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## **ENTRY LEVEL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

***Abstract.** The work environment is a fundamental determinant of the quality of employee work and productivity level. The employee's perception of the work environment is the result of interactions with the manager, within the work team, and is influenced by the various signals received from the organisational environment. We focused our attention on the young employees, who attended their first job during or immediately after Covid-19 pandemic, and who experienced online work conditions. We carried out a quantitative research, proposing a research model to determine the main factors that influence the perception of entry-level employees on the work environment. The theoretical structure model was validated using the PLS-PM method.*

***Keywords** online work, COVID-19 pandemic, entry-level employee, team, team manager, knowledge diversity, organisation*

**JEL Classification: M10, M12, M15, M54, O32**

### **1. Introduction**

Perception can be defined as “the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information in order to make sense of the world” (Davis, Murphy & Watkins, 2023). Employees organise and interpret their sensory impressions to give meaning to their environment (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022).

Perception towards work environment can be affected by many factors like organisational support, autonomy, and collegial relationship. Employee perception of the work environment is the result of interactions within the work team, with the manager, and is influenced by the different stimuli received from the organisational environment.

The structure of the team and how it is organised have an impact on employee perception. All experiences of being on a team influence individual employee attitudes toward the work environment. The employee perception is

determined by the social aspects of being a team member and by his/her degree of participation in various aspects of team functioning. Nevertheless, team reflexivity influences the affective commitment of the employee, which in turn determines employee innovative behaviour (Wang, Cui & Cai, 2021). According to Zhang et al. (2022), the intrateam cooperation and at the same time competition have a positive impact on employee's creativity. The relationship with coworkers influences employee perception of the work environment.

The employee's commitment is shaped by his/her perception of the management, which is the second pillar of our framework to establish the employee's perception of the work environment. According to Hou et al. (2021), employee perceptions of their relationships with three types of managers, senior, line, and human resource managers, determine employees' job satisfaction and their intention to quit (Hou et al., 2021). Different leadership types have a different impact on the quality of life at work for employees (Nikpour, 2019). Supportive leadership involves supporting employees in the tasks they must perform, while transformational leadership has important effects on creativity at both the individual and organisational levels (Shao, Feng & Liu, 2012).

The entire work climate within a company influences the employee's perception of the workplace. A knowledge sharing culture encourages employees to be innovative. In addition, employees are stimulated to use shared facilities, tools, and systems (Weijs-Perree et al., 2019).

The main objective of this study is to assess the perceived work environment and associated factors among students / graduates who have attended their first job during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both literature review and survey research have identified three main actors that influence the employee perception, namely, the team manager, knowledge diversity, and organisation. No prioritisation has been made. Managers have a direct influence on the employees they manage. Several aspects influence the employee perception about managers (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Team-focused resources, like team climate, have an influence on employee well-being, engagement, and commitment (Lei et al., 2021). In online teams, junior employees value the professional background more than social interactions (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). It is important to balance employees' extrinsic requirements and intrinsic motivation (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022) through leadership and managerial initiatives to achieve their performance. The general organisational culture, involvement, or non-involvement in significant decisions regarding policies, strategies, and objectives is a determinant of increasing employee performance in achieving the goals of the company (Nikpour, 2019). Based on these aspects, we have considered the following research questions.

R1. What impact has a manager on employee perception of the work environment? Which are the determinant factors?

R2. How does the employee perception of the work environment influence the team? The impact of virtual work on young employees who attended their first

job.

R3. What is the influence of overall management and organisational culture on employee perceptions of their work environment?

## **2. Literature review**

Work environments integrate work conditions, job characteristics, training and development, communication processes, and social work, which means getting help from other employees or managers. Work changes can have a significant impact on employees, and flexible work arrangements might determine employee positive perception of the work environment (Davis, Murphy & Watkins, 2023).

A major impact on a young employee has the communication between coworkers, employees, and with upper management (Wang et al., 2021). Empathy and overall understanding between colleagues contribute to the comfort of the employee (Davis, Murphy & Watkins, 2023). Virtual workspaces can introduce barriers due to the lack of face-to-face interactions. Therefore, it is important to foster a positive virtual company culture that promotes proactive communication within teams, between teams and with upper management (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). To facilitate the employee's adaptation to work conditions, various technologies and software are used to facilitate virtual mentoring and coaching (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Organisational culture consists of a set of norms and values widely applied to a company (Ferine et al., 2021). It refers to the mission, objectives, expectations, and values that are valid for all employees. According to Ferine et al. (2021), organisational culture has a positive influence on work performance. To maintain this in a remote environment, various aspects are taken into consideration. One of them is trust. Trust is very important in online work environments, managers and team members must trust each other. Beside trust, the employees' wellness should be a priority (Hou, et al., 2021). It is necessary to focus on teamwork and identify employee challenges. Nevertheless, virtual team-building events are planned and informal interaction is encouraged (Thornton, 2021). All virtual activities and interactions are intermediated by technology and information systems. Inadequate information systems have a negative impact on the employee, and as a result, the employee has a bad perception about the work environment.

Organisational culture is correlated with leadership (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). The leadership behaviour of a manager is related to the work satisfaction of the employees. Therefore, it influences the perception of the work environment by the employee. According to Thornton (2021), in online environments the classical models of leadership, like transactional, transformational, or heroic, are replaced by a distributed/shared approach, and the leadership become collective. According to Lei et al. (2021), the most successful teams are led through shared leadership processes that allow sharing of managerial knowledge among decision makers. In virtual teams, employees influence each other through collaborative decision

making and shared responsibility for outcomes, in a way grounding an empowering leadership (Lei et al., 2021).

Sustainable development implies engagement in three dimensions, namely, economic, social, and environmental coordinates. Organisations should promote their initiatives that protect the environment and support social cases, and employees should also be involved in such projects. In this way, a corporate social responsibility is formed and employees are proud to be part of the organisation (Farooq & Salam, 2020).

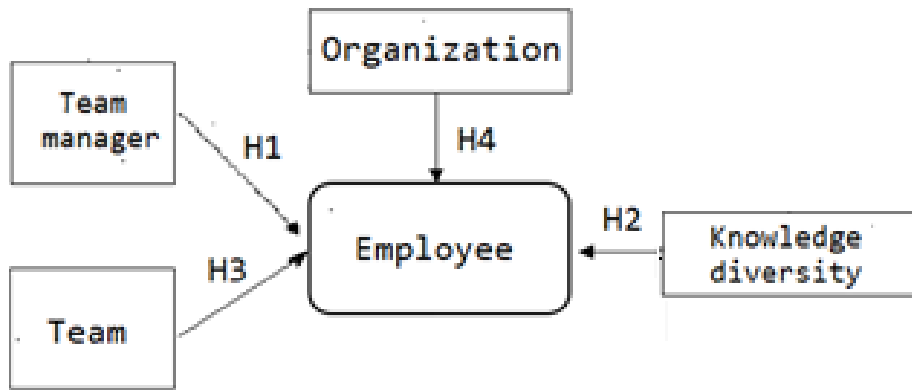
The Covid-19 pandemic forced organisations to move online, activities have taken place in virtual teams globally distributed. Different types of employees are involved, namely long-term employees who acted in face-to-face teams, and some of them are not comfortable to work from home, newcomers who attend their first job. According to Chamakiotis et al. (2021), e-leadership is a prerequisite for sustainable virtual teams. In large virtual teams, dispersed members who are working on a specific project or task, often add diversity to the team in terms of culture, language, organisational background, and technology experience (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Beyond the team manager, different members can act as leaders due to their expertise in a specific task. They assume responsibility for a specific task until the task is finished. A leader with the ability to meet employees' need related to self-esteem and respect can lead to motivate them to work hard, to be creative and to take responsibilities Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

The work environment is a fundamental determinant of the quality of employee work and productivity level. We consider that employee relation with the team manager, team coworkers, and the organisation influence its perception of the work environment. The first two determinants are in proximity, while with the organisation it would seem to have a loose relationship. Nevertheless, the organisation is perceived by the employee through the effects of the organisational culture, top leadership, and the orientation towards environment and social aspects.

### **3. Research Model and Hypotheses**

Drawing upon the literature on employee's perception of the work environment, we have created the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1. Managers have 'the most direct influence on employees they line manage' (Inegbedion et al., 2020). According to Davis, Murphy & Watkins, 2023, the manager's behavioural integrity is positively related to job satisfaction and engagement of the employees. As stated by Davis, Murphy & Watkins, 2023, the interactive leadership style and the communication competence of the team manager affect the employees' perception of the work environment. Employees want to approach their team managers to discuss training and development needs. Learning opportunities represent a determinant of employee engagement. According to Hou et al. (2021), knowledge integration contributes to achieve team

effectiveness.



**Figure 1. The proposed research model**

Team managers often find knowledge integration challenging due to team members' reluctance to develop their individual expertise. Supportive leadership and inspirational communication with team members can help to increase the common beliefs and goals of employees (Zhang & Guo, 2019). Based on these arguments, we assume that:

H1. Team manager has a significant positive influence on Employee.

According to Ferine et al. (2021), a diverse team can help organisations discover unique solutions and make effective business decisions. Job-related diversity, meaning functional diversity, education, and tenure, has a direct positive impact on team performance in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Inegbedion, Sunday and Asaleye (2020) developed a research model on diversity and its impact on performance. A model to determine the impact of team knowledge diversity on employee perception of their work environment was introduced by Hou et al. (2021), evaluations were made on entrepreneurial teams with respect to individual and team creativity. Shao, Z., Feng, Y., & Liu, L. (2012) demonstrated in their research that 'transformational leadership motivated teams' creative efficacy and then moderated the relationship between educational specialisation heterogeneity and team innovation'. According to Zhang and Guo (2019), knowledge leaders should motivate members to upgrade their education and specialisation through exploratory learning and to share new knowledge with other team members. Taking into consideration the above previous findings from the literature, we hypothesise that:

H2. Knowledge diversity has a significant positive influence on Employee.

According to Rabiul & Yean, 2021, teams and trust have an influence on

employee engagement. Team effectiveness is the ability of the team members to meet the goals and objectiveness of the organisation (Lei et al., 2021). According to Morrison-Smith & Ruiz (2020), a team is perceived by the employee depending on the fulfilment or not of the following conditions: supportive environment, role clarity, superordinate goals, and team rewards. Based on these assumptions, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. Team has a positive influence on Employee.

The relationship between employees and organisation can be described using the perceived organisational membership (McCauley & Palus, 2021). The general relationship with the organisation has three underlying dimensions, namely 'belonging', 'matter' and 'need fulfilment'. The employee perception of 'belonging to an organisation, or that it does matter how I feel o what I am doing', as well as the employee's need of fulfilment are the results of the organisational practices promoted by the managers (McCauley & Palus, 2021). According to Shao (2019), strategic leadership behaviour and organisational culture are decisive in the way the employee perceives the organisation and implicitly the workplace. Rabiul & Yean (2021) investigated the influence of leadership styles on employee work engagement, identifying that people-oriented organisational polices are perceived as a positive aspect of the organisation. The IT technologies adopted by the organisation have an impact on work environments, and inadequate information systems cause problems for employees (Shao 2019). The impact is greater the more activities are carried out online. Zhang et al. (2022), analyse the importance of proper IT platform and the impact of digital leadership capabilities in an organisation. Environmental awareness and green behaviour of the organisation is positively perceived by the employees (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022). All these aspects characterise the organisation, thereby we assume that.

H4. Organisation has a positive influence on Employee.

#### **4. Methodology**

Internships are methods of bridging the gap between education and the business environment, and they shorten the period of transition from school to the labour market. In recent years, students, who after the internship remain to work in the company, have occupied an important share. The pandemic forced many activities from various business sectors to go online and employees had to work in online environments. The students, newly employed in entry-level positions, experienced their first job in an online work environment.

In our scientific demarche, we aim to analyse their perception of the work environment. The research was based on a quantitative methodology, the research technique used was the survey based on a questionnaire. When we refer to questionnaires in research, we mean the questionnaire technique, but also the procedure through which we get to collect the data or to the actual investigative

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tool. To perform our analysis and test the research model (Figure 1), we applied an online questionnaire for data collection in a period of five months from March to July 2022. All the indicators were measured on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The target group was made up of Bachelor-studies graduates and master students (aged between 21 and 24 years), who study in Romanian universities. Out of 945 answers, 837 were validated (Table 1). Of these, 89% started their work during the pandemic.

**Table 1. Respondents' personal information**

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	427	51%
	Male	410	49%
<b>Age</b>	20	72	8.6%
	21	608	72.64%
	22	117	13.98%
	23	40	4.78%
<b>Total work Experience</b>	1 year	706	84.35%
	2 years	81	9.68%
	3 years	50	5.92%
<b>Work sector</b>	IT	576	68.81%
	Accountancy	185	22.1%
	Finance	27	3.23%
	Marketing	27	3.23%
	Public relations	9	1.08%
	HR, social media, Logistics	13	1.54%
<b>Work location</b>	University location	420	50.18%
	In other regions of Romania	305	36.44%
	Locations in Europe	112	13.38%

Source: Authors' own analysis

#### **4.1 Survey design**

In order to analyse the influence of the four exogenous variables, namely Organisation (Org), Team manager (Mng), Team and Knowledge diversity (KD), on the endogenous variable Employee (Emp), and to validate the research model, a quantitative survey was performed. The proposed questionnaire contains a list of valid and reliable questions / items in order to address the research objective, namely to analyse the entry level employees' perception on the work environment during and after pandemic (Table 2). Based on the aspects specified in Table 2, the questions in the questionnaire were established, and the items associated with each construct were outlined accordingly.

**Table 2. Survey design**

Construct	Aspects of the analyzed phenomenon	Item	Item reference
Org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Success</li> <li>• Empowering Leadership</li> <li>• Organisation - Employee Relationship</li> <li>• Perceived CSR</li> </ul>	Org_1 – Org_9	(Farooq & Salam, 2020) (Lei et al., 2021)
Mng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation and trust</li> <li>• Idealized Influence</li> <li>• Inspirational communication</li> <li>• Knowledge integration and innovation</li> <li>• Leadership skills - Supportive leadership</li> </ul>	Mng_1 – Mng_11	(Lei et al., 2021) (Shao et al., 2012) (Shao, 2019) (Zhang & Guo, 2019)
Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination</li> <li>• Effectiveness and efficiency</li> <li>• Team satisfaction</li> </ul>	Team_1 – Team_6	(Zhang & Guo, 2019)
KD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge diversity</li> </ul>	KD_1 – KD_4	(Zhang & Guo, 2019)
Emp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Engagement</li> <li>• Organisational Identification</li> </ul>	Emp_1 – Emp_6	(Farooq & Salam, 2020)

#### ***4.2 The partial least squares path modelling method***

The partial least squares path modelling (PLS-PM) method is a component-based modelling approach and is applied to theoretical structure models. It is mainly used in social sciences, econometrics, marketing, and strategic management (Veghes et al., 2023). PLS-PM allows for the estimation of complex cause-effect relationships in path models with latent variables. We measured reliability, validity, and correlations among latent constructs using the R package *plspm* and SmartPLS data analysis software (Figure 2).



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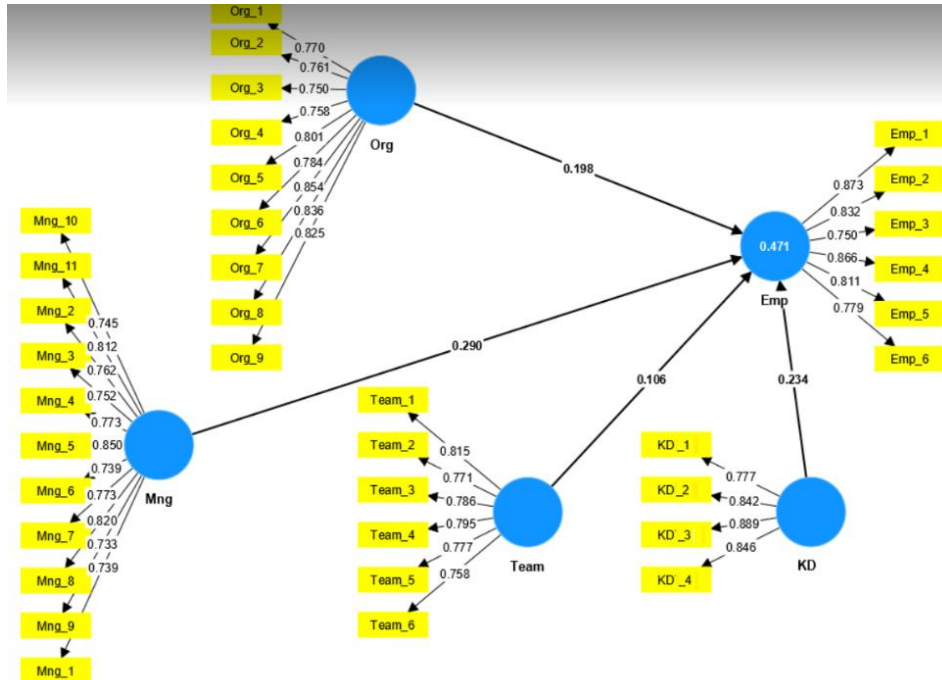


Figure 2. Validated model. Entry level employees' perception on the work environment

Source: Authors' own analysis with SmartPLS software

## 5. Results

### Coefficient of determination and path coefficients

Firstly, we analyse the outer path coefficients for the structural model relationship and the  $R^2$  value of the Emp latent endogenous variable. The  $R^2$  value calculated for Emp is 0.471, and indicates that 47.1% change in Emp can be explained by Org, Mng, Team, and KD. The path coefficients express the connectivity between two constructs. All path coefficients are greater than 0.1 meaning that all relationships between the latent variables are statistically significant. Mng has the most substantial effect on Emp (0.290), followed by KD (0.234), Org (0.198), and Team (0.106).

### Cross loadings

According to cross loadings, 'an item should have higher loadings on its own construct compared to other constructs'. Outer loadings determine 'an item's absolute contribution to its assigned construct', and should have values greater than 0.70. All outer loading values are greater than 0.70, and items have lower loadings on the other constructs.

**Unidimensionality, reliability, and validity**

In PLS-PM modelling, it is important to assess whether a set of variables is unidimensional or not. The unidimensionality implies that the items considered indicate the same latent variable. In PLS-PM, we can use the following three main indices to check unidimensionality, namely the Cronbach’s alpha index, the Dillon-Goldstein's rho or Composite Reliability (CR) index, and the first eigenvalue of the indicators’ correlation matrix (Table 2). A block is considered being unidimensional, when the Cronbach’s alpha and the Dillon-Goldstein’s rho are greater than 0.7.

For Cronbach's alpha indices, all our constructs have a value between 0.86 and 0.94, underlining a high internal consistency. Also, the CR is larger than 0.7, therefore the condition for unidimensionality is fulfilled (Table 2). These two types of reliability tests (Cronbach's Alpha and CR) indicate the accuracy of the survey.

The third metric involves an eigen analysis of the correlation matrix of each set of indicators. If a block is unidimensional, then the first eigenvalue should be greater than 1, whereas the second eigenvalue should be smaller than 1 (Table 3). Also, all AVE values are more significant than 0.5, and as such the convergent validity is confirmed.

**Table 3. Reliability, validity, and correlations among latent constructs**

	C alpha	CR	eig.1 <sup>st</sup>	eig.2 <sup>nd</sup>	AVE	Emp	KD	Mng	Org	Team
<b>Emp</b>	0.902	0.909	6.600	0.766	0.672	0.820				
<b>KDT</b>	0.863	0.890	2.840	0.502	0.705	0.532	0.839			
<b>Mng</b>	0.933	0.939	6.600	0.766	0.598	0.613	0.528	0.774		
<b>Org</b>	0.927	0.931	5.690	0.809	0.631	0.570	0.504	0.643	0.794	
<b>Team</b>	0.876	0.881	3.710	0.633	0.615	0.529	0.421	0.680	0.641	0.784

Source: Authors' own analysis with SmartPLS software

The Fornell-Larcker criterion is a means to check discriminant validity. The classic approach suggests that the square root of AVE in each factor establishes discriminant validity if this value is more significant than other correlation values among the latent variables. The square root of each AVE factor (the values on the diagonal) is greater than the correlation values between factors (Table 3). The result indicates that we have established discriminant validity. We also observed for the cross-loadings values that measurement items of each construct share their highest loading with their latent construct.

**Assessing the Structural Model**

According to Pavlov, Maydeu-Olivares & Shi (2020), ‘Standardised Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) is used to assess the exact fit in structural equation models’. The SRMR value for our research model is 0.075, which indicates a reasonable fit adjustment. According to Potters (2023), “when the independent variables are closely related, it becomes difficult to say which variable is influencing

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the dependent variables". The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) measures the multicollinearity among the independent variables. For VIF we obtained values between 1.64 and 4.108. A value for VIF between 1 and 5 means that the variables are moderately correlated.

With the bootstrapping method, with 5000 iterations, we found that all path coefficients in Table 4 are statistically significant. With  $f^2$  we have measured the effect of the exogenous constructs (Mng, KD, Team, Org) on the endogenous one (Emp). Also, T values and P values are determined for each path. A P-value smaller or equal to 0.05 indicates that the hypothesis is validated.

Referring to the latent endogenous variable Emp, the  $R^2$  value is 0.471 indicating a moderate value (Figure 2). Predictive relevance  $Q^2$  is 0.461 for Emp, depicting high predictive relevance of the structural model.

**Table 4. T-Statistics of path coefficients**

	$f^2$	Path coeff.	T value	P value	Remark
Mng -> Emp	0.069	0.290	6.871	0.000	H1 is supported
KD -> Emp	0.07	0.234	7.444	0.000	H2 is supported
Team -> Emp	0.01	0.106	2.627	0.009	H3 is supported
Org-> Emp	0.036	0.198	4.793	0.000	H4 is supported

Source: Authors' own analysis with SmartPLS software

Based on all results displayed in Table 4, we can conclude that all hypotheses (H1, H2, H3 and H4) are supported.

## 6. Discussions

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the economic-social environment into a turbulent one. According to Stoker et al. (2022) 'leaders must be able to manage their organisations in turbulent times, lead a distributed workforce of individuals and teams, and become a resilient leader themselves'. The following aspects are mentioned: strategic thinking, uncertainty management, decision-making, change management, reinvention, employee experience and support, trust, flexibility, communication, and team skills.

Research results confirmed that emotional engagement and organisational identification exist, in the case of young employees, working in the online environment. Several factors, including but not limited to managers, organisations, and knowledge diversity, have an influence on employees, and companies must allocate resources in these directions. Of these four factors, team managers have the most significant impact on employees, followed by knowledge diversity, organisation, and team. In the last decades, due to the numerous crises, various researches on crisis leadership have been developed. Changes in leadership behaviour have been required in order to increase the effectiveness of working online

(Wu et al., 2021; Stoker et al., 2022). Team managers with adequate management skills will always have a positive impact on employees. They know how to foster a positive work environment so that employees can perform at their best. It is important to promote supportive leadership, to encourage cooperation and trust, and to sustain knowledge integration and innovation. In these conditions, as demonstrated in our paper, they will positively influence the emotional engagement and organisational identification of young employees working in the online environment. Otherwise, TM will negatively influence the perception of young employees, leading to their non-integration into the organisation's environment. Due to their direct influence on employees, companies should allocate resources for the proper training of team managers, this being also recommended to other categories of managers.

Experience diversity has a positive influence on employee performance (Hou et al., 2021). Various studies reflect the benefits brought by knowledge diversity on innovation in R&D projects (Zhang & Guo, 2019; Verhoeven, 2021). Our study highlighted the fact that young employees feel comfortable in work environments characterised by knowledge diversity. Due to this diversity of knowledge, they believe that they could receive guidance in the various activities in which they would be involved. And they could also learn and develop professionally. In online work environments, but not only, it would be desirable, that entry-level employees are integrated into teams whose members have different backgrounds and professional expertise.

Nowadays, teams are fundamental units in organisations. They use structural elements to coordinate the work and rely on a set of rules or procedures for teamwork. The way employees perceive the team they belong to is decisive for their work behaviour. In our research we took into consideration three dimensions, namely team effectiveness, team efficiency, and employee's satisfaction of being part of the team in order to determine if unit Team influence the employee's perception of the work environment.

To these is added the organisation as a factor that influences emotional engagement and organisational identification of young employees working in the online environment. Our study reveals that aspects concerning career success, empowering leadership, organisation-employee relationship, and perceived CSR positively influence the working experience of young employees'.

## **7. Limitations and future research directions**

The COVID- 19 pandemic has exposed deep labour market inequalities. Some professional activities could be transferred online, but others could not. The results of our study do not refer to a specific sector of activity, but to jobs, regardless of the field, that involved online activities. Since online work was supported even after the pandemic, further research will investigate if there are significant differences between the various domains of activity. The respondents in our study are between 20 and 23 years old, further research could include other age categories

to observe if there are significant differences regarding online work. Multiple studies show that older adults 'engage in various self-regulation strategies aimed at continuously maintaining or restoring the person-environment fit' (Farooq & Salam, 2020). However, it would also be interesting to extend the research taking into account other countries.

## 8. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the 'world of work'. Organisations needed to move most of their business processes online. The employees had to adapt to work in virtual teams, remote from home. Research on the impact of the pandemic on the business environment is based on understanding of the implications for human resources associated with social distance, and perspectives from economics, psychology, leadership, ethics, and overall management.

The contribution of this work is that it addressed a new topic in the specialised literature: entry-level employees in online environments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper analysed the entry-level employee's perception of the work environment and identified the most critical factors influencing it. Based on the results, we found that the team managers are the most important, followed by knowledge diversity and organisation. The results of our research have direct practical implications concerning leadership decisions in online work environments to successfully integrate young people into the organisation. Our study reveals that organisations must thoroughly train team managers and create work teams with diverse knowledge.

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