZIONE DEI RISPONDENTI RIGUARDO "Le cose più urgenti da migliorare in Istituto" *(Valori percentuali – su un massimo di tre risposte)*

ASPETTI DA MIGLIORARE	Valore percentuale sul totale rispondenti
La valorizzazione del personale	54,6
La circolazione e la chiarezza delle informazioni	37,0
La formazione e l'aggiornamento del personale	33,0
I sistemi di valutazione del personale	20,1
La chiarezza degli obiettivi e dei compiti	20,0
La struttura organizzativa e i processi di lavoro	17,7
Il comfort dell'ambiente di lavoro	15,2
Il sistema di distribuzione degli incentivi	14,0
I rapporti tra le diverse unità organizzative	13,2
L'assegnazione delle risorse tecniche e umane	13,2
I supporti informatici e tecnologici	10,0
I rapporti con i referenti/dirigenti	9,4
La sicurezza dell'ambiente di lavoro	9,3
La predisposizione di una sede unica	7,0
La flessibilità dell'orario di lavoro	6,2
I rapporti tra colleghi	4,5
Altro	3,4

Figure 6 Survey on organizational well-being and on the phenomenon of mobbing, ISTAT, 2012

According to this survey, these are the first three aspects to work on: the first issue reported by 54,6% of the interviewees is an inadequate enhancement of personnel; the second is the clarity and availability of information (37%); the third issue is staff training and updating (33%).

If more than 50% of workers do not feel sufficiently valued, it can be assumed that in the long run their demotivation increases. Demotivation should not be underestimated; in fact it does not only affect the employee's private life but also the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. A demotivated worker is less inclined to team up, to achieve the organization's objectives because he/she knows that, even if he/she achieve the goals, his/her work will not be adequately recognized.

Let's assume that a manager assigns the same work project to a team composed by motivated employees and to another team composed by demotivated people and imagine the differences in approach and execution of the task. The first team feel enthusiastic about this new project, they accept it as a new challenge, and they want to demonstrate what they can do. They work together, there is a knowledge spillover, communication is encouraged by the achievement of

the objectives, they are driven to do their best. On the other hand, the group composed by demotivated employees perceive the project as a new issue to face, they complete the task because they have to, they don't do it out of passion. Communication is reduced to the essential, there is not a teamwork but individuals that do their small tasks. If all group members are dissatisfied, they could unite against the organization and the leader, thus creating a climate of conflict and misunderstanding. Dissatisfied employees have no incentive to improve the organization because as soon as they find a better job, they will leave.

 Not taking care of unmotivated workers means accepting an increasing human resource management cost due to absenteeism, illness and turnover.

The second aspect that should be improved is clarity and availability of information. The difficulty in finding information slows down the work and makes it more stressful. Sometimes it happens that an employee needs information that he/she cannot find to complete his/her duties, and this happens if each office or area works in watertight compartments. Managers should provide the right means and give the right responsibility to workers so that they can independently have the information they need. It is equally important to integrate information between different business functions. As a result, work becomes leaner, and the enhancement would motivate employees.

The third point to improve is staff training and updating. The market changes and consequently also the organization. Sometimes training or updating courses are taken for granted, but this puts the organization's effectiveness at risk. No new working methods or tools can be introduced without adequate training. It is stressful for an employee doing something without exactly knowing how to perform the task or what is absolutely forbidden or risky for him. Training is necessary not only for reasons of safety or effectiveness, but also to improve the skills of employees and to give them the possibility to grow professionally. Training and career plan are good tools for motivating employees and engaging them.

In the rating at the fourth position there is employee evaluation systems, which could be a very tricky point because it is important to give feedback to the employees, but they shouldn't feel judged otherwise you lose them in term of engagement and involvement in the organization.

The fifth issue is the clarity of objectives and precise definition of roles and jobs. Managers should give a direction; employees should follow their indications. If the objectives and information are vague and incomplete, it increases the margin of error and reduces efficacy of

communication. This is a very big deal because misunderstandings generate slowdowns and conflicts. If a manager assigns a new task to an employee without explaining what he/she expects, the employee feels lost and tries to interpret the manager's expectations with the anxiety of not meeting them due to lack or poor definition of the task. If there is no clear definition of each job with its specific objectives, the workers do not take responsibility because if it is not specified who has to complete a job, it does not belong to anyone.

Then, in Harvard Business the authors of the article "Why people really quit their jobs" underline that people leave Facebook because their job is not enjoyable, their skills are not used and they are not growing in their careers. The issue is how the organization design their work. In the article the authors highlight three keyways that managers can tailor jobs: enable employees to do work they enjoy, help them play to their strengths, and carve a path for career development that accommodates personal priorities.

It is also mentioned the organization structure and working processes; the comfort of the work environment; the rewarding and incentive distribution system; the relationships between the various organizational units; the allocation of technical and human resources; IT and technological supports; relations with managers; the safety of the workplace; presence of a single office; flexibility of working hours; relationships between colleagues.

One of the sources of stress for worker can be organization structure. The two opposite extremes to avoid are: rigid and oppressive structure with a lot of rules that make it difficult to take decisions; or disorganized company where there are no standards, no clear methods or rules, where work tools are never in place, where the employee works on urgency and has to do what the boss orders him.

Structure should be clear and defined, every employee should know what his job is, how to do it, what are the objectives of his tasks but also what are the general objectives of the organization. The mission and vision should be available and clear to everybody. It is important that all employees strive for the same goal, that they are a team, that they help each other. It is very stressful when there is no direction, or the mission and vision are not adequately communicated to employees. If managers miss this point, they will face a disengagement of the employees.

So far, we have mentioned managers without distinction if they are leaders or bosses, but now it is useful add this element as well. The people who most influence the corporate climate are the managers. They are responsible for the achieving company objectives, carrying out more

complex tasks, managing their subordinates, spreading the corporate culture, and taking care of the office and corporate climate. If there are conflicts between colleagues, they should intervene to contain the tension and to promote a relaxed and mutually supportive atmosphere.

If they do not behave in this way, but they are only focus on measurable results, probably they are bosses and not leaders.

Being a leader means pursuing both short and long-term results, inspiring trust in subordinates, being a point of reference, not being afraid of change, asking and giving feedback, understanding and adapting to new circumstances, being able to create a cohesive team, managing conflicts without avoiding them, understanding malaise of subordinates and finding a solution. Being a leader means achieving goals without losing motivation and well-being of the employees.

On the other hands these are the main characteristics of a boss: lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates; a personality that negatively affects organizational climate; focus on visible short-term results and on personal interests.

These are some aspects that ISTAT survey mentioned, but every organization has its weaknesses which if neglected, become a source of unease for employees and a source of inefficiency and ineffectiveness for the company.

Organizational weaknesses and mistakes generate toxicity when unhealthy actions are undergone or performed in a repeated way without any control or intervention.

In "Workplace Violence", book written by Serena Gianfaldoni and published in 2020, she said: "The violent act depends on its nature, its persistence, the degree of awareness, the level of self-esteem, the existence of a valid support network, the reinforcements received, the protection received from responsible people". And: "Work-related violence takes many forms, but in any case, represents an expression of imbalance and unease capable of being reflected on the entire organization as well as on the worker offended and humiliated in his dignity".

It is useful to mention the so-called facilitator aspects, reported by Tomei et al. (2007), that are those signals and characteristics that prepare the ground for violence in the workplace:

- Competitive business climate that encourages the achievement of the objective at all costs including that of prevarication on colleagues.
- Environment devoid of autonomy in which the worker does not have sufficient autonomy in the management of work, which generates a sense of frustration and lack of valorization.

- Poorly organized hierarchical structure in which responsibilities are unclear and those in charge of monitoring intersubjective relationships do not take effective action.
- Lack of leadership which implies a lack of care for employees by top management and does not prevent or stop violent behavior.
- Incompetent headship that does not have the tools to identify, prevent and counter violent actions nor is able to manage conflicts.
- Absent headship which, despite having tools and skills to mitigate conflicts and violence, does not intervene.
- Authoritarian headship that curbs requests for help from subordinates, minimizing the violence suffered.
- Excessive workload that generates stress in workers as they fail to meet the expectations of managers and fear repercussions.
- Lack of teamwork that involves lack of cooperation, individualism in achieving goals, little senso of belonging and fertile ground for conflict.

From these considerations we can identify the need for a culture of listening to grasp the signals that anticipate violent actions or context of tension, and to take care of victims of violence without minimizing their discomfort.

The greatest alarm comes from gender-based violence and discrimination as women. From ISTAT data collected by Poggetto (2020), it emerges that in 4/5 of cases violence is experienced in silence: in 27,4% due to underestimation of the event; in 23,4% due to a lack of trust in the police; in 19,8% for the choice not to accept black mail by losing job; in 18,6% it is a choice dictated by the attempt to overcome the aggression with one's own strength; 12,7% employees are silent for fear of being misjudged.

Raising awareness and supporting victims are effective means not only to stop the violence already present in organizations, but also to prevent new violent behaviors from being justified and from spreading the culture of indifference and individualism. Violence in the workplace not only generates a social and health problem, but also destines the organization to a reduction in the creation of value.

4.2 TOXIC ORGANIZATION AND WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

In 2008, Oxford Dictionaries chose "toxic" as their Word of the Year. They stated that searches for the word on their website had increased by 45%, capturing the mood, ethos and preoccupations of the year that continue to this day. A spokesperson for the dictionary referred to the word "toxic" now being used to articulate a "set of conditions" one might find themselves experiencing. [...] Thinking further about science, the Oxford English Dictionary describes toxic as "very bad, unpleasant or harmful". A permanently toxic workplace can lead to environments that become anoxic (without oxygen).

That is how "Toxic", the book written by Clive Lewis, begins. The author is a business psychologist specializing in individual, team, and organization behavior and in the book, he draws upon decades of experience in HR and mediation to talk about causes of toxic workplaces and ways to heal the business environment.

Already in the definition of toxicity understood as a sense of suffocation and lack of oxygen, it becomes normal to think that the worker who is suffocating will implement all the strategies to avoid the workplace: sick days, holidays, truancy, resignation.

Toxicity is often the result of violent behavior. That is the reason why in this chapter we will mention the most common form of violence at work. First, we distinguish physical violence as aggression, intimidation, injury, from psychological violence. Below we will deal with the latter, more silent but no less harmful from violence.

4.2.1 FORMS OF VIOLENCE

In this chapter we will describe the various forms of violence that we can find in the workplace. The objective of reporting these violent forms, is to help the reader to better understand the qualitative analysis presented in Chapter Five.

VERBAL VIOLENCE

Verbal violence is a form of violence that is too often minimized and justified with phrases such as: "Forget it! Don't get mad, you know he has a bad temper"; or: "He replies rudely to everyone"; or: "Today she has a bad day".

Instead, words have a weight and can be drops that erode the victim day after day as well as make the work environment tense. Verbal violence can be the result of an uncontrolled instinct

or premeditation. In any case, verbal violence causes abuse and submission, and compromises the freedom of expression not only of the victim but also of all those who witness the violence. As Le Bon wrote in 1970, verbal violence generates a climate of fear and anguish and contributes to the disintegration of a team The violent word generates a "revisited reality", reality is filtered and redrawn by the violent according to its schemes. There is no longer an objectivity, but everything is read with the eyes of the violent and every action or omission is dictated by this new subjective reality.

The form of physical violence is the most evident and causes objectively "measurable" physical damage; verbal violence or all the other forms of psychological violence that we will see later, cause damage that is more difficult to calculate because every individual is unique and reacts differently to attacks; precisely for this reason it is not taken for granted that physical violence hurts more than daily psychological violence.

Verbal violence includes offensive and derogatory words, intimidation and threats, discriminatory vocabulary, swearing and blasphemy, slander and lies, accusations and blame, sarcasm and bad jokes. All these acts contribute to erode the self-esteem of the victim, who will feel more and more oppressed and wrong. Another act of violence is completely ignoring the victim, making him/her feel insignificant and alone.

The constant explicit or implicit (indifference) attacks cause a loss of mental balance, an increasing stress that culminates in a depressive disorder.

MOBBING

The verb "to mob" is used to describe the behavior of the animals that try to scare or chase away other animals in the pack.

In the workplace it is a persecutory and recurrent activity carried out by the mobber to the detriment of the victim (mobbed). The goal of this violent behavior is to get the victim to resign. The mobber can be a single colleague, superior or employer or it is possible that an entire group acting against a single victim. We deal with mobbing if the harassing action has four characteristics: harmful, multi-dimensional, intentional, lawful character.

Mobbing is harmful because it causes unfair damage to the victim; it is multi-dimensional because it is a relational crime that affects several areas; it is intentional because the specific target of the mobber is harming and harassing the victim; it is lawful because mobbing does not necessarily include illegal acts.

The mobber has a derogatory intent and is driven by the will to emerge. For the mobber, the victim is only an object on which to discharge his/her frustrations. The mobber takes no

responsibility but blames the victim and minimizes his/her harassment. The mobber wants to exclude and isolate the victim to force him/her to request a transfer or resign.

Sometimes the mobber wants to push away a capable and competent worker for fear of being overshadowed. Other times the mobber begins his harassment to take revenge for a behavior that he deems unacceptable. Or the mobber tries to make the victim resign, so that a friend of him can get his job.

The mobbing actions concern forms of abuse, persecutory acts, pressure, harassment, systematic hostility. At first, the victim is reprimand in private and in public; then it is denigrated, offended and untrue news is spread. The victim is cornered, publicly humiliated, embarrassed, and excluded from the group. The mobber hinders the victim's work by not providing the necessary information or providing the incorrect information, and then publicly pointing out the victim's mistakes. If the mobber is the victim's boss, another action he/she can take is to demotion the victim, giving to the mobbed insignificant and humiliating tasks.

Over time the victim begins to suffer from disorders such as emotional instability, lack of self-esteem, distrust in him/herself and in others, social isolation, hypersensitivity, depression.

Among the psychosomatic consequences there are also gastritis, cardio-circulatory somatization, headache, dermatitis, sleep-wake rhythm disturbances, eating disorders.

The worse the psychophysical health of the worker, more sick leave increases. The worker can get to ask for a leave or to deliver the resignation.

In addition to being harmful to victims and to society, mobbing is also harmful to companies. If the mobber is not punished, a climate of tension and retaliation is indirectly authorized. Consequently, the turnover rate and the loss of talent increases.

Lastly, the law distinguishes mobbing from straining. The latter is a milder form of violence because it does not present the characteristic of the continuity of oppressive acts. In any case, the worker who is the victim of straining also has the right to be protected and can claim damages.

BOSSING

Bossing is a particular form of mobbing in which the mobber is the boss, and the victim is a subordinate. Vertical bossing is one of psychological violence because it refers to manifestations of arrogance and debasement against a subordinate.

We talk about vertical bossing because the violent behavior of the boss is reinforced by his/her hierarchical position. Being the boss, he/she can do anything without any control. The boss (the mobber) does not support and encourage the worker but oppresses him/her and makes his/her life impossible. The purpose of bossing is to bring the worker to resign.

The characteristics of bossing include an authoritarian approach towards subordinates, excessive control of the worker, denigration, public devaluations and humiliations, hyper criticality, lack of listening, accusations, verbal violence, conflict, threats, and demotion.

SIDE MOBBING

Side mobbing is the mobbing activity that a worker carries out towards a colleague or a worker of the same hierarchical level. It often happens that a worker compare him/herself to a colleague with respect to the assignments received, the efforts, the results achieved, and the awards received. Competition and envy can arise from comparison and some relationships can break down.

Some specific behaviors of side mobbing can be backbiting and the attempt to indulge other colleagues to join forces and exclude the victim. If more colleagues join forces against the victim, they become co-mobbers. Sometimes co-mobbers are people who dislike the victim; other times they are workers who fear they will become a target themselves if they do not band together against the chosen victim. Other colleagues witness the violence but omit help for the victim. Silence and indifference are also a form of violence to be condemned.

Among the actions performed by the side mobber are isolation, backbiting, indifference, omission of information, non-recognition, denigration, devaluation, and verbal aggression.
What hurts the victim most is the sense of loneliness, the perception of being wrong and incapable. This belief leads to the progressive worsening of his psychophysical health and, consequently, the decline in productivity. The reduction of efficiency and effectiveness in carrying out his duties entails on the one hand the confirmation towards himself that he is incapable and on the other hand it can be a reason for further violence and oppression.

The organization must compensate the victim of the damage as it is its duty to avoid violence or, if there are violent or oppressive situations in the company, remove it as soon as possible. Silence and indifference are not contemplated.

WORK LIFE BALANCE

If in a work environment the private life of an employee is not respected asking him unsustainable working hours, continuous overtime paid or unpaid, business trips away from home, an increasingly heavy workload, fast pace; the worker will end up suffering. The overload of work that weighs on a person generates stress, worry and a sense of inadequacy especially if the target is unrealistic.

This feeling of heaviness and inadequacy is not confined to the work environment but is also transferred to the family context. The so-called "work to family conflict" begins, where the professional sphere invades the private sphere. If the worker is so overworked that he/she cannot meet the needs and requirements of the household, he/she will feel inadequate, overwhelmed, and left to fend for him/herself.

It becomes more and more difficult to switch from one role to another, a climate of tension is created, and the worker could end up moving away from both spheres: he/she is disconcerted at work because he/she thinks about family concerns and is distracted in the family because he/she is anxious about the work.

On a relational level, the worker finds him/herself increasingly uncomfortable, avoids collective events, loses motivation and involvement for the work context. In the private sphere, he/she struggles more and more to devote time and attention to his/her loved ones, he/she develops forms of neurosis as well as detachment from friends and relatives.

The health of the worker deteriorates, he/she suffers from anxiety disorders, stress, and depression. In the worst cases he/she develops addictions and burnout.

Worker performance decreases due to excessive pressure, loses concentration, errors increase, communication and coordination between colleagues decreases. Usually, the worker reacts in two ways: either he/she increases absenteeism due to the loss of motivation or he/she is always present in the office even beyond his/her working hours to escape family conflicts.

The buildup of tension can also lead to violent behavior. One of the signs is the increase in irritability and the number of fights. If the worker does not find an escape valve, the tension can explode in forms of verbal and/or physical violence.

FAILURE TO PAY FOR WORK PERFORMANCE

One of the abuses that a worker can suffer is non-payment or partial payment for his/her work. In an employment contract, the worker undertakes to work within the pre-established working hours; on the other hand, the employer undertakes to pay an economic remuneration in addition to the payment of social security contributions. Sometimes it happens that the employer does not respect these two contractual obligations and does not pay either the full salary or the social security contributions; or pays but late. Other times it happens that the worker works overtime without being economically remunerated. It should also be remembered that the employer must pay a surcharge for night shifts, Sundays, and for dangerous activities.

Article 36 of the Italian Constitution reads as follows: "The worker has the right to a remuneration proportionate to the quantity and quality of his work and in any case sufficient to ensure a free and dignified existence for himself and his family". Two principles are outlined: the proportionality and the sufficiency ones. The remuneration must be proportional to the time spent for the work performed, must consider the difficulties, complexities and responsibilities of a given task. Furthermore, the salary must be dignified, it must allow the worker to live and support his/her family.

INDIRECT VIOLENCE

As Bancraft et Silverman (2002) reported, often the victims of violence in the workplace accumulate tension and, if the conflict continues over time without any improvement, the victim in turn becomes the executioner not in the workplace but in his/her family. Therefore, family victims suffer the violence of the workplace indirectly.

The worker is overwhelmed by the amount of work so much that he/she spends more and more time the workplace sacrificing hobbies and social life. The more time passes, the more the worker accumulates anger and discontent. The frustration and sense of inadequacy that weighs on the worker is transferred to other people outside the workplace. The worker loses control and, unable to discharge his anger with his boss or colleagues, vent his aggression with loved ones.

Violence in the workplace is a social problem as well as an organizational one, because it not only harms the company by worsening the corporate performance, but also it worsens the health of the worker-victim and of his/her family.

HOW VICTIMS REACT

In the case of violence suffered in the workplace, the reactions of the victims are different for women and men. Men who are particularly stressed are more physically aggressive. Women

under pressure, more rarely react with physical violence, much more often with psychological attacks. Furthermore, as Mencacci et Annivero (2005) have found, women suffer from depression more often than men. More precisely, women suffer from depression about 75% more than men and they suffer from lack of self-esteem 100% more than men.

Women tend to live social and work relationships with greater affective and emotional participation than men. The propensity for relationships is on the one hand a strength, on the other involvement causes vulnerability.

4.2.2 FORM OF GENDER AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

In this chapter we will describe what sexual and gender discrimination are, and what are the consequences of a toxic corporate culture that does not eradicate such form of discriminations.

HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL BLACKMAIL

For sexual harassment and blackmail, we mean all those violence based on the victim's corporeality, on his/her sexual dimension, on his/her sexual orientation.
Sexual violence is characterized by coercion, so acts of the violent do not have the consent of the victim. The violence concerns the body dimension even if there may be no physical contact and it concerns the sexual sphere.

Often the harasser holds a position of authority at the hierarchical level and uses his or her role of power to satisfy his/her desire. In some cases, the violence lies in sexist attitudes and in hyper sexualized language in which the victim is not a person but an object of pleasure. In other cases, sexual blackmail is forcing the victim to provide sexual services in exchange for career advancement.

The harassment or sexual violence can be expressed in physical, verbal, and non-verbal form. The violent exploits his/her hierarchical position, the vulnerability of the victim, the lack of control, the complicity and indifference of other colleagues.
Some signs of violence can be invasive courtship, verbal aggression, discriminatory comments, physical approach attempts, sexual avances, sexual blackmail.

One variation of harassment is stalking: the victim suffers persistent persecution made up of threats, intrusive communications, pursuits. The victim undergoes an alteration of his daily routine, begins to fear for his/her own safety and that of his/her loved ones.

The victim feels humiliated and devalued, he/she no longer perceives him/herself as a person but as an object. His/her identity is reduced to his corporeality and sexuality; his/her personality, character, abilities are clouded by physicality. This is deeply degrading, and the victim may begin to suffer from anxiety, guilty, shame, self-loathing.

OBSTACLES TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Obstacles to career advancement are a form of hidden violence because it does not go against any specific legislation despite generating discomfort in the victim. The worker perceives as injustice and violence the failure to recognize his/her skills, his/her experience and objective achieved. Other times the obstacles placed result in lack of communication that hinder the fulfillment of expectations.

The distortion concerns the worker's personal development project. In fact, he/she is committed with constancy, refines his/her knowledge, learns new ones, reaches the set goals to grow as a person and as a professional figure. If this development is hindered or not recognized, it generates frustration, self-loss and reduced commitment.

It is important to keep in mind that behind the desire to make a career, there is an implicit demand for the improvement of the individual, for recognition and enhancement. Career advancement can be a lever to motivate workers to achieve company goals; but if used incorrectly, it cannot only reduce company performance but also cause discomfort for the worker. The career path must be designed from the outset based on the skills and needs of the worker and must be respected.

DISCRIMINATION AND FEWER CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

In Italy more than 50% of graduates are women and, on average, women receive higher marks than their male colleagues. With the same or higher skills, SDA Bocconi research shows that only 9% of top management positions are occupied by women. In addition, the research institute Catalyst highlights that the difference in performance between male and multi-gender companies is +40% for the latter.

According to statistics, it is more than rational to hire, value and retain women; but reality presents a rather different picture. The gender gap exists for two main reasons: culture and

motherhood. Historically, women are seen as weaker and more submissive to men, less interested in a career and more in a family. In 80% of cases, companies change their attitude towards a woman after she has had children. Some deal with pregnancy as an obstacle to their career, some women abort to avoid being replaced by a male colleague. This is a ferocious for of violence that prevents the individual from freely living her private life. The organization denatures the individual, it deprives her of her sexual identity. Non-discrimination means that a woman receives promotion regardless the number of children she has or wants to have.

Being a woman and being a mother is not a minus but a plus. Man and woman as human beings have the same rights and the same inestimable value, but they are different, and this diversity does not detract from either of them, but diversity is a richness.

As Bullough et al. (2022) reported, women have an important role for economic, societal, and environmental value creation in different businesses. In 2018-2019, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), 231 million women launched or operated businesses in the 59 economies around the world. Business is no longer a male thing.

HINDERED MOTHERHOOD

As mentioned above, the issue of hindered motherhood is not an uncommon problem. The working woman is penalized as a mother or a potential mother by the employer, by colleagues, and sometimes even by other women.

In some companies, being a mother or wanting to become a mother in the future is a brake on hiring. Sometimes a woman claims to be a mother (or worse, that she is pregnant) during a screening interview and she is then pushed aside with an excuse. It also happens that during a job interview the interviewer asked to a woman if she is single, if she has a partner, if she is married and intends to have children in short or medium term. But discrimination does not end with job interviews, it continues even after the maternity period. After pregnancy a woman has very different rhythms of life, she sleeps less, she has to breastfeed, she has to recover from childbirth. She needs to recover physically and regain balance. However, some employers may press for the worker to forgo breastfeeding and legally guaranteed maternity leave.

In the medium and long term, obstacles to motherhood may be the lack of flexibility of colleagues and of the employer in meeting the needs of a working mother. Special emergency permits or part-time contract may be required.

Moreover, for many women returning to work is very difficult because they have to face the separation from their child that generates feelings of guilt and concern. The woman can suffer from such severe anxiety that she never wants to go back to work.

If the employer does not adequately support motherhood, either the woman stifles the desire to become a mother or in the short or long term she will resign.

In 2019, the Italian national labor inspectorate recorded 49.000 resignations and terminations of contracts of working mothers (the majority) or of working fathers.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: RESIGNATION'S CASES

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will describe a qualitative analysis based on five interviews. The purpose of this empirical study is to explain the reasons why employees left their company, what were the factors that guided their decision, and what are the challenges for Human Resource Management in term of retention.

This qualitative analysis wants to reinforce the theoretical concepts already discussed in an empirical way, investigating how toxic behaviors influence the workplace climate, the job satisfaction, the employees' well-being, and the resignation decision.

We will mainly focus on three areas: the first one refers to the general satisfaction or unsatisfaction for the job activities; the second one refers to the relation quality with the manager or management team and colleagues; the third one measures the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on respondents' perception of their job and on their satisfaction.

5.1 RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis has the aim of investigate what are the reason behind a resignation, so the first screening for participants was excluding all these employees that didn't resign.

A first pre-selection was made by looking for people who had resigned and asking them broadly the main reasons for the decision. Employees that were fired, employees whose contract has expired, employees who have found a better job opportunity, employees who worked very far from home and decided to get closer to home, employees who have left the company to follow the partner in another town or country, employees who have left the company only for the poor salary were excluded from the interview.

Another prerequisite for participants was that they resigned during or after the COVID-19 pandemic, to understand if the health emergency could be considered a driver in resignation decision and, if so, to what extent.

To conduct this analysis, no age or gender discrimination was made, neither white- or blue-collar discrimination, nor discrimination on education basis. In fact, the final selected participants were both women and men with different age and work experience, some with high school diploma, others with a master's degree and doctoral degree.

The exclusion of some employees' categories was necessary to collect significant data for our analysis.

5.2 DEVELOP QUESTIONS AND RECORDING METHOD

Every work experience is unique and subjective, and the focus of questions was to give the opportunity to the participants to explain how and why they decided to resign, avoiding yes/no questions and a too structured interview, to make the interviewees feel free to express feelings, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, discomfort, heavy and frustrating situations.

The open questions were developed based on the concepts that were mentioned in the previous chapters. One of the first topic of the interviews was the employee's job satisfaction and unsatisfaction: it was interesting to have a general overview on the work experience, talking not only of the reasons why they were motivated to resign, but also of the satisfying part of the job experience, in order to understand what was working in the company and what totally not.

Then the following questions dealt with the relationship between the employee and the manager or the management team, investigating how many interactions there were between the employees and the managers, what were the employee's feelings before and after the conversation with the boss, and how could define the boss. Finally, to what extent the relationship with the boss influenced the decision to resign.

After the investigation on the boss, there was also an open question on the relationship with the colleagues and on the general climate of the organization, in order to understand what roles had the other employees and the organizational culture in the exit decision.

The last topic dealt with concerns the methods of managing the pandemic in the organizations, how the company has secured not only the physical health of its employees but also their mental health and their well-being. Finally, to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic affected the resignation decision.

The way in which the interviews were conducted was one-to-one interview and the audio was recorded by a mobile phone. Before starting the interviews, all participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, and they have freely consented to the use of the recordings for research purposes. The recordings won't be shared. The recordings were used to report in a more precise way the concepts expressed during the interviews by the participants. Anonymity was guaranteed to the participants and no personal data, company or employees' information will be shared in a recognizable way in the paper. Participation in the interview was free and each participant had the possibility to interrupt the interview if they wanted for any reasons. Each interview lasted about half an hour, and the interviews recorded were five.

All interviews were conducted in Italian because all the participants were Italians and were then translated into English for exhibition purposes.

5.3 DATA COLLECTION

Before analyzing interviews and issues suggested by participants, we will shortly present the five work experiences in anonymous way. For simplicity we will give the interviewees some invented names: Jamila, David, Anne, Jane, and Edward.

Jamila has a doctorate in physics and is over thirty. During her master's degree she studied in Germany; she knows Italian, English, and German. One of her first job as a physicist was working for a public administration on a European project as a researcher. The European project had a duration of three years, but she resigned after a year and a half. She was very happy with her work because it dealt with issues related to her studies and she had a good relationship with colleagues, but she decided to resign 100% for her relationship with the boss. She says she suffered sever sexual discrimination which caused her great anxiety, frustration, and anguish, so much that she decided to resign even though she liked the job very much and even though she wanted to complete the European project in which she was involved.

David is a physicist too; he has a master's degree, and he is 35. He worked for a private company that dealt with energy consultancy. The company was a small one, with 10 employees in total. David really appreciated his job because it was very stimulating and gave him the possibility to learn and improve his skills and capabilities. The main reason of his dismissal was the organization climate of fear and anxiety promoted by the boss.

Anne has a master's degree in languages, and she is 40. She worked for a multinational company as a managers' assistant. She was happy to be able to use the languages she had studied, and to interface with colleagues and managers from all over the world. She was very fascinated by the international environment in which she worked. She decided to resign for three main reasons: the first one was the difficulties that she had to face in order to communicate with his manager who had moved abroad and with whom she worked on-site only twice a year; the second reason was the absence of work-life balance because she didn't have someone who could replace her and so she had to work, and answer the phone and email even when she was on vacation; the third reason was the competitive and oppressive work environment.

Jane has a high school diploma in accounting and a diploma of pastry chef. Jane has always had a passion for pastry and immediately after high school she attended a pastry course. Jane now is 27. In the work experience that she presented in the interview, before she was a pastry chef, and after four years she became head of the pastry department of a large-scale distribution

supermarket. The two main reasons for her dismissal were her relationship with her boss, that she called "despot"; and the poor work-life balance because the supermarket was constantly understaffed and, consequently, the employees were overwhelmed with work. She decided to resign after yet another fight with her boss.

Edward has a scientific high school diploma and is enrolled in the aerospace engineering degree course. He is 23. During the first year of engineering course, he became passionate about technical drawing and in a short time he found a job in a company that produced games for playgrounds and became part of the company's technical department. He really enjoyed designing games, he became passionate about playgrounds and thought every day to come up with new ones. The main problem of the company was the poor organization. They had a very competitive and attractive product, so they a significant demand, but they were very badly organized. The boss of Edward was also the business owner, and he had a very poor knowledge of computers and 3D or 2D design software like Solidworks or Autocad. The boss didn't realize how long it took to design a playground, nor did he understand the value and the importance of the work of the technical department. At the end, Edward decided for resignation.
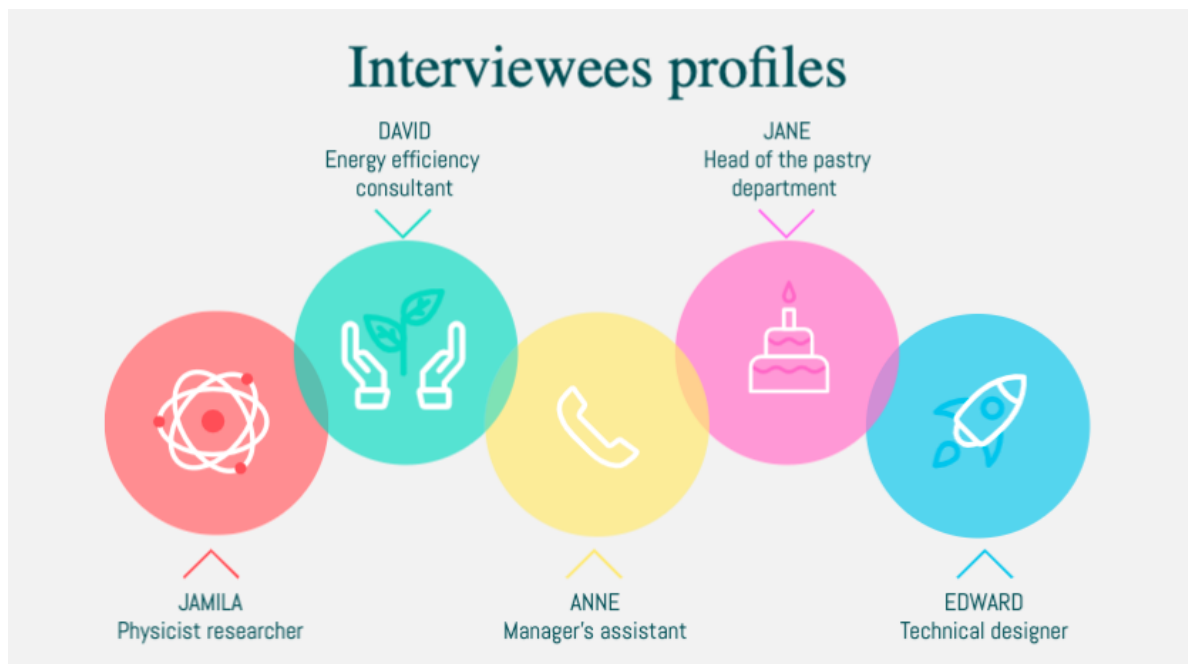

Figure 7 Visual and simplified interviewees profiles

5.4 DATA RESULTS

5.4.1 MULTILEVEL CATEGORIES AFFECTING RESIGNATION'S DECISION

In the analysis we will describe four different second order categories which explain some specific characteristic of the work experience: job satisfaction VS job difficulties; leadership relationships; the work-life balance; and the historical context. For clarity of analysis, we will present the four themes as in the order showed in Figure 8. As we can notice, each theme has multiple specific aspects that characterize it. We will define them "First order categories".
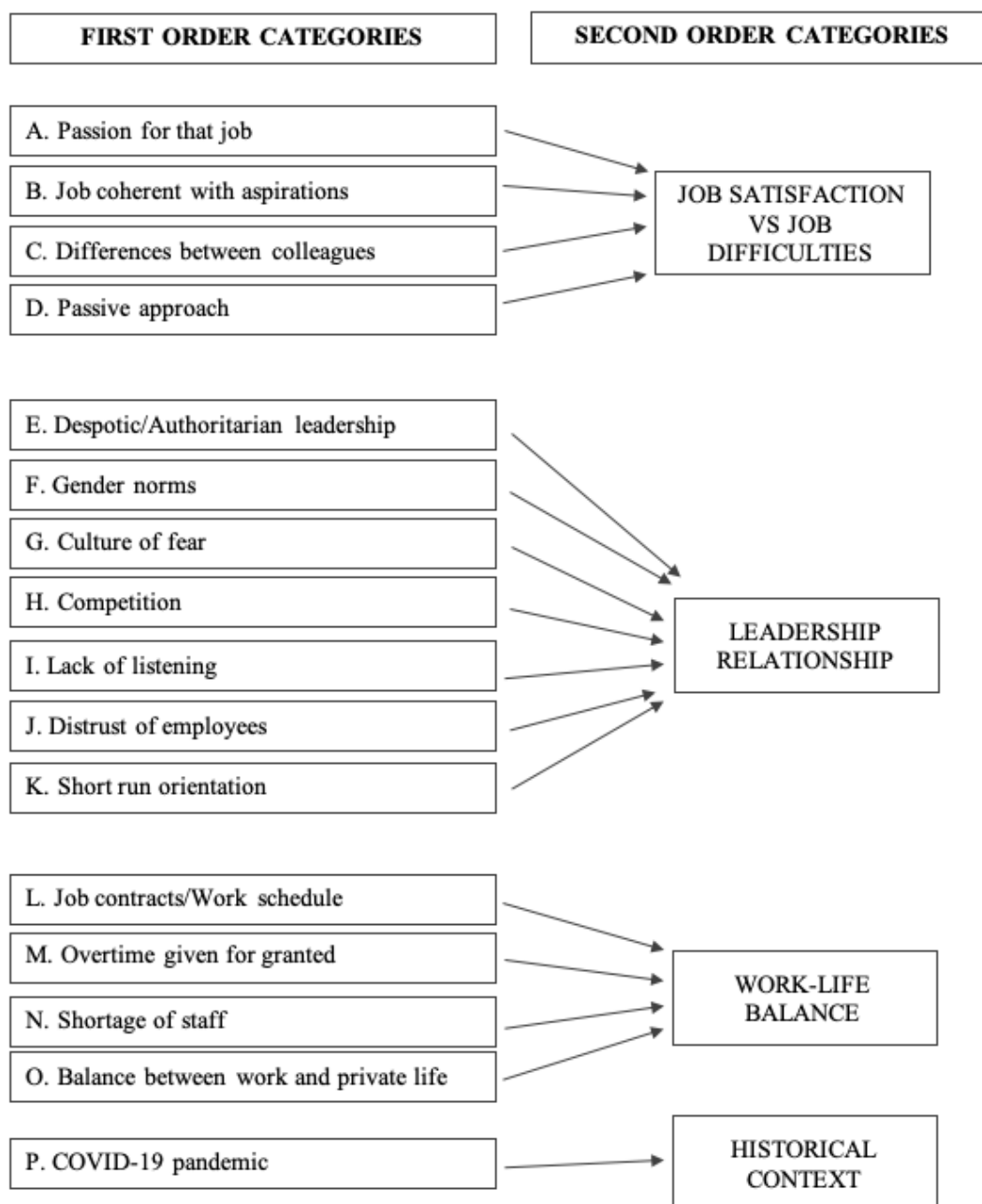

Figure 8 Overview of first-order categories and second-order thematic cores

5.4.2 JOB SATISFACTION VS JOB DIFFICULTIES

A common thread of all five interviews is the satisfaction of employees about the activities carried out as they are relevant to the course of study or in any case they are considered stimulating by the interviewees. The two main reasons why interviewees were satisfied about their job were because of their passion for that job, and the consistency with their aspirations. None of the participants was dissatisfied with the work performed, although in the end all five decided to resign. So, a stimulating job is not enough to retain an employee in the organization. On the other hand, the two main difficulties were managing the differences between colleagues and the temptation to have a passive approach in the workplace without facing conflicts or difficult situations.

A. Passion for the job

David said that the consulting activities allowed him to learn new things and that the work activities were very stimulating and challenging.

> *"Learning new things motivated me and never made me feel bored."*

Jane wanted to work in the pastry world from early age and she was pleased to see the smiles of the customers who returned to compliment her on the cake she had prepared for them a few weeks earlier. And she was happy for the collaborative team that she had built.

> *"I have always wanted to be a pastry chef; I have always enjoyed kneading. I was already making my first desserts at the age of 12. Getting paid to make sweets was my dream."*

Finally, Edward the precise future aerospace engineer had discovered that he was an avid playground designer, that every evening after work he kept imagining new playgrounds to design. During the weekends his girlfriend was forced to take trips to the playgrounds to study the company's competitor products with him.

> *"For me it was an unknown world, but after a few days I was already passionate. During that time, I went to more playgrounds than in my childhood. I wanted to study competitors' products and understand how to improve ours…even if our products were almost always the best."*

B. Job coherent with aspirations

Jamila was happy for the European research project because it was relevant to her studies, and it was professionally satisfying. During the interviews, more than once she underlined how sad she was to leave the research project halfway through.

> *"For me this job meant a lot, doing research was what I aspired to."*

Anne had studied languages at university because she wanted to work in an international environment and her job activities involved the constant use of her language skills and her open mind setting to approach new cultures.

> *"Working in an international environment and using languages I had studied was what I was looking for."*

C. Differences between colleagues

Sometimes Anne struggled to make herself understood by her foreign colleagues, not because of a problem of linguistic understanding, but of culture.

> *"Sometimes I found it hard to organize events with foreign colleagues because we didn't understand each other. It was not a linguistic problem, but of different habits, different ways of thinking and working."*

Jane reported that she had difficulties with some colleagues due to differences in character and in working methods.

> *"With some colleagues we understood each other immediately, with others it was very difficult to communicate and managing the team was not always easy."*

D. Passive approach

Jamila admitted that she didn't try to change the working environment she was in.

> *"Since my boss showed hatred towards me, I returned the same stiffness too. I began to interact less and less with both my boss and my colleagues. Despite the suppression I suffered, I did not try to override my boss by going to his superior to report his behavior."*

David decided not to denounce his violent boss:

> *"I only realized afterwards that together with the other colleagues we could report his verbal assaults. Instead, we suffered for fear of further repercussions."*

Jane did not know how to handle some issue of the ward, despite this, she did not ask for help.

> *"There were relational issues within the team. Some of them did not get along and were often in conflict. I tried to ask them what the problem was and how I could help them, but they denied this evident conflict. I didn't ask my superior for advice because I didn't think she would help me."*

Edward soon stopped taking a proactive approach:

> *"At first, I asked questions and tried to explain to my boss what was wrong; then I gave up. At some point I started following orders without asking me the reason why."*

5.4.3 LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIP

If in all five interviews participants were satisfied about the job, the same cannot be said for the relationship with their boss. In each work experience there is a different facet of leadership toxicity.

Jamila still remembers her boss with resentment, said that by dint of being subjected to his bullying, she too had become more rigid and nasty. With him there was never the possibility of dialogue, and Jamila at a certain point began to interact as little as possible. Jamila didn't believe that women could experience such discrimination, but she had to change her mind. Jamila's boss was verbally aggressive, humiliating in his attitudes towards her and generated a climate of constant anxiety and tension within the office. Later, Jamila discovered that she had not been her boss's only victim, but only a long-running one. Other women had already resigned from the harassment they suffered, especially if those women were also mothers. In fact, the boss thought that a male colleague was more focused on work than a woman.

Even now Jamila identifies the unsustainable discriminatory behavior of her boss as the only reason for her resignation.

> *I decided to resign after a meeting with him and our supervisor, that was a woman too, and during that meeting I realize that he had a dysfunctional attitude not only towards subordinates, but also towards superiors."*

David was not subject to gender discrimination, but he shared with Jamila the pain of working with a violent boss, whose management was based on terror and threat. In his mind people produced only if they were afraid of consequences of failing to achieve goals. David worked in a consultancy company and his was a project job, therefore free from schedules and based on

the achievement of objectives. One of the first constraints that David and his colleagues faced was unlimited office hours. His boss was often particularly angry with a David's colleague, who was mocked every day for his incompetence with yells and offenses. David's colleague arrived at work by bus and the boss, knowing that in the evening after a certain time the bus no longer passed, always made him stay in the office until late with an excuse to make him miss the last bus. The boss didn't want colleagues to go for coffee together so that they wouldn't waste time talking, so the employees went to have coffee one at a time, returning immediately and finishing the coffee sitting on their desk. The boss checked the progress of the project every day, harassing both David and his colleagues. Inside the office there was a great deal of tension and a climate of terror. Not a day went by when the boss didn't verbally attack someone and make him feel incompetent.

David described the work environment and office climate like this:

> *"There was a strong relational discomfort due to the climate that the superior had created; the working environment had deteriorated; you felt like a cog that had to produce and you were squeezed like a lemon."*

David and his colleague were victims of bossing. In the previous chapters, we mentioned the phenomenon as a particular form of mobbing performed by the boss. The characteristics of David's boss coincide with the literature picture of authoritarian boss that overly controls his subordinates, denigrates them aloud and in public, humiliates them using verbal aggressions. All these attitudes destroy the self-esteem of the victims, erode their well-being until they decide to quit.

Anne was the manager's assistant, she organized his agenda, his business trips, multinational events and so on. Anne worked closely with her boss, there was a continuous interaction, and the quality of communication greatly influenced her work. One of the biggest difficulties for Anne was working often at the last minute and managing emergencies. Her working hours officially were supposed to be from 9am to 6pm, however in reality the work often lasted until 9pm due to continuous emergencies and issues that should be solved as soon as possible. A problematic aspect was that the manager wanted her to be on time and sign the entry to work and if she entered even just one minute later, in the evening she must recover half an hour; while all the extra work she did beyond working hours was not considered, and it was given for granted. But the real insurmountable problem happened when her boss was permanently transferred to another country. The boss lived and worked in London, while his assistant lived and worked in Italy. Anne's manager came to Italy twice a year, so she worked with her manager in presence only twice a year. Her manager was always very busy and in order to work

she had to wait for an answer, which was always late in coming. In addition, on 20 working days a month, for 2 days a month his manager was completely unreachable because he was at meetings from morning to night. She said:

> *"I didn't feel fine, I wasn't happy. Every day I knew that I would have to wait for an answer from a very busy person, and that sometimes the answer wouldn't arrive. I felt helpless and frustrated. When the manager was in Italy, I was able to talk to him between meetings and everything was easier and faster. With this totally virtual way of working, even the simplest requests became difficult to manage. He came to Italy twice a year and in any case, he was always busy. We communicated almost exclusively by email. I tried to contact him by phone, but he was often busy. Working exclusively via email, you do what you can."*

With the Anna's work experience there are two aspects to underline: the first are the issues caused by the absence of the leader, and the second are the limits of smart working in relation to effective communication. In previous chapter we mentioned multiple form of toxic leadership, but we didn't mention the ghost leader. Just as the presence of a despotic and authoritarian leader generates intolerance and discomfort in his subordinates, so too the almost total absence of a reference point generates anxiety in subordinates. The absence of the leader destabilizes subordinates; the objectives are perceived as less clear and less achievable and, consequently, the level of stress increases. In the long run lack of communication is unnerving and erodes self-esteem. In addition, Anne said:

> *"I knew I was a number and not a person. I was treated like a robot. There was a factory corporate culture even within the offices. The work had become anonymous and aseptic."*

The lack of relationships aggravated by smart working had produced a flat and frustrating environment. Anne realized that the situation would not improve, and she decided to resign.

Jane had been working for some years as a pastry chef in the pastry department of a supermarket, when in 2020 she received a promotion and became the head of the pastry department. Two of the first things she reported during the interview were that she decided to resign because of the conflicting relationship with her boss – the inspector of all pastry departments in the region- and because her efforts were poorly recognized. Not only her work wasn't recognized, but neither her colleagues' work. Whatever they did, it was never enough. She defined her inspector as a "despotic" boss:

> *"She was the boss and therefore we had to follow her orders without asking questions or having the opportunity to express our opinion. Even I, who was the head of the*

department, had no right to talk to her. If someone made small changes to what she had
ordered, then he or she was scolded roughly. She had never asked why we made some
changes, what were our reasons or what kind of issues we had faced. We simply hadn't
done what she said, so surely, we were wrong."

Jane reported that after talking with her, she felt frustrated, not understood, and not listened to. She ignored my requests for help for difficult situations that arose in the ward, and indeed, asked more and more. But there was an even deeper problem than the dynamic distorted relationship between her and me: the corporate culture geared towards achieving goals at any cost. Even the instructor was nothing but a cog which in turn was pressed from her superior.

For Edward, working as a technical designer at the company that produces playgrounds games was his first work experience. Edward is an aerospace engineering student who got a job after taking his technical drawing course and becoming passionate about it. The organization he worked in was a small one with fewer than ten employees, despite exporting its products beyond Europe. After studying competitor products, Edward soon realized that the company worked because it had a good product, certainly not for business management. The owner also acted as head of the technical office and warehouse. The main problem was that the owner didn't know the computer basics, and therefore didn't realize how long it would take to design a playground in 3D and didn't understand the complexity either.

About his relationship with the owner and boss, Edward said:

"After the talks with him I felt disheartened: all the requests he made me and the timing
he gave me were not realistic. They were based on his standard of manual work, not on
3D computer modeling. My work was not recognized, and it was perceived as accessory.
In the reality without data sheets the production didn't go ahead. In addition,
considering the activities of the technical office not particularly relevant, he didn't
support me enough in the initial stages of the employment. Total disorganization, the
owner's inability to listen, his outdated and disordered way of managing were the
reasons why I decided to resign."

The company proceeded for emergencies and focusing on the short-term needs. There wasn't a stable and orderly organizational structure, the archive wasn't digitalized and finding worksheets of standard components wasn't easy. Disorganization not only slowed production but also made employees so frustrated that turnover rate was high.

Another characteristic that the leader should have, it is the ability to change and not to remain anchored in the past without innovating.

E. Despotic/Authoritarian leadership

In all five interviews the leader described matches the definition of despotic/authoritarian leader that we can find in the literature.

Jamila described his supervisor like this:

"My supervisor generated a climate of anxiety and anguish, publicly discriminated against me as a woman, he always had very resentful attitudes. There was no possibility of dialogue with him. He was very self-confident, and no one could contradict him."

David was very uncomfortable with his boss and feared his out-of-control reactions:

"In the morning he entered the office already angry and lashed out at an office colleague. Every day he publicly despised him, and I want to say that he really mistreated him. We were all terrified of him, he yelled even at the little things and didn't control his anger. When he was angry, he verbally assaulted the first person close to him. This was one of the reasons we all tried to stay away from him and minimize the interactions."

Anne didn't describe her supervisor as a violent person, but as an absent one. The only attitude in common with the despotic leader was his indifference towards others.

"My manager has always been very committed to achieving goals and has never evaluated people. He was not empathetic in any situation. For example, when I got married, he didn't even send me a card with congratulations. Or when I quit, on my last day at work he didn't even call me to say goodbye."

To describe her boss, Jane used the word "despot":

"My inspector thought she was right about everything as a boss. She gave orders without even listening to the problems we encountered in everyday life. If we didn't do something with valid reasons, she treated us stupid and yell at us."

Edward's boss in addition to having an authoritarian behavior, also wanted to be right in fields unknown to him such as computer one.

"My boss didn't know anything about 3D modeling software, yet he wanted to teach me how to work with the software. I tried to explain to him how it works, and that not all his requests could be met, but he didn't want to hear reasons. It was like talking to a wall. If I didn't do what he asked me, he would get angry and say I was incapable."

F. Gender Norms

Jamila suffered severe gender discrimination from her boss, he never missed an opportunity to humiliate her as a woman. We reported below some examples of sexual discrimination:

> *"When there was a simple and routine job to do, the boss told me: I give you this job because it would be humiliating to give it to your male colleague.*
>
> *During the meetings my male colleague could actively participate and ask questions, but I had to bring the coffees.*
>
> *I did most of the work, my boss knew it, but despite this he only gave credit to my male colleague. My work wasn't recognized just because I was a woman.*
>
> *I was afraid to even walk past his office. I could hear from the corridor he was making jokes towards me."*

G. Culture of fear

Jamila and David reported the issue of fear in their organizations, and they said:

> *"I knew I was wrong already because I was a woman, if I did a mistake, it would have been better for me to disappear." (Jamila)*

> *"We couldn't even have coffee with colleagues because otherwise we wasted time. When the boss was in the office, even having a coffee or going to the toilet was a source of anxiety." (David)*

H. Competition

Anne reported that there was a high level of competition between colleagues.

> *"The office environment was toxic, my colleagues gossiped about my boss who had previously been their boss. They weren't available at all, when I needed help, I had to beg for help. It was just a matter of stepping on each other to get to the boss' eyes first. They criticized everything; it was difficult to work with them. The only reason why they didn't resign, was that the average salary was 20% higher than other companies."*

Jamila reported in the interview that she was disappointed with her male colleagues:

> *"I was disappointed to see that, to make a career, the male colleagues did not move a finger when I was victim of public discrimination. On the contrary, they invited me to ignore the boss and did not give weight to my discomfort."*

I. Lack of listening

In the interview, Edward highlights his boss' inability to listen:

> *"Not only he didn't listen to me who had recently arrived in the organization; he did not even listen to the production manager who had been working there for ten years. Everyone knew what the problem was: the owner's inability to change. For the employees there were two possibilities: either you gave up to the situation or you resign."*

Jane often tried to talk about the issues of pastry department:

> *"It was like talking to a wall: the more I listed the various problems, the more she raised the bar of requests without solving any issues."*

Anne's experience shows how the lack of listening generates frustration in the employee:

> *"I felt useless, always waiting for an answer or feedback that never came. I always had to be available, while my manager was never interested in me and my difficulties."*

J. Distrust of employees

The breaking point that led to Jane's dismissal was yet another distrust in her:

> *The last fight we had before I decided to resign was due to the fact that I had taken some cream from the sale to use it in the ward. We had finished the cream in stock, it was Friday and we had to prepare all the cakes for the weekend. Given the emergency, as head of ward, I decided to use the cream that was on sale and that was most similar to the cream that we generally used. We were already late, there was no time to waste, and this solution seemed to me the only possible one. When the inspector found out, she went on a rampage. I explained the situation to her, but she didn't want to hear reasons. According to her, I should have asked her for permission. After that unpleasant outburst, I decided that I would no longer work in those conditions."*

K. Short run orientation

Edward's boss has a very short run orientation, the company worked on the emergency. There was any type of digitalization and standardization even for "standard" components.

> *"We worked on the emergency of the day and often on orders that should have shipped days before. It was frustrating to spend more than an hour to send only an order to suppliers just because all the documentation was on paper."*

Jane reports that employees were squeezed like lemons, and many ended up resigning, taking sick leave or maternity leave because that amount of work wasn't sustainable in the long run.

> *"Two colleagues had confessed to me that they had anticipated the pregnancy because they could no longer bear to come to work. For women pregnancy was perceived as a way out of those pressing rhythms without losing the job."*

5.4.3 WORK-LIFE BALANCE

In all five interviews the issue of work-life balance emerged, and almost all our interviewees identify this imbalance as the second cause of resignation. In five interviews, four employees were induced to work more hours than contractually agreed.

Both Jamila and David suffered from this time constraint mainly because in both cases the wage was not calculated on hourly basis but on the objectives achieved.

For Jamila, the relationship difficulties with her boss and the never-ending office hours weighed heavily on her mood and on her physical health. She suffered from insomnia, gastritis, migraines, bone, and joint pains. The work tension also extended to private life and above all, also affected his health.

David was married and work tensions affected and hurt the couple. His wife never knew what time he would be back, and this was one source of fight. He also had to be available on weekends to answer to his boss, and this limited his free time. David said:

> *"I have brought home the tension and anxiety of work and thus the fights with my wife increased. The work has polluted my personal life both in term of time and quality."*

Edward's contract was on hourly base, but often the boss asked him to work an extra hour, but he had never paid him overtime. Edward wasn't too angry because he was passionate about the job. The only problem that emerged from the interview beyond the difficult relationship with his boss is the "Sunday anxiety" because he knew that the next day he would again be submerged by the disorder. Edward is a very precise and scientific person and working in that disorganized company caused him a great deal of stress.

Anne had an hourly work contract with schedule 9am-6pm which was never respected. Anne worked when the manager asked her to work. In the interview, Anne reported that she worked regularly until 9pm and that her husband and her children never knew what time she would come home. She worked an hour from home, so she often skipped dinner when she came back

late and went straight to sleep because the next day at 9am she had to be in the office again. Although on the contract was not expected the availability, it often happened that her manager called her outside working hours or on weekends to solve some issues. She even had to answer calls and emails when she was on vacation because there was no one who could replace her. This constant intrusion of work issues into Anne's private life had become unbearable and denied her the chance to relax outside the office. In addition, the harmful work environment had also affected her relationship with her husband: in fact, every night she was so stressed that she had to let off steam with her husband for all issues encountered at work. In doing so, she never disconnected from work. She reported that her sleep quality had deteriorated and that she felt less and less happy and carefree. On Sunday afternoon the bad thoughts began about the things she should have done on Monday morning.

> *"I often had mood swings and fits of tears. I had reached a point where I no longer understood if there still was a part of me healthy and rational or if there was only the sick part immersed in that working vortex. I realized that in there I would never achieve a healthy balance of well-being."*

Jane had been thinking of quitting for a long time. She hadn't done it yet because she had a permanent contract and because she liked the job and the teamwork. Something has changed since the pandemic.

L. Job contract and work schedule

Jane had a 40-hour-a-week work contract with morning and evening shifts, 7 days a week with two days off mainly midweek. Being understaffed automatically forced employees to work more hours than their contract required. Most weeks she worked 50 hours a week, while in peak or holidays periods, she worked 55-60 hours a week. Every year from September onwards she began to have the nightmare of Christmas and every year she promised herself that this would be the last in there. Jane came home from work exhausted, with strength only to go to sleep.

> *"I never respected the working hours stipulated in the contract and I was not the only one. Overtime was not the exception but the rule."*

Jamila and David were not paid based on hours worked but based on the objectives achieved. Therefore, by contract they did not have a working schedule. Despite this, both were forced by their supervisors to stay in the office not only 40 hours a week, but often more.

> *"If I had had a contract paid by the hour, my salary would have been higher, and I would have had more protection. If one day I had to go for a medical examination and*

had to leave the office 5 minutes early, hell would happen, even if it didn't say anywhere that I had to stay a certain number of hours in the office." (Jamila)

"If the supervisor knew we had to take the bus back home in the evening, he specifically gave us additional last-minute activities, so that we had to work overtime and miss the bus." (David)

Anne had a 40-hour-a-week work contract, the working schedule was 9 AM to 6 PM. Anne reports that this type of contract was not adequate and consistent with her real work schedule. She often worked with London or American colleagues or supervisors, and her working schedule did not consider time zones. For this reason, she hardly ever finished work at 6 PM, in fact she often finished at 9 PM and she had to start again the next week at 9 AM.

"With time zones and last-minute activities to complete, I ended up staying in the office 12 hours and my contract was that of a simple employee, not a manager."

Edward fared worse than Anne and Jane because if at least they were paid for overtime, Edward was not. He had a full-time job contract, but he worked at least one hour and half overtime every day.

"The boss asked me to complete so many activities that when I checked the time it was already after 7 PM. In addition, he never paid me even 15 minutes of overtime and, in the end, he declared that I had taken days off when I had always gone at work."

M. Overtime given for granted

Jamila felt very stressed about having to go to the office for hours without her contract having foreseen it. Plus, she had to be available also in the weekend:

"As if weekly overtime weren't enough, I had to answer calls and emails even on weekends. I never stopped working."

The climate of terror that existed in the David's office led to comply with the requests of the boss:

"The boss checked every day the progress of the project I was following and knowing that I was being monitored caused me great anguish. To try to get on with my job, I worked overtime very day and sometimes even on weekends."

Anne's schedule should have been from 9 AM to 6 PM, but for time zones and for last-minute requests, she often finished her worked after 9 PM:

> *"In the morning I knew what time I would start but I didn't know what time I would finish work. Being a manager's assistant meant having no schedules, no weekends, no holidays."*

Edward's boss had a tactic to make him work overtime:

> *"When the end of the working hours approached, my boss called me and asked me to do something very urgent. Every day around 6 PM there was a very urgent thing to do."*

Jane's nightmare was Christmas because Christmas meant overtime. More overtime than usual:

> *"In 6 years of work I think I worked 40 hours a week only in the months when the whole world was in lockdown. Most weeks I worked 50 hours a week; during the Christmas peak I was working 60 hours a week. And there was no other option because we had to reach our sales targets at any costs."*

N. Shortage of staff

In the company where Jane worked, they were regularly understaffed. During the interview, Jane reported that the ward was constantly understaffed and, despite the ward was already suffering, they continued to open new supermarket without having saturated the need for staff in the supermarket already open. In addition to this, due to the numerous new supermarket openings, she often asked to transfer to some new supermarket to support and train new hires. Business trips only aggravated the situation and overloaded the workers who remained in the ward.

> *"It was an unsustainable situation, we were required to fully achieve our staffing goals, as in reality there was a constant lack of manpower. We experienced the holidays as a nightmare because for us it meant facing a peak of work with half the workers that would be needed. In the six years that I have worked here, we have always been understaffed."*

In the company where Edward worked, there was a significant turnover rate: indeed, in the technical office there was a need for at least two designers, but Edward was the only designer for more than a month and he had just been hired. Furthermore, the last colleague had already resigned when he was hired and for this reason, Edward was trained for only two weeks and then he had to manage suppliers, model components in 3D, prepare worksheets for production, contact certification organization for safety rules of the playground, draw up the assembly instructions in two languages, and manage the technical office alone. Edward soon understood why 11 technical designers had followed one another in just few years.

"I had just been hired and I was already the only member and manager of the office. I think it is not even necessary to specify how much work I did and how much imbalance there was between my experience there and the level of responsibility I had."

O. Balance between work and private life

With an organizational culture based on overtime, work life balance was a utopia.

"I couldn't relax and enjoy the weekend because the phone was ringing." (Jamila)

"I was the manager's only assistant and there was no one to replace me when I was on vacation. So, I had to take my cell phone to the beach and answer the phone and email there too." (Anne)

"Working so hard and with such a boss, I had started to have more and more frequent psychological breakdowns. Not only I felt discomfort at work, but I felt it also when I was at home with the people I loved." (Jane)

5.4.4 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

P. Covid-19 pandemic

In the interview, there was also an investigation on how COVID-19 pandemic was a driver of resignation decision. For all the participants COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as a break-time to reflect, to pull the strings of their life and decide to cut out unhealthy things, including work. The global emergency has made everyone realize how fragile the human being is and how important today is.

If Jane for years has postponed the decision -she had already made in her heart- to resign; now there was no more time to waste. Jane said:

"I realized that life is one and I don't want to spend it at work or at home sleeping because I am exhausted. I prefer to do a job that I like a little less but that guarantees me a peaceful working atmosphere and healthy schedule. I want to hang out with my friends, have time for my hobbies, be energetic and not always stressed and worried. The lockdown showed us how is life without relationships and I don't want to live like this anymore."

Jamila was away from her family to work on this European project and the pandemic didn't allow her to return to her family for months. Jamila said that, given the harassment she suffered, she would have resigned in any case, simply the pandemic has accelerated the times.

With the pandemic David started working from home and not seeing his boss and hearing his screams made him feel better. For David working from home was a blessing. After the lockdown, however, he had to go back to the office, and this was the last thing he wanted. In a short period of time, he decided to resign.

Edward never worked from home because by working in a small company, with the right health precautions, employees could go to work. Even for Edward, the pandemic wasn't the triggering reason for the dismissal, but it certainly accelerated the times.

Anne had been working virtually for a while as her manager lived in London. With the pandemic, however, her work has become more complicated and stressful because all the business trips or events she organized could be canceled at any moment due to the infections. The excessive stress caused by the pandemic made her say enough with that job.

If in everyday life people tended to hide problems under the rug and procrastinate without making decisions; during the pandemic many have taken the courage to make decisions that have already been dormant for some time. The interviews confirm what was initially said about the Great Resignation phenomenon.

5.4.4 TIME HORIZON: THE BREAKING POINT

We analyzed very different situations, united by the same premeditation in resigning.

The interesting point is to understand why our participants resign at that specific time and not two months earlier or a year later. What is the breaking point?

We have already said that Covid-19 pandemic has played a fundamental role in accelerating the decision-making processes already underway; so, in general terms we can affirm that Covid-19 pandemic was an accelerator factor, but the deep reasons why people decided to resign, are not strictly linked with the pandemic.

One of the breaking points is the moment when the employee perceives that there is no more hope, that things will not change except for worse, and that he/she cannot do anything about it. Jamila and Jane explicitly reported what the breaking point was, and it corresponds to a representative episode of their relationship with their bosses, different from other episodes of conflict not in the matter, but in the perception. A thousand other similar incidents have occurred, but there was still a glimmer of hope in the employees. The breaking point comes when the employee perceives that there is no longer any hope.

Jamila reported:

> "*I decided to resign after a meeting with him and our supervisor, that was a woman too, and during that meeting I realize that he had a dysfunctional attitude not only towards subordinates, but also towards superiors.*"

Jamila's breaking point was having clear in mind that her boss discriminated every woman, no matter if they were his subordinates or his supervisor. There was no longer any battle to fight.

Jane reported the cream episode:

> "*Given the emergency, as head of ward, I decided to use the cream that was on sale and that was most similar to the cream that we generally used. We were already late, there was no time to waste, and this solution seemed to me the only possible one. When the inspector found out, she went on a rampage. I explained the situation to her, but she didn't want to hear reasons. According to her, I should have asked her for permission. After that unpleasant outburst, I decided that I would no longer work in those conditions.*"

For both Jamila and Jane, the breaking point coincides with the moment in which they both understood that inside they would never be valued, but always oppressed: Jamila for her being a woman; Jane for the character of her inspector. By dint of being abused, they realized that they deserved more than that and that even if leaving a stable job required courage, it was worth it. Both quit their jobs before finding another one, but both reported that they prioritized their

well-being and health. Jamila in fact, suffered from gastritis, insomnia, and migraine, while Jane had periodical mental breakdowns.

David, Anne, and Edward didn't report a specific breaking point, but we can rebuild it.

David was constantly under the supervision of his boss, who checked the progress of the project every day. He claimed to be very stressed and always tense even when he was not at work. During the interview he said he was sick with gastritis and his boss made him go to the office on December 31st to work half a day. Furthermore, he said that one of his colleagues resigned shortly thereafter and after few weeks he decided to resign too. David's boss did not appreciate anyone, in fact he despised his subordinates aggressively. One of the impositions forced him to go to work even if he was still sick. Yet David did it anyway. Something probably broke when he saw a colleague resign. It is as if that colleague had shown him a possible way to live in a more peaceful and dignified way.

Anne had been thinking about quitting for a while when she learned that there would be a corporate reorganization of all the offices shortly.

> *"As soon as I knew they were going to reorganize the offices, I decided to resign before they moved me. At that point I was married, and my husband was working, so even being unemployed for a few months waiting for a new job was not a problem."*

Edward soon understood why the turnover rate was so high and decided to leave the company precisely because for him working in a total disorganization way was intolerable. Edward is a very calm, precise, and rational person. Probably the resignation decision was taken slowly, not after a specific event. For Edward the breaking point was daily attrition. He had no financial means and for this reason he decided to work in the company until he found another job.

CONCLUSION

5.5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Compared to what was reported in the literature, analyzing the interviews, one of the expected results was that the employees who had chosen to resign were dissatisfied with their job. In the interviews, on the other hand, a dissatisfaction emerged mainly deriving from relationships, especially with the boss, rather than an issue in the work activities carried out.

In the literature, one of the HRM challenge reported was the redesign of the job position, to ensure that the employee was motivated and not bored. Furthermore, the redesign of the job position was also aimed at maximizing the productivity of the employee, who was assigned the job that best performed. In fact, none of the interviewees reported any discomfort with respect to the work performed or the work activities assigned. Not only did the participants not complain about work activities, but they were also enthusiastic about it, some even passionate about it. Participants soon made it clear that they had decided to resign mainly due to a conflicting relationship with the boss and a poor work-life balance.

The mistake made by the companies towards its employees was underestimating the human component of work. A good job position was not enough, nor a good salary; but the creation of a healthy work environment made up of mutually supportive relationships.

The analysis of the interviews shows that employees are willing to leave a job they love, in exchange for a job they love less but which allows them to live with greater serenity.

Jamila works for a private company that deals with plant engineering consultancy. There are few women in her sector and the gender pressure is still there, but she reported that a few months ago her boss called her to the office to congratulate her on her work, acknowledging that a woman must work 30% more than a man to be recognized in the workplace.

David has changed sector and now he works as a teacher at the high school. Unlike before, he feels respected and is no longer afraid to express his opinion with colleagues or superior.

Anne works in a family business, she certainly uses languages less than before, but she says that being able to talk to her boss and have a personal relationship with the company's owner is priceless.

Jane, who was very fond of pastry, left that world from what was traumatized by it and now works in office.

Edward now designs custom refrigerators for butcheries and gastronomies. He liked designing playgrounds more, but he would never come back because he is now in a work environment that values him and has a good relationship with his boss.

5.5.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

We have extensively investigated how managers influence worker satisfaction and the company climate. The leaders represent the company and the company culture. A key aspect on which the company must focus and improve is the choice of leaders, their training, and their development. A bad leader can do much more damage that a bad employee, so it is in the company's interest to spend its energy to find and retain or train good leaders.

The company must ensure that the chosen manager has not only specific skills, but also the so-called soft skills. In case he/she does not have them, the company must provide him/her with the right training and coaching in order to develop them to the fullest.

One of the most difficult tasks that the manager must perform is the creation of a supportive work team, the employees have to trust the manager and so they will also trust the company and have a good opinion of it. Employer branding starts from inside the organization, from the development of healthy work environment, whose freedom of opinion and respect are not optional. One of the tasks that the manager must not neglect is listening to the employees, the continuous feedback will generate a relationship of trust and will be the basis for their development of skills and growth within the company.

We have found both in literature and in interviews, that the employee wants to feel valued and recognized. In this regard, the boss, in addition to organizing meetings to establish objectives, must also periodically thank the employees for their commitment and their efforts, regardless of result obtained. Thanking and recognizing employees are the first steps to motivate them and retain them in the company. The message to convey is that the company would not be the same without them. And these words cannot be perceived as nice words, it is the truth: the equipment can be replaced, a talented employee has a unique value. Listening to and valuing employees takes time, but it is an investment that should not be underestimated.

For example, think about some employees that give to the boss some suggestions to improve their work activities. To show the employees that their feedback has been taken into account, the boss will need to explain how they intend to proceed and provide them with a timeline. If the suggestion received is not feasible, it must be explained why it is not currently possible to implement it; if it is a good idea, the employees will be personally informed when and how the idea would be implemented.

Finally, companies should remember that workers are human being, not machines. It is not healthy working hours and hours without a limit, in the long run it is not sustainable for anyone. Once again, listening to employees also means not taking them to their physical and mental limits.

5.5.3 LIMITATIONS

The analysis carried out has limits and gaps that could be reduced with further research.

From the very first paragraphs of the analysis, the literature has shown a correlation between employee satisfaction and happiness, and his productivity. In the interviews, none of the participants admitted to having slowed down their pace of work due to their dissatisfaction; however, in this qualitative analysis, the actual decrease in productivity was not measured.

The sample of interviewees is very small. A larger sample of interviewees would provide more consistent and complete results. In any case, in the pre-selection of the interviewees, a small screening was carried out to highlight different issues in different companies and in different job roles, in order to have a picture of the workplace as broad as possible.

All the interviewees were Italian, it would be interesting to understand if the priorities and issues perceived by the worker change according to the culture or country analyzed. Think about how the Hofstede model highlights the differences between the countries based on cultural values that influence work attitudes and aspirations. For example, if we compare Italy (76) and United States (91) in Individualism-Collectivism terms, the Hofstede model shows us that Americans are more focused on their self and their priority is the achievement of their specific objectives, no matter of the others. If we had interviewed Americans, they probably would have given less importance to workplace relationships than Italians. Or if we had interviewed Finns with a much lower level of Masculinity (26) than Italy (70) and the United States (62), more mutual attention and less competition would probably have emerged. So, a limitation of this analysis is undoubtedly not having considered cultural values as characterizing the work experience.

Another aspect that could be investigated was to interview employees who were satisfied and happy with their work, to understand if the reasons why they were satisfied were the same that made the interviewees dissatisfied.

Finally, it would have been interesting to also interview the participants' co-workers and their superiors, to analyze different points of view and perception in the same work environment.

CONCLUSION

The interviews carried out have taken up various aspects of the reflection made previously and based on the literature.

We expected leadership to affect the work environment and employee satisfaction; in fact, most of interviewees gave ample space to relational problems with their superiors. In all the interviews, the conflictual relationship dynamic with the boss largely influenced the decision to resign. We have also found that not only a difficult relationship with the boss lead to resignation, but the absence of the leader can also lead to frustration.

One aspect that unites all the work experiences reported, is the difficulty of communication between the employee and the boss for various reasons. For Jamila, the lack of communication derives from the gender discrimination suffered; David's boss verbal aggression demotivates interactions; Anne's manager is always very busy and physically absent in the office; Jane's inspector has despotic attitudes, and she has no listening skills; Edward's boss has remained anchored to the working methods of 20 years ago, and he doesn't listen to the issues that his employees encounter every day.

For future research it would be interesting to understand how the perception of being listened to within the company influences the job experience and the job performance. An American multinational company installed a whiteboard at the entrance to his warehouse where employees can write down the issues they encounter and the things they would like to change. Instead, inside the canteen, screens have been installed and they show the things that the company has already changed on the advice of its employees.

Another relevant aspect that emerged is the importance of a healthy work-life balance. More and more people don't want to sacrifice everything for work. Salary is no longer the only lever on which the company can focus on. In addition, we have seen that all five interviewees were satisfied with their work activities, so it is not a matter of redesigning the job, but of giving them more free time.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has only brought out issues that already existed and that had not yet been addressed. The pandemic was an opportunity to take control of life and stop suffering it.

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RINGRAZIAMENTI

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