

The subjective dimension of work in the COVID-19 age: Is the emotional health of employees a matter of the company?

Abstract: The subjective dimension of work is a complex concept that is gaining presence because of the pandemic in the way we work. This paper is about how this subjective dimension of work might have changed, his relationship with the objective dimension of work and how this is related to the emotional health of the employees. Which one is the role of the companies in this regard 30 years after the Centesimus Annus Encyclic? Which one should be the role of the indirect employer and the social dialogue?

The pandemic has changed the way we work in our society. We wonder if these new ways of working are more solidary, cooperative, and responsible. As we witnessed in many other fields, digitalization in the world of work has increased its impact and remote working showed us that it is possible to work from different places and not just in the office.

The relationship of man with technology, understanding technology as a “*whole set of instruments* which man uses in his work”¹ has suffered an acceleration too. In *Laborem Exercens* St. John Paul II emphasizes that this relationship with technology is positive and undoubtedly technology is man's ally. However, technology can become our adversary and St. John Paul II uses the example of the mechanization where man is substituted by the machine taking away from him any personal satisfaction and the stimulus to be creative or responsible.

Therefore, one of the effects of the pandemic is how the objective dimension of work has changed. But we would like to enquire whether and how far change has affected the subjective dimension of work. Has it been diminished due to these changes? Is it easier to fulfill our personal expectations after the pandemic? Or can we say that thanks to technology the objective dimension of work has improved its subjective dimension?

In practice, from what we have witnessed during this year, companies are experiencing that many employees are reporting psychological problems. Moreover, they are dealing with the fact that new formulas of hybrid working or full remote working are preferred by their employees. Finally, the relationships between the social institutions, in particular Unions, has been challenged due to all of these changes.

To better understand how the subjective dimension of work has changed and discuss ways to make the work more human we invited three people to share their views with the group: Amir Kaplan, CEO and Founder of iFeel, a company that

¹ Laborem Exercens (II-5)

provides psychological assistance to the employees of the companies that hire their services; Elena Sanz Isla, General Director of People and Organization of MAPFRE; and Oliver Roethig, the Regional Secretary of UNI Europa.

In January we interviewed Amir Kaplan, who shared with us that working remotely has increased the productivity of the workers, but it has increased their stress level too. The uncertainty provoked by the digitalization process was accelerated due to the COVID and this is a real challenge for HR professionals since they are not therapists. In this sense what he experienced is that there is more demand of services related to psychological assistance from the part of the companies.

In February Elena Sanz described to the group how a big company like MAPFRE handled the pandemic. The priority were the employees. In fact, they put in motion a psycho-emotional wellbeing program. The pandemic implied more communication between management and employees and her view is that this event brought them more together than ever.

Finally, in March we interviewed Oliver Roethig along with the Belgium Chapter of FCAPP. From his point of view there are several difficulties created by the remote working like work-life balance and the right to digital disconnection and how you control working time. Also, there is a clear lack of regulation for this kind of new way of working or collective agreements.

At the time of writing, we are starting to feel how vaccines are letting us go back to normal, even though at a very slow pace. We can perceive that there is a segment of the population that is keen to go back to presential work. However, most of the workers prefer a hybrid model with flexibility².

1. The subjective dimension of work 30 years after Centesimus Annus

With these insights we debated about the main question of this contribution and the outcome is the following one.

First of all, we have to reflect about the subjective dimension of work nowadays.

We should emphasize that what work provides for people are three main things:

- Access to income
- Insertion in a social context which also helps to keep a healthy self-esteem
- Personal and professional development.

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zm_KzfyuOz-uj2cmlmZFZcWK767rmX-2/view

In addition to these basic functions, traditionally attributed to work, Pope Francis, both in his recent social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*³ and in his apostolic letter *Patris corde*⁴, also adds the following purposes: self-expression of oneself; placing at the service of society -and of the communion that allows us to "live as a people"- the gifts, potential and qualities that God gives to each person; co-responsible participation in the task of salvation of the world, by contributing, precisely through work, to the coming of the Kingdom.

New ways of working started to become more popular due to technological change, the main example is the *gig economy* where it can be argued that there is more freedom for the employee and therefore there is more flexibility and more options. However, this kind of work is bringing a lot of debate about inequality. It could be understood as an imposition or the only exit for those with no opportunities to access to a traditional job.

On the other hand, we are witnessing interesting new phenomena as an unexpected outcome of the pandemic. The so called "Great resignation"⁵ points out that there is something happening with the subjective dimension of work and traditional jobs.

Finally, digitalization and automation of tasks are meant to make many routine jobs disappear meanwhile new ones could allow more initiative, creativity, and participation from the workers.

Hence, we should think about how liquid the concept of the subjective dimension of work is and if this contributes to helping people to fulfill their expectations in a different way today, 30 years after the publication of *Centesimus Annus*. The answer is ambiguous. It is easy to find arguments to say that technology and the pandemic has deteriorated the subjective dimension of work since workers are suffering psychological problems and HR departments have to take up new near-therapeutical needs in big corporations. On the other hand, technology is providing opportunities that were not available before and now, more than ever, it is easier to put talent to work at the service of different clients from everywhere without the need of a traditional contract.

It is not easy to draw conclusions over general trends, but we can help to elaborate proper employment and educational policies in a way which facilitates easier adaptation to new contexts. The big challenge lies in increasing the capacity of intellectual and ethical discernment, both among political and economic leaders, and among workers themselves.

³ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. Paragraph 162.

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html. "6. A Working Father".

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2021/07/28/the-great-resignation-why-employees-dont-want-to-go-back-to-the-office/?sh=61b7e12b2000>

2. Should companies take care of employee's wellbeing? Is this sustainable?

Companies taking care of employee's mental health is something new and not common. Working in teams, in many cases the biggest human asset of the company, implied at some level that everyone should have left feelings and emotions at the door of the company so there could be some distance between the professional and the personal dimension.

However, reality showed that as management, the more you take care of talent you increase the chances of obtaining better productivity ratios and, therefore, become more successful. Extrinsic motivations are becoming less important meanwhile intrinsic ones are key for many workers⁶.

The consequences of the pandemic made it necessary to pay attention to the psychological needs of the employees. The question now is if this situation is just a temporary one or it will remain as a HR policy to attend the intrinsic motivations of the workers. In the current context we are inclined towards thinking that these policies are here to remain, and this means making the line between the professional and personal life thinner, which could become a double-edged sword.

3. The role of the indirect employer.

The social doctrine of the Church acknowledges the notion of the indirect employer as the "many different factors, other than the direct employer, that exercise a determining influence on both the shaping of the work contract and, consequently, of just or unjust relationships in the field of human labour"⁷. This concept means that companies can't bear all the burdens of the changes that are taking place after the pandemic. In many countries, and in Spain particularly, we are witnessing how governments are putting into motion instruments to provide cash to companies and employees. In the short term these instruments are effective. However, the reality is that we are dealing with a situation where people are receiving money without working for the companies or the government due to the pandemic. Therefore, they are not fulfilling their expectations as humans. In addition to this, digitalization is creating a permanent need of reskilling and upskilling for employees which, now, should integrate not just digital skills but other kinds of skills, like soft-skills.

In this context we should be aware that companies should look for coordination and alignment with the indirect employer to help this situation. First, the labor and the tax regulations should facilitate flexibility for employers and employees (flexi-protection) so entitlements and benefits should follow the employee if he or she changes jobs.

With regards to education, effective bridges between University and Vocational Training are needed, and Vocational Training should be made more attractive for young people. We are in the age of perpetual learning, and it is urgent that new

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2013/04/does-money-really-affect-motiv>

⁷ Laborem excersens (IV-16)

initiatives – public, private, local, regional, national, and supranational – arise to upskill and reskill our citizens no matter their age so they can deal with the new reality of work.

In particular, in Spain where 37,1% of people under 25 years old are unemployed, new public programs to make people employable should be started instead of solutions, like the Minimum Vital Wage, or the Universal Basic Income, which could be morally hazardous because it could disincentivize employment and, indirectly, it can destroy jobs. On the other hand, these kinds of solutions pay attention to just one of the sides of the subjective dimension of work: Income. However, they leave two key elements unattended: Self-esteem and talent development.

We would like to highlight that if businessmen carry out their mission properly, which implies necessarily “not harming”, those businessmen will be taking care of their employees in the best way possible. Planning out how they have to adapt their businesses without using firings or substituting employees with other people is one of the best ways to help the mental health of the employees. It is here where the indirect employer should make things easier for the businessman, letting him to develop his tasks properly.

4. What about the social dialogue?

Unions are trying to redefine their model while the precarious employment, gig economy and depersonalization of work are evolving. This is taking place in an environment where the polarization and the lack of objectivity of the political debate should reinforce the voice of the social agents since they are often closer to the real problems of the people than politicians

Big Tech companies, mainly American and Chinese, are becoming new centers of economic power along with complex configuration of multiple European decision centers provide a context where solid union organizations could be a key element of social equilibrium. However, it is necessary that they get rid of some of the stigma of the past which constrain the necessary social and labor flexibility.

We can say the same thing, *mutatis mutanda*, about Business Organizations. A dialogue inspired by the Social Doctrine of the Church could be an interesting starting point for this evolution.

Workers’ Unions and Business Organizations should recover the leadership that has been stolen by politicians and also by international elites, which have become referents without any legitimacy and without the experience of the traditional social agents.