

Does the Relationship between Manager and Employee Affect the Employees' Propensity to Recommend Their Manager?

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Unhappy employees are increasing alarming and bad management has been recognised as one of the most influential reasons of disengagement at work. Managerial behaviours may influence the quality of the relationship between managers and employees relevantly, with a strong impact on employees' engagement. The present study aims to answer the following question: does the relationship between manager and employee affects the employees' propensity to recommend their manager? Our proposal is based on a wealth of experience and integrates many of the latest, most robust and practical approaches on the theme, with research carried out on a group of 641 Italian employees.

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1. Introduction

In the latest 30 years, managerial research has largely investigated the figure of managers, their skills and behaviours, recognising them a key role inside organisations, stressing the fact that the difference between a bad and a good manager counts a lot, since it deeply impacts not only on the organizational climate but also on the whole organizational performance (Sheldrake & Hurley, 2000; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2001; Ball & Carter, 2002; Emiliani, 2003; Amar et al., 2009; Sutton, 2009; Raelin, 2012; Birkinshaw, 2013; Mintzberg, 2013; Beck & Harter, 2014).

Managers ensure organisations succeed in their purpose, that is the efficient production of good and services (Drucker, 1995). Managers design and maintain the stability of operational routine of organisations, while understanding how to adapt it to environmental rapid changes (Birkinshaw, 2010; D'Amato, 2015). Managers make sure organisations reach the targets of people controlling them, symbolise the key link with the external environment and represent the formal authority (Mintzberg, 1971).

The unexpected strong impact of managerial behaviours on employees' engagement is emerging in literature over the past 20 years (Beck & Harter, 2014).

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According to Gallup, 87% of the worldwide workforce is disengaged, failing to develop and contribute at work (Wright, 2015). Among different reasons of disengagement, bad management is one of the most influential. While good management drives many positive outcomes, like better working conditions, higher engagement, reduced employee turnover and improved managerial effectiveness, bad management costs a lot to companies (Wu et al., 2018). Good management (effective managerial behaviours) has a strong impact on the quality of the relationship between manager and employee, which, in turn, impacts on employees' engagement and performance (Beck & Harter, 2014; D'Amato et al., 2019).

Starting from these assumptions, the main aims of this study is to identify if the relationship between manager and employees (size of the team, methods of communication, frequency of communication, length of the relationship) influence the employees' propensity to recommend their manager. Having said that, our research question can be formalized in the following way: Does the relationship between manager and employee affects the employees' propensity to recommend their manager?

In an attempt to answer the research question, we run an online survey answered by 641 Italian employees operating across different sectors. Our findings show, that in lights of the obtained results, it is possible to affirm that the four analysed elements (size of the team, methods of communication, frequency of communication, length of the relationship) impact on employees' propensity to recommend their managers, in different ways.

The paper is organised as follows: after a brief introduction underlining the main goals of the work, Section 2 conducts a deep bibliographical analysis, in order to collect and review all the most recent, robust and relevant literature contributions on the subject. Section 3 describes the adopted methodology and method and give reasons for its use. The findings are reported in Section 4. Section 5 contains conclusions and managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

That of disengagement is becoming an increasingly relevant concern inside organisations, since the number of disengaged and discontent employees are growing alarming (Huckerby, 2002; May et al., 2004; Wren, 2005; Rastogi et al., 2018). While personal engagement is the simultaneous and active employment of all three levels in task behaviours, promoting connections to the work activity and to others, providing a full, effective role performance, disengagement can be defined as the disconnection of employees from their work roles, from a physical, intellectual and emotional point of view (Wollard & Shuck, 2011; Kahn, 1990).

According to Rastogi et al. (2018), disengaged employees have low energy and generally provide a poor work performance, also due to their low innovation and creativity (Krueger & Killham, 2007). Disengagement reduces happiness and satisfaction with life and increase depression, also causing bad feelings and health problems (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). Causes of employees' disengagement could be looked for in the relationship between employees and employers. People are

more engaged at work, when their managers are open and responsive to their ideas and suggestions, regardless hierarchy (Fast, Burris & Bartel, 2015).

Engagement diminishes when employees don't trust their supervisors and perceive them as inefficient and ineffective in their role (Beech & Anderson, 2003; Luthans & Peterson, 2002). When employees trust their managers, they are more likely to commit themselves fully in their job, making extra efforts than required by their job contract (Birkinshaw, 2010).

The quality of the relationship between managers and employees may influence employees' happiness too. Layard's studies (2003) demonstrated that employees, on average, are not happy to spend time with their managers, if not imposed. Happiness and organisational wellbeing impact on all levels of the organizational hierarchy and managers and managerial behaviours benefit from them too (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Improved managerial behaviours, in turn, reinforce the manager-employee relationship (Brower et al., 2009).

Among the factors influencing happiness and wellbeing at work, managerial behaviours need a special focus, due to their significant impact on the employees' physical and emotional state (Bolino et al., 2003; Tse et al., 2008). According to the theory, the high quality of the relationship between manager and employee affect the way in which the latter relates to the other members of the team and the whole organisation (Seers et al., 1995). Employees tend to be more inclined to share information and resources and to help colleagues. This way, both the individual and the organisational efficiency and effectiveness improve (Tse et al., 2008).

In spite of its importance, trust is only one of the elements influencing the quality of the relationship between managers and employees. Other elements deserve to be mentioned, like the types of communication methods adopted, the length of the relationship, the amount of time spent together and the size of the team (how many people report to the same manager) (Shore and Coyle-Shapiro, 2003). Two-way communication nurtures a good relationship between manager and employees, since employees are thinking beings, who expect to be allowed to express their own opinions and be considered (Mackenzie, 2010; Golden et al., 2008).

The business world is changing and digital communication is catching on. Actually, despite communications are becoming more lean, quick and easy, digital communication can have a negative impact on employees' engagement and commitment (Solomon 2001; Zelenka, 2009). Team cohesiveness reduces and workplace culture is more difficult to share, when people have few occasions to meet and interact among each other and with their managers directly (Merriman et al., 2007). It often occurs that digital communication methods are adopted also in contexts that do not require them, since people could meet in person. This attitude makes relationships more and more impersonal, reducing the general level of trust of employees, who prefer face-to-face dialogues (Mackenzie, 2010).

While on the topic of communication between managers and employees plenty of studies and researches have been conducted, only few authors discuss the length of the relationship, the amount of time spent together and the size of the team. Some early contributions link the amount of time spent with one's manager with

employees' social identity (Tajfel, 1974). In other words, it is possible to guess that the increase in employees' social identity is due to an increase of the time employees tend to spend with their managers. Social identity means for the employee as an individual's knowledge that he or she belongs to certain social or status groups, together with some emotional and value significance of the group membership (Willemyns et al., 2003). As a consequence, they will be more inclined to collaborate effectively with their colleagues and to indulge managerial indications.

According to Shore & Coyle-Shapiro (2003), it is possible to affirm that the quality of the relationship between managers and employees has a positive influence on both the individual and the team performance, besides improving the organisational climate. All the considered studies are extremely useful to get a complete theoretical overview of the topic, but none of them outlines a concrete result. A gap therefore exists in the managerial literature on this topic. Starting from the research gap identified, this paper wants to move a step ahead and add another essential building block to the wealth of literature.

The main aims of this study is to identify if the relationship between manager and employees (size of the team, methods of communication, frequency of communication, length of the relationship) influence the employees propensity to recommend their manager. The quality of the relationship will be assessed by measuring the possible correlation between promoters and four elements characterising the relationship: size of the team, methods of communication (face-to-face, e-mails, phone-calls) and frequency of communication, length of the relationship.

The research question is further investigated with the following four hypotheses:

H1: The size of the team influences employees' propensity negatively.

H2: The length of the relationship between manager and employee influences employees' propensity positively.

H3: The time spent with their manager influences employees' propensity positively.

H4: The frequency of communications (email and phone calls) influences employees' propensity negatively.

3. The Methodology and Model

In order to answer the research question, we run an online survey answered by 641 Italian employees operating across different sectors. The research turns to all the Italian employees who have a hierarchical supervisor.

Data collection was conducted through an online survey, based on a questionnaire with closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was realised by the Research Centre on Change, Leadership & People Management of LIUC Business School. Data analysed and presented in this paper were collected between November 2017 and September 2019. The key information for the reduction of this article has been obtained based on four questions: How many people, including you, report to your manager? For how many years have you been reporting to your current manager? How many hours do you spend with your manager per week? Approximately, how many emails and phone calls do you exchange with your manager per week? Apart

from describing the quality of the employee-manager relationship, this part of the questionnaire is crucial, since it allows to skim the sample further. Indeed, people who do not have any direct supervisor or people working for unconventional organisations void of hierarchy, can't go on with completion.

In order to investigate hypothesis, it has been measured the correlation between the percentage of promoters (employees recommending their managers) and frequency and methods of communication between the parties, length of their relationship (number of years that manager and employee spent working together in hierarchical relation) and size of the team (number of people reporting to the same manager). Respondents' answers have been clusterized, in order to simplify the analysis.

4. The Findings

Hypothesis 1 (The size of the team influences employees' propensity negatively) guesses that a negative correlation exists between the wealth of the team and individuals' propensity to recommend their managers. This assumption has been derived by the evidences that a negative correlation occurs between size of the team and trust in management (Edmondson et al., 2004; Sharma & Ghosh, 2007). When the number of people reporting to the same manager increases, it is more difficult for managers to care for the single employee and nurture the individual relationship. Moreover, it is more difficult for managers to establish one-to-one communication processes and listen to each employee's needs, opinions or even strengths to improve. Face-to-face meetings risk to become rare and rare (Midthaug, 2017). All these elements impact on employees' propensity to recommend their manager negatively (Birkinshaw, 2013). Actually, the obtained empirical results do not confirm the hypothesis. From a comprehensive overview, a certain level of variability in responses can be registered, but it does not reflect the theoretical references supporting the hypothesis, in any way (Figure 1). In Figure 1, on the vertical axis the percentage of promoters is indicated, while on the horizontal axis there are the size clusters.

Hypothesis 2 (The length of the relationship between manager and employee influences employees' propensity positively) stresses the link between propensity to recommend the manager and the length of the manager-employee relationship, guessing a negative correlation exists between these two factors. Based on literature, this is due to the fact that employees and the manager know each other better with the passing of the years and time helps to smooth incomprehension, to accept the counterpart's weaknesses and to share ways of thought (Moye & Henkin, 2006). As a consequence, employees tend to feel more closed to their manager and better listened to and understood, developing trust (Brower et al., 2009; Birkinshaw, 2013).

Referring to Figure 2, the second hypothesis seems to be confirmed, up to a certain point. Indeed a gradual increase can be registered: from a percentage of promoters equal to 23,86% of the first cluster, where managers and employees are related by a short relationship no longer than five years, to 37,50% for employees working with their managers for more than ten years. Actually, a sharp reduction occur in correspondence of the fourth cluster, were managers and employees are working

together for more than 20 years. This data refutes theoretical statement and prevent us from accepting the hypothesis' validity. Even though causes of this incidence are not notorious, based on our knowledge, evidences do not support the hypothesis.

Figure 1: Promoters and Size of the Team

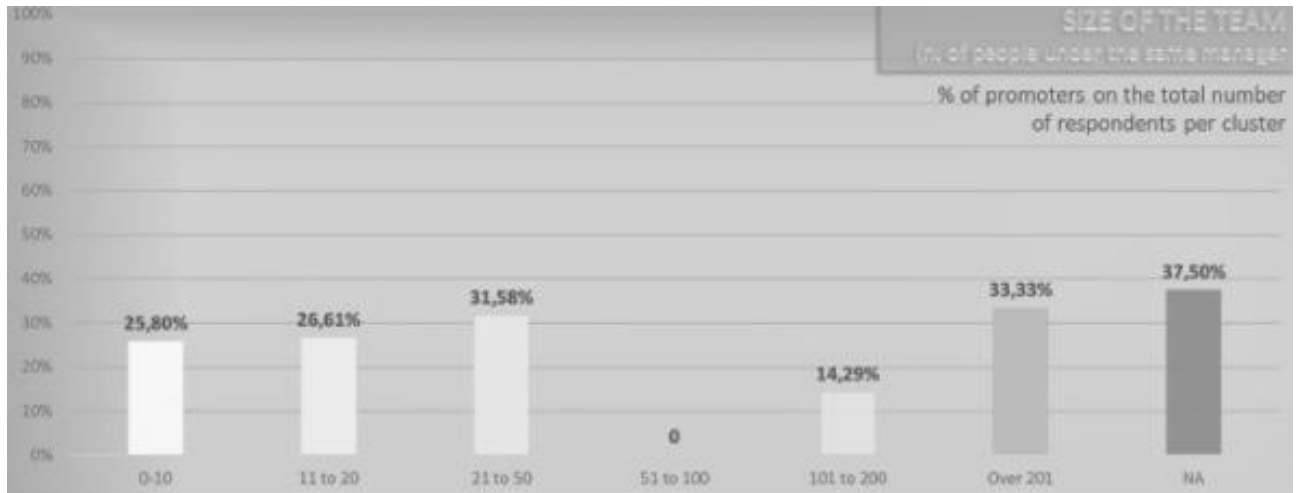
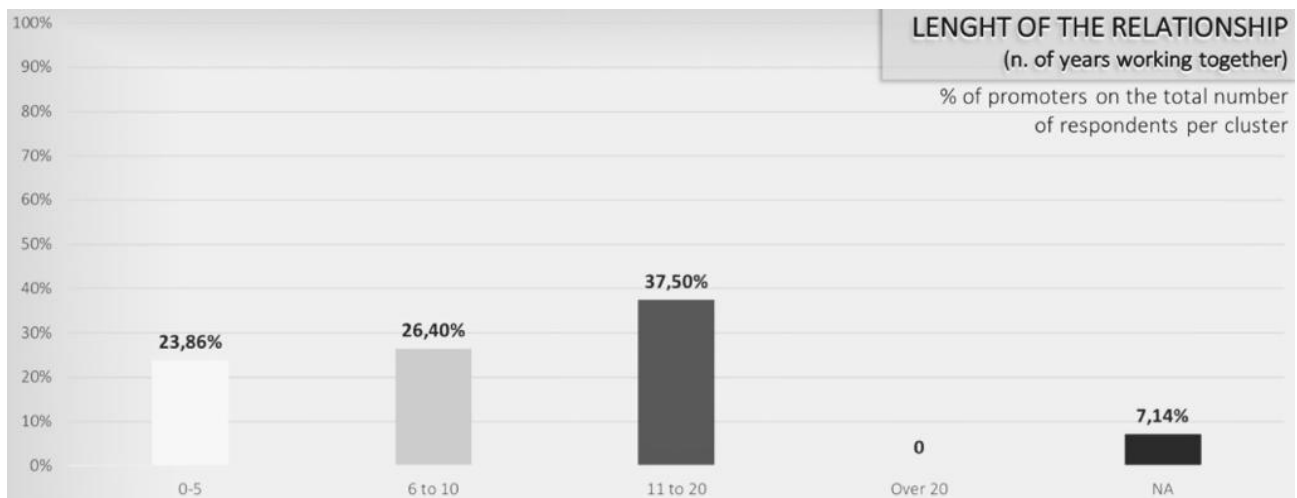


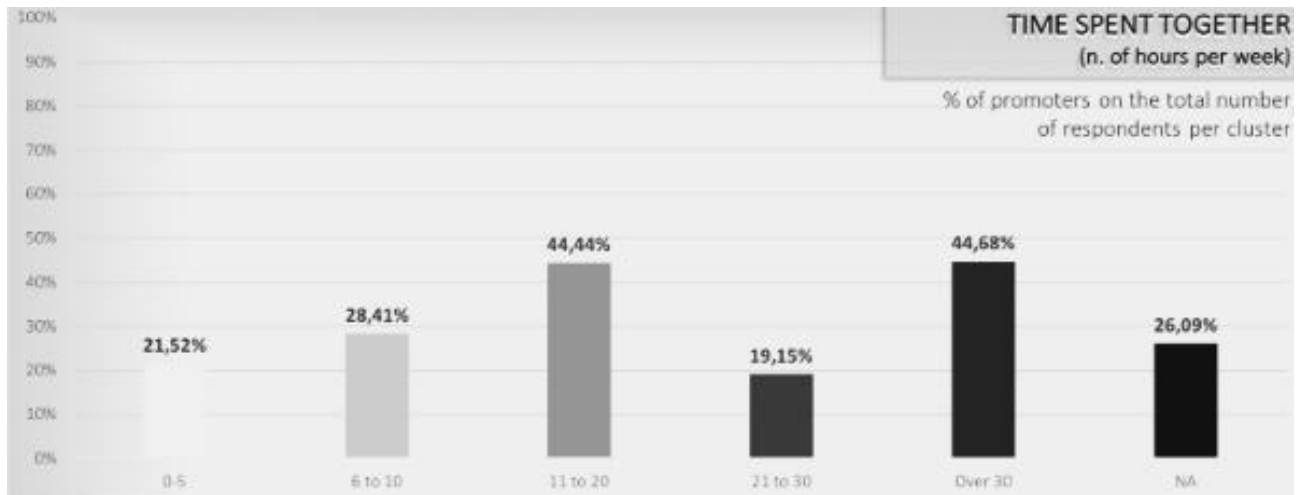
Figure 2: Promoters and the Length of the Relationship between Manager and Employee



Hypothesis 3 (The time spent with their manager influences employees' propensity positively) is strictly related to the second and is based on the assumption that the more time manager and employees spend together, the better they know and understand each other, developing reciprocal trust (Whitener et al., 1998; Brower et al., 2009). When employees understand their managers' choices and behaviours, they are more likely to support them, even in case of errors or possible failure. Trust and esteem towards managers boost employees' propensity to recommend (Whitener et al., 1998; Harter et al., 2002, Brower et al., 2009).

Looking at Figure 3 a positively increasing trend could be seen, since percentages grow from a starting 21,52% (cluster 0-5 hours per week) to a more than doubled 44,68% (cluster over 30). Actually, one dissonant data affects the overview: after the 44,44% of people spending between 11 to 20 hours with their managers, percentage of employees spending between 21 to 30 hours with their managers deeply decreases to 19,15%. Based on theoretical knowledge, this data is difficult to be interpreted and understood, but prevent the possibility to confirm the hypothesis.

Figure 3: Promoters and Time Spent together by Manager and Employee per Week



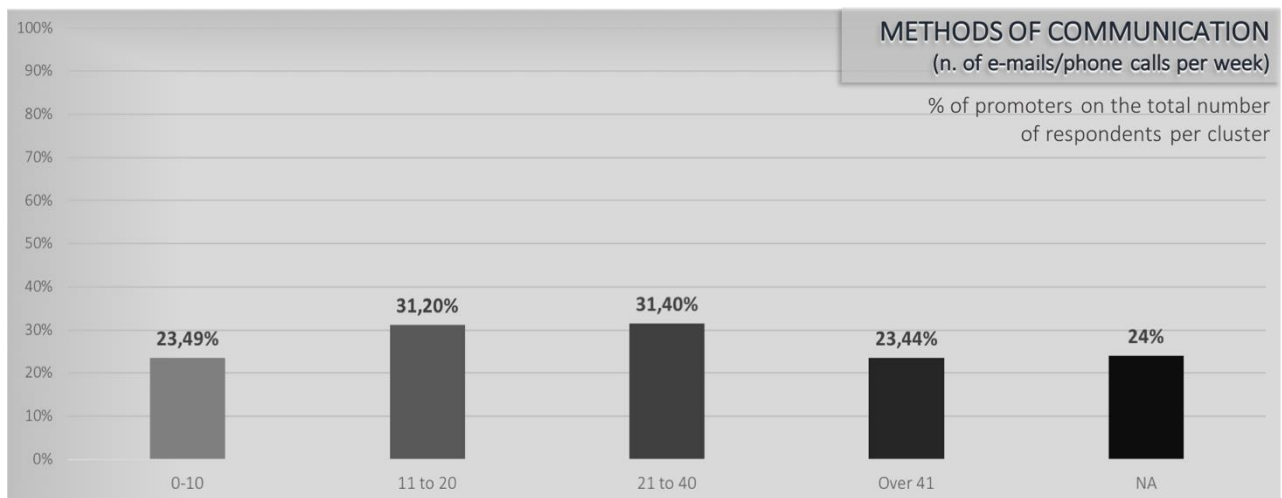
Hypothesis 4 (The frequency of emails and phone calls influences employees' propensity negatively) focuses on communication, which, among the factors influencing the manager-employee relationship, is the most analysed in literature (Young & Post, 1993; Dambrin, 2004; Mackenzie, 2010; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011; Ruck and Welch, 2012). In particular the fourth hypothesis combines two key aspects of communication, that are the methodology used to exchange messages and the frequency of interactions between managers and employees. In particular, the hypothesis states that frequent and digitalised communications result in reducing employees' propensity to recommend their managers. In spite of living in a digitalised world, which is innovating at an unprecedented speed, employees, when possible, continue to prefer face-to-face communications with their managers. Therefore, there is a common understanding around the conviction that, in absence of physical barriers, the exchange of countless emails or phone calls is counterproductive, since reduces communication fluidity and increases time. People lose communicational abilities gradually, with a negative impact of collaborative skills too (Dambrin, 2004; Merriman et al., 2007; Zelenka, 2009).

Even in this case, unfortunately, findings are difficult to be commented. Looking at the first three clusters uniquely, the hypothesis seems to be rejected clearly, since a slight, but continuous increase in percentage is registered (from 23,49% to 31,40%), while a decrease was expected. An unpredicted drop of almost 10% occurs in correspondence of the fourth cluster. What is even more curious and difficult to explain, is the fact that the research evidences show that those employees exchanging more than 40 phone-calls and emails with their managers have the

same propensity of those employees who digitally communicate with their managers very rarely (up to 10 times per week).

In lights of these results, it seems quite clear that the amount of email and phone-calls exchanged do not impact on employees' propensity to recommend their manager. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis need to be rejected, like previous three.

Figure 4: Promoters and the Number of Emails and Phone-Calls Exchanged Weekly



5. Summary and Conclusions

In spite of the strong correlations assumed in literature, it can be concluded that the research findings are conflicting and lead to reject the hypothesis. None of the four hypotheses, indeed, can find confirmation in research evidences. Despite a certain degree of variance can be confirmed, the emerging trends are often opposite to those expected.

In lights of the obtained results, it is possible to affirm that the four analysed elements impact on employees' propensity to recommend their managers, in different ways. It is not possible to assume any positive or negative trend between them and employees' propensity, anyway.

From a theoretical point of view, this paper brings a relevant contribution to scientific literature investigating the relationship between managers and employees. While current literature is becoming more and more focused on leaders and leadership attitudes, this study wants to recall the attention on managers, managerial behaviours and their impact on employees' engagement and performance. In addition to this, the paper deals with a critical issue in organisations nowadays, that is the increasing level of disengagement at work. The findings provided can represent a useful starting point for managers to establish a better working relationship with their employees, in order to increase their engagement and improve their performance at work.

The work is not free from limitations and shows many margins of improvement. Indeed, link between the quality of the manager-employee relationship and employees' propensity to recommend their managers has not brought to the desired results. Despite the deep and strong theoretical assumptions, it has been not possible to confirm hypothesis. Hence, further work needs to be done in order to investigate which is the impact of the relationship between managers and employees on the latter's propensity to recommend their managers.

Moreover, the research is limited to offering the perceptions of Italian employees. It could be interesting to enlarge the sample and open the research internationally in order to investigate how culture and environmental background may influence employees' perspectives on managerial behaviours. Increasing the number of observations would help to strengthen results and avoid possible problems of heterogeneity of the sample, which implies the creation of unequal clusters, that make it more difficult to interpret the significance of research findings.

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