

Tensions in Relationship Management: Organization-Employee Relational Maintenance Strategies in Flexible Work

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled organizations to adopt various operating models such as remote and flexible work to keep business operations from grinding to a complete halt. While flexible modes of work ensure business continuity, it can trigger various tensions and contradictions that employees and organizations need to navigate. Our study aims to interrogate existing relational maintenance strategies and examine the strategies organizations employ to deal with these tensions. Findings can inform policy on human resource management in the United Arab Emirates, particularly with a focus on employee well-being in contexts of remote/flexible work. This is of high significance to the UAE considering that the country has been creating infrastructures that support virtual/remote work and aims to make the UAE one of the happiest places to live and work in.

We interviewed 13 heads of communication and human resources across 10 organizations. The participants were from organizations listed in the Forbes 2021 World's Best Employers, Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work for 2021 as well as LinkedIn Top Companies 2021 and 2022 lists with a presence in the Middle East and Africa region. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five key tensions in managing organization-employee relationships (OER) over remote/flexible work.

We find that (i) top employers responded to organizational identity tensions such as performance-driven cultures by becoming more people-centric, cultivating communal relationships, and creating supportive work climates focused on bonding and togetherness; (ii) diversity tensions (i.e., generational, gendered, work/family roles, lifestyle etc.) were managed by assisting employees to personalize their work arrangements and championing inclusive work environments; (iii) the autonomy-control paradox (i.e., a complex tension that arises when employees with aspirational mindsets work excessively hard or challenges that arise when flexible work is discouraged) was addressed through placing trust and responsibility on employees, coaching, and focusing on performance management; (iv) spatial-temporal tensions due to employees' work intensification were tackled by respecting employees' boundaries and through reconceptualizing physical workspaces where employees can engage in meaningful in-person interactions; and (v) communication tensions arising from top-down, informative communications were managed by acknowledging employees' need for two-way dialogue, responding through interactive listening initiatives, providing access to top leaders, and crafting open, honest and transparent communications.

Our study offers multiple theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study enhances public relations scholarship by offering a tension-based lens to study the relationships organizations have with their employees. The study's empirical findings provide nuanced understandings of the tensions inherent in managing employee relationships over remote/flexible work and strategies to manage these. Practically, findings can help communications and human resources practitioners to strengthen OER in the changing workplaces of the future.