

# WORK COMMITMENT IN TIMES OF CRISIS: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN ORGANIZATIONS

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## Abstract

*This article ponders on the impact of management practices throughout the COVID-19 crisis on the work engagement within organizations. Our study thus makes it possible to strengthen, on the one hand, the existing literature on work commitment, through qualitative methods, and, on the other hand, research focused on employee engagement within organizations. For this, we chose to carry out a qualitative survey within two organizations: a reception center for asylum seekers and a multinational organization. To analyze these data, we used the theoretical framework of work engagement developed by Saks (2006). Our analysis allowed us, first of all, to observe how organizations managed the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the modification of two main management practices, namely the organization of work and the management of skills. Second, we realized that these two management practices were closely related to three precursors of work engagement (Saks, 2006): work characteristics, organizational and managerial support, and reward. Finally, we could observe that these three precursors had a relationship of mutual influence with the two mentioned management practices and that they also had an impact on work commitment.*

**Keywords:** organization, crisis, work commitment, management

**JEL Classification:** A14, M12

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations have found themselves on the front lines facing the consequences of a health crisis unprecedented in our contemporary era. These organizations are, by their nature, made up of networks of inter-knowledge and mutual assistance that are very important in dealing with crises (Archambault, 2020). Since the spring of 2020, certain surveys have accurately shown the consequences of the health crisis on the functioning of these organizations. Very much of the organizations were strongly or very strongly affected by the crisis and saw their activity greatly reduced (more than two-thirds of the organizations reduced their activity by at least 60%). While some organizations, especially cultural and sports organizations, have had to stop their activities with part-time employees, others have resorted massively to teleworking. This new organization of work has ensured a certain continuity in their operation. Organizations have therefore had to adapt in the event of an emergency and diversify their work. A significant part of it carried out actions outside the usual field of activity (manufacture of textile masks, psychological support, borrowing of computer equipment, etc.). If organizations responded to the urgency of the crisis, especially due to a wave of generosity and a great involvement of their employees and volunteers, the first studies seem to point out that they were not prepared, from an organizational point of view to face the pandemic.

In our research, the objective was to provide empirical data on the repercussions of the COVID-19 health crisis on the functioning of organizations, especially in terms of the use of human resource management practices and the effects it has had on employees. More specifically, we wanted to focus on the commitment to work of these people, through the following issue: how do human resource management practices (HRMs) influence the work commitment of employees within organizations in times of crisis? To answer this question, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study by comparing the situations of the employees of two organizations: a Center for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and a multinational organization in Bucharest. Our communication is organized as follows. First of all, we return,

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to literature, to the debates surrounding HRM practices within these organizations, and we focus on the theoretical concept of commitment to work. Next, we detail the research methodology specifying the options for collecting and processing data. Finally, we present and discuss the results to respond to the problem.

## **REVISITING LITERATURE: THE LINKS BETWEEN MRU PRACTICES AND WORK COMMITMENT**

Long before the health crisis, organizations underwent many changes in their management practices. These changes have sometimes even led to questions about individuals' commitment to work. Indeed, the world of work has undergone profound changes since the 1990s, which were accentuated in the 2000s, bringing with them an increase in certain conditions such as stress, burn-out, absenteeism, accidents at work, etc. This management change initiated by New Public Management has thus brought with it techniques from the private sector to the public sector. In order to analyze precisely the consequences of the crisis on engagement in work, it is necessary to return first of all to the evolution of the HRM practices of these organizations, and then to constitute the theoretical framework mobilized in research on commitment to work.

### **1. *HRM practices in organizations, through the prism of work commitment***

In order to understand the commitment to work of the actors within the organizations, it is necessary to understand the characteristics and practices of these particular organizations.

Organizations are characterized by their social project and the presence of actors of different status: volunteers and employees. The development of the voluntary sector, sometimes called the fourth public sector, is a response to the withdrawal of the state, the latter increasingly outsourcing its missions of general interest and social utility. However, these structures are not immune to changes initiated by public policies and are living a similar fate to public sector organizations through this change of management. The latter translates into a rationalization of costs leading to a strengthening of the management and evaluation requirements associated with the granting of public funds. Organizations need to analyze their goals in relation to the real needs in a territory and adapt their functioning to meet them. Organizations evolve them in the midst of a paradox between their social project and adaptation to managerial practices to meet the demands of the environment. As a result, organizations are increasingly adopting "classical" management practices to deal with the competitive pressures of their environment (Ndiaye and Cousineau, 2020) and to acquire some form of legitimacy before public authorities (Hospitable and Templar, 2018). This involves in particular the implementation of management tools, as well as the professionalization of the management of their human resources. This professionalization involves, among other things, the use of human resource management practices in various fields. This management also results in the recruitment of more and more young university graduates to apply the good management of their organizations required by public and/or private funders.

In this paper, we will focus mostly on HRM practices, as well as on the management tools implemented to achieve these practices. HRM practices vary depending on the culture of the organization. There are many typologies around this notion of HRM practice, but in general they include practices such as recruitment, training, job analysis, compensation or performance evaluation (Hornsby and Kuratko, 2003; Jeffrey and Donald, 2003). A called HRM practices are likely to positively influence employees' satisfaction and commitment to work: work organization and job characteristics, recruitment (selection, reception and integration), training, compensation, benefits, communication and participation, work-life balance, leadership, and performance evaluation. The increasing development of HRM practices in organizations brings paradoxes and complex reflections for the actors of these organizations.

Combes and Ughetto (2010) thus mirror engagement in organizations and companies. On the one hand, involvement in organizations is defined as an altruistic dedication, with a

sense of sacrifice, to a collective cause. On the other hand, in corporate engagement, the feeling of "motivation" prevails, modulated by the rewards given and the regulation of leaders. This mirroring is all the more interesting with the observation of the managerial turn in organizations and the evolution of the profiles of the associative actors.

Engagement is multipositional in interdependent timelines and modalities, or even Becker (1960) recalling that commitment is theoretically mobilized in the study of professional careers. In other words, an individual's involvement in organizations can evolve over time: an individual can get involved to meet an altruistic or personal need, or even both at the same time. Despite profound changes in the management of their organizations, these organizations still establish themselves in representations as a world of self-sacrifice and commitment. It is all the more interesting to discuss this issue of engagement according to changes in context, such as the consequences of managerial change or even economic and health crises. It therefore seems to me necessary to delineate the concept of commitment to work and to specify how it will be mobilized in our research.

#### 1. *Commitment to work*

In order to understand the concept of employment engagement, it is important to identify the different types of engagements present in the literature. The commitment concept has a multitude of definitions, with a particular emphasis on three common formulations:

1. The personal commitment of employees (Khan, 1990; May et al., 2004; Shuck et al., 2013) represents a state in which employees "bring" their personality and feel an emotional connection with their work.
2. Employee commitment to work (Bakker et al., 2011; Rich et al., 2010; Christian et al., 2011) is characterized by vigor, dedication and sense of sacrifice with a strong identification of the employee with his work.
3. Organizational Commitment of Employees (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Carrier Vernhet et al., 2014) is defined by an employee's attachment to his organization and the consequences for the decision to remain a member.

In this work, we focus on getting involved in work. Indeed, in the research, we are interested in management practices in times of health crisis and the repercussions that changes could have had on the work commitment of organizational actors in organizations. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004, p.295), work commitment is a "persistent affective-cognitive state that is not focused on a particular object, event, or behavior." This type of commitment is related to the professional consciousness of an individual, giving him the responsibility to respond to the needs of society and to remedy technical and organizational shortcomings. Engagement in work has three dimensions. Firstly, the "vigor" corresponding to a permanent investment in work and a mental resistance in the face of difficulties. Subsequently, "dedication" is related to the meaning of work. More specifically, the work is considered as one or more challenges to achieve. Finally, "absorption" refers to the fact that the individual is totally involved in his work, not to mention the energy mobilized over time.

There are certain patterns to determine the relationship that an individual has with the workplace. For example, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) presented a demand-resource model. This model emphasizes that resources relate to positive aspects of management practices (autonomy, support, recognition, etc.) resulting in a higher level of commitment to work. On the contrary, the requirements correspond rather to negative management practices (conflicts, overwork at work, etc.) reducing in this case the level of commitment to work.

Three conditions that favor engagement in work:

1. consistency with a clear working environment and directives,
2. appropriation of the values of the organization
3. reciprocity related to the rewarding of employees for their work.

Saks (2006) presents a model that highlights the antecedents and their consequences for the work commitment of individuals. These antecedents are the characteristics of the job, the perceived organizational support, the perceived support of the manager, the rewards and recognition, the procedural justice and, finally, the distributive justice. Although Saks (2006) studied two types of engagement, we chose to focus on work commitment at the expense of organizational engagement. Indeed, we want to look at the consequences of the health crisis on the commitment of individuals mainly in terms of their daily work and not on their attachment to the organization in which they evolve. As such, we show the link between antecedents and work involvement. In Saks' work (2006), this type of engagement is positively linked to job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors, and negatively to the intention to leave the organization.

In this continuity, each antecedent refers to precise concepts, which we wanted to support thanks to the related literature. First, Hackman and Oldham (1975) determine the characteristics of the job according to three elements: the variety of skills, the importance of the tasks, and the identity of these tasks.

In terms of reward and recognition practices, their implementation may have several objectives. Indeed, mobilizing rewards could help motivate employees, attract or retain them, communicate values, or even facilitate a transition within the organization. The awarding of rewards can thus prove to be a cheap solution for the company to act positively on the productivity and morale of the employees. The sense of justice is determined by the gap between recognition methods and the feeling of recognition perceived by employees. The type of recognition implemented within the organization has effects on the motivation and work commitment of employees.

We use the Saks model (2006) as a framework for analyzing our research on the repercussions of the health crisis on the work commitment of people working in organizations.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this part, we present our data collection, in particular through the presentation of the organizations studied. Next, we explain the data processing and analysis. As a reminder, our methodology should allow us to respond to our problem, which is this: how do human resource management practices (HRMs) influence the work commitment of employees within their organizations in times of crisis? We develop our problem in two research questions: How have the organizational activities of the two organizations been structured in times of health crisis? and How has the commitment of employees to work been affected by these HRM practices in the times of the COVID-19 crisis?.

**Data collection** As part of this study, we chose to conduct a qualitative survey because it fits the exploratory nature of this research. The survey is based on 20 semi-structured individual interviews conducted with organizational actors from two different organizations. These actors have different statuses: in organization 1, employees can be qualified as "supervisors" (socio-educational, medical, managerial, managerial and associative presidential teams), while in organization 2, they are "beneficiaries general purpose employees". Indeed, the first organization is a Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers. Its organizing actors support asylum seekers in their legal, administrative and social process. Organization 2 is, in turn, a multinational organization in Bucharest.

The objective of the experiment is to create new activities – responding to an unmet need – to generate activity for long-term jobseekers in the area. The study of these two organizations is a matter of a certain "methodical opportunism". This opportunism allows the observation work to be reoriented along the way, according to the constraints specific to the field.

For the sake of heterogeneity, and in order to have a representation of all the functions of the organizations studied, we interviewed several types of actors (from administrator to

social worker or even multipurpose employee). In addition, the interviewees have various profiles: men, women, with more or less experience in office. The purpose of this heterogeneity is to obtain different data on the perceptions of actors depending, in particular, on their function or even on their age. The 20 interviews were all conducted in the year 2022.

Guide of the interview mobilized with the company's employees for the purpose of employment, it was structured, in a first version, inductively from field observations then co-built with the field actors of the territory. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full.

**Data processing and analysis** We conducted a content analysis. This analysis was carried out in two stages, eventually performing manual processing using the collaborative writing software "Google Docs".

## RESULTS

To operationalize the Saks model (2006), we focused on identifiable HRM practices during the COVID-19 health crisis. Indeed, we decided to look at these antecedents in the light of HRM practices and in particular the management tools implemented. We are committed to answering in this first subsection the following research question: How were the organizational activities of the two organizations structured in times of health crisis?

**A change in activity during COVID-19: elements of context** The health crisis has led to a series of changes within the two organizations studied. In a first case, it was necessary to adapt the activity to continue to support the most precarious during the pandemic. On the other hand, a change in the work allowed the organization to participate in the collective effort of this crisis. In both cases, we will see how these organizations have adapted and modified their activities in the face of this new context.

Indeed, the work had to be adapted to meet the first needs of the organization. It was necessary to support the collective and partnership aspect of the work in order to further ensure the support mission. Similarly, certain activities were established, usually outside the scope of the association, such as the distribution of food products. Instead, due to barrier measures and, in general, the management of emergency situations, certain activities had to be stopped. What should be kept in these activities to prevent the spread of the virus? Indeed, the reduction in wages during the COVID-19 crisis, caused by many employees with reduced hours, sick leave or teleworking, has created a need for recruitment. The reduction in wages has had the effect of creating uncertainty related to the planning of activities. A number of changes, related to the organization's need to adapt quickly, led the management to implement a business continuity plan to prioritize the actions carried out by the association. This prioritization has focused on the reception, safety and health of people, to the detriment of certain areas of support.

**A change in the activity within the company for the purpose of employment** As far as the company for employment purposes is concerned, we have been able to observe that the COVID19 crisis has had the effect of reducing the activity of certain employees to the point of causing a total cessation of their activity. On the other hand, during this period, certain activities appeared, especially those related to the manufacture of masks, the protection of care workers or even for the inhabitants of the territory. The multinational organization studied is oriented towards the development of activities that provide a response to the needs of the population during the health crisis. Thus, the company acquired material means to support the expansion of the activity in order to meet the increasing demand for production.

**Elements of convergence in the structuring of the activity in the times of COVID-19** Although the functioning of the two structures that we have just presented was different during the pandemic, we want to highlight their convergence towards reorienting the actions on the basic and public needs, utility activities. This reorientation has been done at the expense of certain tasks incumbent on employees in normal times, such as the duty of

training. Indeed, in the case of the reception centre for asylum seekers, the activities of the employees are oriented towards the reception of persons, their safety and their health. In the case of the multinational organization, the employees' activities focused on the manufacture of masks and protections for the medical assistance staff as well as on the services provided to the population. We see, therefore, that the two structures have limited their activities in order to reorient themselves on emergency and essential missions, at the level of their public but also of the population on the territory. Having highlighted the activities of these two organizations in the times of COVID-19, we now want to highlight the practices of HRMs within these two structures during the COVID-19 crisis.

*Saks' model under the prism of MRU practices* Empirical material allows us to identify different MRU practices related to a history of engagement in work, according to the Model of Saks (2006). Thus, in this second part of the results, we strive to answer the second research question: How has the commitment of employees to work been affected by these HRM practices in the times of the COVID-19 crisis?

Therefore, we structure our results according to these antecedents and identify the relationships of mutual influence between HRM practices and these antecedents during the COVID-19 health crisis.

Characteristics of work influenced by many HRM practices According to Hackman & Oldham (1975), the three major characteristics of work are the variety of skills, the importance of tasks and the identity of tasks. As regards the variety of skills, this characteristic has been particularly affected by the increase in the skills required by certain individuals in the exercise of their work. As training has been reduced during COVID-19, employees have developed their skills mainly through experience in times of health crisis. The work environment has had a major impact on management practices related to the importance of pregnancy. Indeed, the change in activity led to a restructuring of the missions: only the necessary tasks were to continue, and this to the detriment of the missions considered secondary. The proportion of their tasks increases during the emergency situation: they have been resourceful people in times of crisis. In this continuity, and in relation to the identity of the tasks, the actors had to equip themselves in the face of the health crisis, this time at the strategic level of the organization, by developing new management tools such as business continuity.

### **Organizational support and support of the visible manager in management practices**

The results show that the organization and the manager support the increased commitment to the work of the employees to respond to the emergencies caused by the health crisis, at the level of the organization, but also at the level of the organizational environment. The organizational support was felt especially at the level of the employees.

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### **Rewarding and recognition practices: management practices in the service of engagement**

We note, in this continuity, that the recognition of the work of the employees has a positive impact on their commitment to work and is closely correlated with the previous antecedent: organizational support. Indeed, during the crisis, organizations did not hesitate to leave more room for manoeuvre for employees to take initiatives and responsibilities in crisis management. The organization seems to highlight certain organizational activities, which were not necessarily valued until then. Employees receive positive feedback about their work activity. We see that in both structures the recognition of employees is done mainly by appreciating their presence and involvement in their work. Thus, we find that the implementation of recognition practices has a positive link on the motivation of employees and on their commitment to their work in the activities valued during the COVID-19 crisis. We might, however, wonder what structures they have put in place for employees whose activities stopped during COVID-19 or who have resorted to teleworking.

In conclusion, we note that each antecedent in the literature regarding the employment commitment of employees is correlated with one or more HRM practices, in particular: work organization and skills management. Similarly, we highlighted in our results three main antecedents: the characteristics of the work, organizational support and support from the manager/supervisor, as well as the reward and recognition. These HRM practices have thus highlighted antagonistic movements of commitment to work.

Within the organizations studied, the reorganization of work towards the reorientation of activities and the management of skills had two major, and antagonistic, repercussions on the commitment to work. The first consequence is that within the two organizations, the commitment to significant work related to the activity has increased during the health crisis. The knowledge of the employees' work by the organizational environment of the structures gave them a sense of pride, encouraging their commitment to work. This commitment to activity is directly related to the need to be useful, but also to stay busy. In addition, in exchange for employees' commitment to basic needs, employees were able to use and develop their skills in more important or new activities in their usual tasks. The results thus highlight the need to highlight employees' skills as a form of recognition to promote their commitment to work. On the contrary, the commitment of employees to work during the pandemic has allowed the organization to develop new skills within it regarding the activities targeted. Indeed, employees mobilized in times of COVID-19 have been largely supported by their manager and their organization, thus contributing to this sense of usefulness and skills development, strong features of the meaning of work. The second consequence is the emergence of a contrary movement, during the health crisis, on the part of a certain number of team members: a reduction in commitment to work activity. While some respondents could not imagine that they were limiting and ceasing face-to-face work, having a sense of abandonment by users, others were physically removed from their work activity. This physical distance had an impact on their commitment (many resorted to partial unemployment

and only a few to telework) and did not experience the COVID-19 episode in the same way. This had repercussions on the cohesion of the team, as individuals felt the crisis lived differently. Indeed, some work activities have been reduced or even stopped during the health crisis.

Due to the lack of having a so-called "necessary" activity in times of health crisis, the work of some employees was suspended and led to a devaluation of the work activity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some actors have seen their field of action disrupted: their traditional missions have sometimes been put on hold while entrusted with new missions. We can say that antagonistic movements of commitment to work have been at work in this health crisis: on the one hand, an increase in commitment to work that has been synonymous with public utility in times of crisis; on the other hand, a disengagement caused by a cessation of activity or a withdrawal of people. Thus, we have seen a spectrum of engagement that ranges from non-engagement to over-engagement during this time of the COVID-19 health crisis. Observing the operationalization of these HRM practices in times of health crisis reveals a history of employment engagement for individuals. Thanks to these practices identified in our field work, we realized that three antecedents have mainly returned to the times of COVID-19. These are the features of work, organizational support of managers and supervisors, as well as reward and recognition. In addition, these three antecedents are particularly visible through two HRM practices, which are work organization and skills management.

To cope with the pressures of their environment, organizations have changed their activities. This has led, for example, to the implementation of management tools, the promotion of initiatives taken or even the granting of new responsibilities. These changes have had the effect of reorienting work on tasks considered essential during the COVID-19 crisis. This is related to this type of commitment, which is linked to the professional consciousness of an individual, giving him the responsibility to meet societal needs and fill technical and organizational shortcomings. In addition, within the two organizations studied, we could see that the COVID-19 crisis has allowed the growth of new skills within a valuable activity during the pandemic, as well as the assumption of initiatives and responsibilities in relation to this activity.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we sought to answer the following question: how do human resource management (HRM) practices influence the work commitment of employees within their organizations in times of crisis? The results led us, first of all, to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a change in the organization of work, directing organizations to their activities of basic needs. Secondly, I noticed the commitment to work through the structure of Saks' model (2006). To do this, we have highlighted the four history of work engagement based on HRM practices implemented during the health crisis. The results showed that three antecedents of work engagement were particularly represented in our research, namely: work characteristics, organizational support, managers and supervisors, as well as reward and recognition. Third, we have highlighted the two antagonistic movements of commitment to work during the COVID-19 crisis. When employees are affected by changes in work organization and skills management, they show themselves to be committed to their work during the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, where the change in the organization of work, through the cessation of certain activities and the absence of the development of skills, have the effect of 'excluding' employees de facto, it leads to a reduction in the employees' commitment to their work. The paper therefore highlights two antagonistic directions in times of health crisis, generated by imperatives of emergency management, which require the use of management practices. The research thus enabled us to operationalize the Saks model (2006), proposing that HRM practices are indicators of the history of employment engagement, i.e. practices directly observable within organizations. The study is thus consistent with the



continuity of the existing literature on the commitment to work through qualitative methods. We will thus contribute to the growth of quality work related to commitment to work.

Organizations evolve them in full paradox between their social project and adaptation to managerial practices to meet the demands of their environment. As such, the results allowed us to highlight the three characteristics of commitment to work, namely: "- force" (permanent commitment to work and mental resistance to difficulties), "dedication" (related to the meaning of work, work is considered as one or more challenges to be achieved) and finally "absorption" (the individual is totally invested in his work and does not count the energy mobilized over time). The presence of the three dimensions of engagement in the workplace in the organization of work in the times of COVID-19 has allowed some employees to flourish professionally. Indeed, employees mobilized in times of COVID-19 have been largely supported by their manager and their organization, thus contributing to this sense of usefulness and skills development, strong features of the meaning of work. Therefore, we could develop these three dimensions in future research, thus allowing us to observe our research object from another theoretical angle.

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