



Employee engagement and work centrality in times of crisis

 Moshe Sharabi^{1*}
Adiel Shlomi²
Shani Sharabi³

¹Department of MA Studies in Organizational Development and Consulting, Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel.

¹Email: mshes@yvc.ac.il

²Email: adiels@yvc.ac.il

³Rappaport Faculty of Medicine, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel.

³Email: shani.s@campus.technion.ac.il

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(* Corresponding Author)

Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, in 2020, many employees were forced to switch to working full-time from home or in a hybrid mode (combining work from home and on premises). The purpose of the present study examined the degree of engagement and work centrality of employees according to their employment mode. The questionnaire was conducted to those who continued to work on premises (n=100), those who switched to a hybrid mode (n=100), and those who switched to working from home (n=100) during the crisis. The findings of the study showed that the participation or non-participation of employees in the decision to change the working mode during the crisis, did not affect their engagement work centrality. Work centrality was highest for employees who continued to work on premises and lowest for those who switched to working from home. No difference was found in the degree of employee's engagement in the different employment modes. Single-parent workers with children under the age of 13 who switched to hybrid work or working from home showed a higher engagement than did other workers. Demographic variables, employee participation, and the change in work mode had little effect on work centrality and engagement. One of the practical implications is that employing workers in crisis situations, when other organizations lay off employees and unemployment rates soar, increase appreciation of the organization, and contribute to strengthening the psychological contract of mutual obligations.

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a great interest in the study of employee engagement, as reflected in the significant increase in research in this field (Anand & Acharya, 2022; Kahn, 2010). Employee engagement indicates the extent of involvement, contribution, and loyalty of employees to the organization at various levels. According to the research literature, employees with a higher degree of engagement are more committed, passionate, focused, and energetic (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Employee engagement predicts the performance of employees as well as the success and financial performance of the organization. The correlation between employee engagement for financial gain is a derivative of higher productivity and satisfaction (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Employee engagement and cohesion can be tested in times of crisis, when tensions or disagreements arise between management and employees. At such times, cooperation between management and employees can weaken so that the position of the employees is not reflected in fateful decisions (Marchington & Kynighou,

2012). Thus, organizations that create high employee engagement are better able to weather crises and possibly find more creative and flexible ways to perform work.

Another aspect that is directly and indirectly related to employee engagement is the centrality of work in the lives of employees (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017). This concept describes the importance of work and the extent to which work and its results occupy a central place in an individual's life (MOW-International Research Team, 1987). Work centrality is positively related to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, involvement in decision making, and a high level of performance (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2010). Various studies have found a clear positive correlation between employee engagement and work centrality (e.g., (Hu, Jiang, Probst, & Liu, 2021; Kahn, 2010)) and a negative one between the two and employee absence and turnover (e.g., (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Sousa, Ramos, & Carvalho, 2021)).

Following the COVID-19 crisis, which began in 2020, millions of workers worldwide were forced to work from home because of government restrictions, closures and partial closures, or their own fear of contracting the disease. As a result, many organizations temporarily closed, and others reduced work by dismissing employees or putting them on unpaid leave. Essential organizations, however, often continued to work in full capacity. Given the situation, employment from home became an alternative for many organizations. A study conducted in April 2020 found that 50% of all US employees worked from home either partially or fully (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020).

The decision of organizations whether to work on premises, in a hybrid mode or fully from home, was at times made in cooperation with the employees to respond to their needs (for example, parents of small children) and at other times it was dictated to them. The present study examined the degree of engagement and work centrality of employees who during the COVID-19 crisis worked on premises, from home, or in a hybrid mode. We examined how work centrality and engagement were affected by the degree of employee participation in the decision on how to employ them, as well as the effect of demographic variables on employee engagement and work centrality. Organizations that wish to preserve and improve the work centrality and engagement of their employees, can use the present research insights in planning the transition of employees to hybrid employment modes or work from home.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employee Engagement

Employee engagement can be defined as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement is also defined as a cognitive emotional behaviour and a behavioural state directed toward the nature and purpose of the organization (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). Engagement can be characterized by employees’ energy, dedication, and passion to do everything they can to achieve the goals of the organization. Studies have found that employee engagement is positively related to commitment to the organization and better performance at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Therefore, many organizations believe that employee engagement is a dominant source to gain a competitive advantage (Geeth & Sebastian, 2014; Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Part of the explanation of employee’s engagement appears to lie in emotional attachment to their workplace and the attribution of “family” to it. According to a definition that relates to more mental elements, employee engagement is a person's mental desire to achieve the goals at work or the goals of the company as perfectly as possible (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In all the above definitions, employee engagement is a significant element in the organization and an organizational goal because it creates meaning, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy. Employee engagement has different behavioral-emotional components, attitudes, and behaviours associated with the environment in which people work, and its consequences are considered valuable for organizational effectiveness. Positive employee engagement is built through trust, honesty, and open communication between company management and employees (Agrawal, 2016).

The level of employee engagement to the organization is measured by indicators such as organizational citizenship, organizational commitment, degree of identification with the values of the organization, and belief that the organization allows the individual to perform well (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Asplund, 2006; Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009). Research that used a regression model to examine the factors predicting employee engagement found that the following six variables accounted for about 47% of the variance: (a) sense of value and involvement, (b) cooperation, (c) job satisfaction, (d) equal opportunities and fair treatment, (e) ethnicity diversity, and (f) communication (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004).

Many studies have found that the engagement of employees to the workplace significantly affects the quality of their work and their productivity. The better the employees’ mood and commitment, the more the organization succeeded (Bourne, Pavlov, Franco-Santos, Lucianetti, & Mura, 2013). Furthermore, studies have shown that employee engagement contributes not only to productivity, loyalty, and their retention but also increases customer satisfaction (Lockwood, 2007). New employees expect their workplace to make them feel engaged, contributing, and committed (Barik & Kochar, 2017). These and other studies Devendhiran and

Wesley (2017); Markos and Sridevi (2010) and Robertson and Cooper (2010) have illustrated the great benefits that organizations may enjoy if they succeed in increasing their employee engagement.

2.2. Work Centrality

Work centrality can be defined as the degree of general importance that work has in one's life at any given time (Dubin, Hedley, & Taveggia, 1976; MOW-International Research Team, 1987). Research has indicated that people consider work and work outcomes to be key aspects of their lives and important means of meeting several needs. Beyond the material benefits of work (income), interest in work and commitment to it have been seen to be part of human nature and human needs. Finally, work has also been associated with socio-psychological or intrinsic factors that emphasize its contribution to an individual's identity, social relationships, self-esteem, status, and sense of accomplishment (Bakker, Du, & Derks, 2019; MOW-International Research Team, 1987; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Sharabi & Harpaz, 2019).

Employees with a higher work centrality shows higher job satisfaction, participation in decision-making, willingness to work longer hours, and less absenteeism and turnover than employees who have low work centrality (Bakker et al., 2019; Kanungo, 1982; Rosso et al., 2010; Sharabi & Harpaz, 2019). They also shows stronger identification with their work, and higher internal motivation and personal creativity (Volery & Tarabashkina, 2021).

2.3. Employee Engagement and Work Centrality

Various studies found a positive relationship between employee engagement and work centrality in various organizations (e.g., (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Kahn, 2010; Sousa et al., 2021)). Kahn (1990) argued that employee engagement and work centrality were the product of unique, consistent, and holistic processes of organization-employee relations. According to Hu et al. (2021) these processes are psychological empowerment and a psychological contract that link work centrality to employee engagement. Psychological empowerment is the responsibility of the organization, whereas the psychological contract is a product of mutual commitment. Therefore, employee engagement and work centrality are a reflection of an active and mutual harnessing of employee-organization ties in a way that makes both parties committed to this relationship.

A study conducted by Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017) in Israel with respondents from private and public organizations found that psychological empowerment and employee engagement were positively and significantly related to work centrality. The correlation between employee engagement and work centrality was stronger than that of both with demographic and occupational factors. It also reported that employee absence and turnover had a negative correlation with employee work centrality and engagement. Additionally, a study conducted in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic with workers from various industries in the private and public sectors found a distinct positive correlation between employee engagement and work centrality and a distinct negative correlation between employees' intention to leave and work centrality and engagement (Sousa et al., 2021). Based on the above, the next hypothesis was formulated:

H₁: A positive correlation will be found between employee engagement and work centrality in each of the three modes of employment (on premises, from home, and hybrid).

2.4. The Effectiveness of Working from Home

The field of employment from home has been studied for many years, and its effects have been examined since the 1950s (Davies & Frink, 2014; Shamir & Salomon, 1985), including its effects on cost savings and employee performance. Many organizations worldwide allow employees to work from home because of such advantages as flexibility, autonomy, and comfort in the employee's personal space, savings of travel time, and improved efficiency (Farooq & Sultana, 2022). Bloom, Liang, Roberts, and Ying (2015) found that working from home led to a 13% increase in performance. Workers from home also reported an improvement in job satisfaction, and their burnout rate decreased by 50%. Given the success of the experiment, the organization allowed employees to choose between working from the office or from home, as a result of which, more than half the employees switched to working from home, leading to a 22% increase in profits. This case illustrates the benefits of organizational learning and employee participation in decisions (Bloom et al., 2015).

In general, the ability to perform flexibly away from the premises of the organization is an element that many employees value highly (Bloom et al., 2015; Conradie & De Klerk, 2019). Studies have shown that employment from home, or remote employment, is linked to improvement in organizational capabilities, higher employee engagement, an increase in productivity, a willingness to work more hours (Conradie & De Klerk, 2019; Lee, 2018) a reduction in absenteeism (Truss, Delbridge, Alfes, Shantz, & Soane, 2013) and increased financial effectiveness of the workplace (Bloom et al., 2015; Khodakarami & Dirani, 2020). Dockery and Bawa (2020) noted that some studies have found that working from home reduced the conflict between work and family, but other studies reported that the intrusion of work into the family space exacerbated the conflict.

During a crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic, the transition to working from home was determined, in most cases, without employee participation. During the crisis, flexibility may be critical for employees who

need to be at home to supervise their children and support homeschooling. Previous research has studied almost exclusively people who worked from home with mutual consent between the employee and the employer; during a crisis, this may be different because employees did not have this choice. Studies also found that the transition to working from home or working flexible hours, made employees who are parents of children more committed, engaged with the organization, and willing to stay with the company in the long term (Sousa et al., 2021; Young, 2019). Flexible working hours and the possibility of working from home, partly or fully, can help men and women with small children, especially single parents, and improve their quality of life (Abu-Hasan Nabwani & Sharabi, 2023; Young, 2019). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that organizations that allow employees to work from home strengthen their engagement (Devendhiran & Wesley, 2017; Mani & Mishra, 2020; Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Such a change increases employee engagement because it is related to flexibility, autonomy, work-life balance, renewal, equality of opportunity, feeling of being valued, mental wellbeing, and more especially for single parents. It can be assumed that the effect will be more significant in a complex period such as the closures during the corona epidemic when the children were at home and required the help of their parents (particularly the young ones). This help involved close and ongoing care, including emotional support and assistance with distance learning. In the case of single parents, this stands out more because they have no partner to rely on. Based on the above review, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H₁: In the case of a switch to a hybrid mode or to working from home, parents of young children (under the age of 13), especially single parents, will be more engaged with the organization than those without children or those with adult children.

2.5. Employee Engagement and Work Centrality during the COVID-19 Crisis

During the COVID-19 epidemic, restrictions on mobility and closures were imposed. Worldwide, organizations changed their work modes and allowed employees to work from home either partially or fully (Koohsari, Nakaya, Shibata, Ishii, & Oka, 2021). Brynjolfsson et al. (2020) found that between February and May 2020, more than a third of the American workforce switched to working from home, and later about a half worked from home. During this period, unemployment reached 14.7%, affecting the labor market in multiple areas. Reduction of consumer and business activity was either voluntary or imposed by the government, which ordered social distancing and the closing of non-essential workplaces as part of its effort to contain the pandemic (Lee, Park, & Shin, 2021). Industries with a higher percentage of educated workers made an easier transition to working from home, with little loss of productivity, as opposed to organizations with a high percentage of less-educated workers (Bartik, Cullen, Glaeser, Luca, & Stanton, 2020). Farooq and Sultana (2022) also noted that because of the COVID-19 epidemic, there is an expectation that in the future less work will be carried out in the office and more from home. Israel also adopted procedures to curb the epidemic, including closures, social distancing, and leaving the home only for essential operations. Many businesses laid off workers or put them on unpaid leave (Shlomi, 2023).

At the beginning of the crisis, the focus of the organizations was the preservation of their reputation, relations, and performance vis-à-vis external stakeholders. The emphasis on external communication strategies has led to a neglect of internal crisis communication, especially with employees. This biased distribution of organizational attention was problematic because employees play a vital role in the success of organizations in times of crisis and managing communication with them is critical. Management can help build economic resilience and reduce negative effects during a crisis by targeting positive adaptive behaviors and implementing communication and sharing strategies to preserve and strengthen the employee's engagement. Eventually, it is the employees who maintain the level of performance of their duties at work, therefore they significantly affect the ability of the organization to go through crises effectively (Tao, Lee, Sun, Li, & He, 2022).

Farooq and Sultana (2022) studied the relationship between working from home and employee productivity in India during the COVID-19 epidemic and found a negative correlation between working from home and employee productivity, especially for women. The researchers explained this finding by arguing that working from home allowed flexibility in working hours but involved the family chores that women felt more responsible for performing. The findings reflect the tension between home and family (Abu-Hasan Nabwani & Sharabi, 2023). Working from home increases involvement in family chores and can weaken the centrality of work, especially for women (Farooq & Sultana, 2022), and especially at a time when the children are confined to the family space and learn from home (because of closures and social distancing) (Shlomi, 2023).

Studies about the economic and human effects of the epidemic on workers are still being conducted, with mixed findings. A study conducted in South Africa during the closures found that working exclusively from home could harm the employees' engagement to the point of burnout, especially when they had no influence on the decision about the work mode. Employees preferred the flexibility of working in a hybrid mode and having the ability to work from home only 2-3 times a week because face-to-face interactions remained important to them (Klerk, Joubert, & Mosca, 2021). By contrast, parents of young children became more engaged after switching to working from home (Mani & Mishra, 2020; Sousa et al., 2021).

However, employee engagement, which is achieved mainly by non-material incentives (Hu et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2004) weakens when employees are present partially and especially when they work fully from home. The inability to communicate face-to-face with colleagues and managers, and the difficulty in creating consolidating events that support psychological empowerment and the strengthening of the psychological contract weakens employee's engagement as they become less present in the organization. Past experience has shown that in difficult and demanding business situations, employee morale is the first to suffer. Companies that succeed in getting through the crisis and preserving the engagement of their workforce do so through creativity, effective internal communication of the organization's leadership with employees, and support for employees who participate in the processes and decisions about coping with the crisis (Mani & Mishra, 2020; Tao et al., 2022).

As noted, employees with high engagement play a central role in the success of the organization because they feel more responsible for the organization and for the quality of the product or service, especially during a crisis. In a crisis, employers face intense pressures, and organizations with a history of employee participation and involvement have a better chance of survival (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012). Considering the above, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H₁: The engagement and work centrality of those who continued to work in the organization will be higher than that of those who switched to working in a hybrid mode, and especially than of those who switched to working fully from home.

H₂: Employees' engagement and work centrality will be related to the degree of their participation in the employment mode; they will be the highest when the change in the way they are employed was made with their participation and consent, and lowest when it was imposed on them.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. The Sample

The study was conducted during the COVID-19 period, therefore some employees worked from home and some in a hybrid mode. We used the ELIXIR research institute, which has a database of people working in all mods of employment and in various fields, to collect the data. The institute distributed the questionnaires by email and participants completed them online.

The sample consisted of 300 people, aged 18-71, 50% men. The average age of the women was 36.6 years and of the men 40.6 years; 53.7% had children below the age of 13, the rest had no children or children over the age of 13. Of the participants, 58.7% had academic education; 9.7% had an income below 6,000 NIS, 33% had 6,000-11,000 NIS, 27% had 11,000-16,000 NIS, and 30.3% above 16,000 NIS.

3.2. The Questionnaire and Measures

We used a four-part online questionnaire: the first part contained demographic questions; the second part questions about employee engagement; the third part questions about work centrality in their lives; and the fourth part questions about the work mode and the extent of their participation in the decision regarding the employment mode.

The research indicators were:

Employee engagement measure was based on the questionnaire of Harter et al. (2006). It included 12 questions answered on a scale ranging from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (very satisfied). For example: "This organization is known as a good employer" and "I find that my values and those of the organization are very similar" (Cronbach's alpha=0.89).

Work centrality measure was based on the questionnaire of Paullay, Alliger, and Stone-Romero (1994). It included 5 questions answered on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (completely agree). For example: "Life is only worth something when a person is involved in his work" and "Work should be considered a central factor in life" (Cronbach's alpha=0.80).

Mode of employment during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1=work on premises, 2=hybrid mode, 3=work from home.

Degree of participation and agreement about the employment mode: 1=there was no change in the employment mode; 2=the change was made by the organization with my consent; 3=A change was made jointly; 4=the change was made without my consent.

Table 1. Differences in work centrality and employee engagement (ANOVA) based on the degree of sharing in the decision concerning the employment mode.

Research variables	No change in employment mode		Change with my agreement		Change with mutual agreement		Change without my agreement		F
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Employee engagement	3.88	0.78	3.85	0.64	3.87	0.66	3.73	0.67	0.50
Work centrality	3.80	1.10	3.49 ^a	1.15	3.55 ^a	1.01	3.47 ^a	1.01	1.59

Note: a. In these cases, work centrality was significantly lower ($P<0.05$) than among those that there was no change in their employment mode.

4. Findings

To examine how the degree of employee participation and agreement to employment mode affected the level of engagement and the centrality of work, we conducted a one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance). As shown in Table 1, there was no difference in the level of engagement of those whose employment mode did and did not change. We found no significant differences in the engagement of the three groups whose employment mode changed (with employee consent, with mutual consent, or without employee consent) ($F=0.71, p=0.49$), although it was lower for those whose change took place without their consent.

Table 2. Differences in work centrality and employee engagement (ANOVA) based on employment mode.

Research variables	Work on premises		Hybrid mode		Work from home		F
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Employee engagement	3.88	0.75	3.82	0.70	3.83	0.61	0.81
Work centrality	3.80	1.10	3.56	1.17	3.40	0.95	3.49*

Note: * $P<0.05$.

Table 2 shows the differences in employee engagement and work centrality of employees who continued to work on premises, switched to a hybrid mode, or switched to working from home. The findings show a significant difference in the level of work centrality of employees by type of employment mode ($F=3.49, p<0.05$). Employees who continued to work on premises showed the highest work centrality ($M=3.8$) and those who switched to working fully from home showed the lowest ($M=3.4$). We found no differences in the level of employee engagement between those who worked in a hybrid mode and those who continued to work on premises or from home. Thus, hypothesis 3 was partially confirmed as there was a decrease only in work centrality.

Table 3 shows that a change in employment mode did not change the engagement of employees without children or whose children were over the age of 13. But there was a decrease in the engagement of parents of children up to the age of 13 living with a partner and a dramatic increase in the engagement of single parents of children up to the age of 13. Thus, hypothesis 2 was partially confirmed, as the increase in the engagement of parents of children up to the age of 13 was shown only for single parents.

Table 3. Differences in employee engagement (ANOVA) based on family status and the change in employment mode.

Employment mode	No children or children over 13 years old		Living with a partner and children below age 13		Single parents of children below age 13		F
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Continue working on premises	3.75	0.82	4.10	0.52	3.10	0.80	3.03**
Switched to hybrid work or working from home	3.72	0.71	3.88 ^a	0.63	4.10 ^b	0.62	3.41***

Note: ** $P<0.01$; *** $P<0.001$.

a. The engagement of parents after the change in employment mode was lower than that of those whose employment mode did not change ($P<0.08$).

b. The engagement of parents after the change in employment mode was significantly higher than those whose continue working on premises ($P<0.01$).

Table 4. Linear regression model for employee engagement based on demographic variables.

Variable	β	S.E.	Beta
Constant	3.74***	0.16	
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	0.03	0.08	0.02
Education (1= academic, 0=non-academic)	0.04	0.09	0.03
Organizational status (1=manager, 0=worker)	0.06	0.10	0.04
Family status (1=children below age 13, 2=no children or children over age 13)	0.18	0.08	0.13*
Degree of participation (1=with my consent, 0=other)	-0.06	0.13	-0.04
Degree of participation (1=against my consent, 0=other)	-0.17	0.16	-0.09
Degree of participation (1=mutual, 0=other) ^a			
Work mode (1=home, 0=other)	-0.04	0.13	-0.03
Work mode (1=hybrid, 0=other)	-0.03	0.14	-0.02
Work mode (1=on premises, 0=other) ^a			
Age	-0.00	0.00	-0.07
Income level	0.07	0.05	0.10
R ²		0.15	
F		0.98	

Note: ^a Dummy variable.

* $P<0.10$; ** $P<0.05$; *** $P<0.001$.

To test hypothesis 1, which predicts a positive relationship between employee engagement and work centrality in each of the three modes of employment, we conducted a Pearson correlation test. We found a significant positive correlation between employee engagement and work centrality for those who continued to work on premises ($R^2=.32, P<.001$) and those who switched to hybrid work ($R^2=.22, P<.01$), and a low significance among employees who switched to work fully from home ($R^2=.15, P<.07$). Thus, although the hypothesis was confirmed, the correlation between the two variables became weaker as the presence of the employees on premises decreased.

To examine the effect of the demographic variables on employee engagement and centrality of work, we performed linear regression analyses. **Tables 4, 5.** Overall, the demographic variables have a low capability of explaining the employee engagement and work centrality of the participants.

Table 4 shows that except for the family situation, demographic variables had no effect on employee engagement. Parents of children up to the age of 13 showed higher engagement than those without children or parents of older children. Work centrality was higher for men than for women and for managers than for workers, and it increased with employee age. Moreover, those who worked from home had lower work centrality than those who worked on hybrid mode or on premises **Table 5.**

5. Discussion

Because of the COVID-19 crisis, at the beginning of 2020, many organizations were forced to change the mode of employment of many of their employees from working on premises to working from home or in a hybrid mode. The crisis and its constraints created a new reality which made it possible to examine employees' work centrality and engagement to the organization, in all three modes of employment. The present study also investigated the effect of variables such as the degree of employee acceptance of the change and of demographic factors on employee engagement and the centrality of work in their lives.

The findings indicate that the employees' engagement and work centrality did not depend on the degree of their participation in the decision to change the employment mode. These findings are contrary to those of other studies and models because forcing decisions about a change in work mode harms the main elements of employee engagement, such as a sense of appreciation, self-worth, involvement, and cooperation (Mani & Mishra, 2020; Robinson et al., 2004) building of trust, honesty, and open communication between management and employees (Agrawal, 2016). These findings also contradict Kanungo (1982) study, which found a positive correlation between work centrality and participation in decision-making and job satisfaction. Lack of attention to employees' wishes and needs is expected to decrease their work centrality (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2010). Our study found that the work centrality of employees who continued to work on premises during the COVID-19 crisis was higher than that of employees who switched to working in a hybrid mode, and especially higher than that of employees who worked from home. This finding was expected because presence in the workplace fulfills the employees' need for interpersonal relationships, social activity, and the feeling of being important to the organization, which increases work centrality (Jiang & Johnson, 2018; Moshe Sharabi, 2017). Work is part of individuals' life areas; therefore its centrality is related to other areas of life such as family and leisure (Moshe Sharabi, 2017; Sharabi & Harpaz, 2007). Therefore, the transition to partially or fully working from home increases involvement in family activities and household management, and family life becomes more central at the expense of the centrality of work, especially for those who have switched to working fully from home.

Table 5. Linear regression model for work centrality based on demographic variables.

Variable	β	S.E.	Beta
Constant	3.35***	0.25	
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	0.22	0.13	0.10+
Education (1= academic, 0=non-academic)	0.09	0.15	0.04
Organizational status (1=manager, 0=worker)	0.31	0.16	0.12*
Family status (1=children below age 13, 2=no children or children over age 13)	0.02	0.13	0.01
Degree of participation (1=with my consent, 0=other)	-0.17	0.20	-0.08
Degree of participation (1=against my consent, 0=other)	-0.21	0.25	-0.07
Degree of participation (1=mutual, 0=other) ^a			
Work mode (1=home, 0=other)	-0.01	0.21	-0.14*
Work mode (1=hybrid, 0=other)	-0.14	0.22	-0.06
Work mode (1=on premises, 0=other) ^a			
Age	0.01	0.01	0.10+
Income level	-0.07	0.08	-0.07
R^2	0.23		
F	2.41*		

Note: ^a Dummy variable.
 + $P<0.10$; * $P<0.05$; *** $P<0.001$.

Additional, job instability harms work centrality (Sharabi, Abu-Hasan Nabwani, Shahor, & Simonovich, 2021) whereas job security enhances it (Noon & Morrell, 2017). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that for

workers whose mode of employment has not changed, the effect of stability in employment on their lives and mental wellbeing was positive (Hu et al., 2021). Consequently, in a crisis, work centrality should be higher for such employees than for those who experienced an upheaval in their mode of employment (in addition to the other upheavals caused by the global crisis). Yet, we found no decrease in the level of engagement of employees who switched to a hybrid mode or to working fully from home compared to that of employees who continued to work on premises.

These unexpected findings may be attributed to the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 epidemic, when many organizations dismissed employees or put them on unpaid leave, and many experienced uncertainty and job insecurity. Thus, continued employment was not self-evident, and organizations that retained their workers won their appreciation even if the employees did not participate in the decision to switch to working partially or fully from home. Jaupi and Llaci (2014) found a relationship between employee engagement and unemployment rate, so that the higher the unemployment was in the employees' environment, the more engaged they felt with the workplace, and during COVID-19 there was a dramatic increase in unemployment rate throughout the country. Hu et al. (2021) also noted that the higher the insecurity of the employees was, the lower their sense of mental wellbeing was. Organizations that provided job security during the crisis preserved the mental wellbeing of their employees, their commitment and identification with the organization, even if they were not involved in the decision to change their mode of employment. This also explains the general lack of decrease in engagement of employees who switched to working from home or in a hybrid mode.

Furthermore, the decision to continue employment was positively related to employee engagement because it had to do with organizational support, career commitment, leadership decision making, and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) (Mani & Mishra, 2020; Tao et al., 2022). The transition to working partially or fully from home also meets the need of the employee for empowerment, flexibility, work-life balance, and other variables that are also positively related to employee engagement (Agrawal, 2016; Mani & Mishra, 2020; Robinson et al., 2004). Thus, the opposing effects of non-involvement of the employees in the decision about the mode of employment, and their continued employment during the crisis appear to have resulted in no change in the engagement of the employees.

Similarly, to other studies, we found a clear positive correlation between employee engagement and work centrality in all three employment modes (e.g., (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Kahn, 2010; Sousa et al., 2021)) but the relationship weakened with decrease of the employees' presence on the premises. Thus, while the employee engagement remained stable, the centrality of work decreased for those who worked in a hybrid mode and especially for those who worked fully from home.

Regarding our assumption that the flexibility of the working mode (hybrid or from home) increases the engagement of parents of young children (up to age 13) compared to those with older or no children, we found a rather complex picture. Sousa et al. (2021) found that employees with parental responsibilities greatly valued change and adaptation of the nature of their work to their family needs, such as working from home or working flexible hours, resulting in greater commitment and engagement with the organization. Flexible working hours and the possibility of working from home, partially or fully, can make it easier for men and women with small children, especially for single parents, and improve their quality of life (Watai, Nishikido, & Murashima, 2008; Young, 2019). This can enhance their engagement with the organization particularly in times of crisis (Sousa et al., 2021). We found, as expected, that the transition to work from home or a hybrid mode did not change the engagement of employees who were not parents or whose children were older than 13 years. We also found that single parents with children under the age of 13 who switched to work from home or to a hybrid mode showed the highest engagement of all employees whose work modes changed. Single parents with young children needed maximum presence at home because they lacked additional parental support. This stood out during the crisis when school closures and cessation of social activities that confined children to their homes. For single parents, the transition to working from home was a critical need to supervise their children and support home learning. It is therefore possible to understand the frustration of single parents who were forced to continue working on premises, reflected in the fact that their engagement with the organization was the lowest.

However, the engagement of parents of young children who had a partner and switched to either working from home or in a hybrid mode was lower than that of those who continued to work on premises. Dockery and Bawa (2020) indicated that working from home can exacerbate work-family conflict. We can assume that the transition of one or both spouses to working from home when they were under lockdown with young children created tensions and conflicts that made it difficult for them. Some may not have understood the necessity of their presence in the home, and the decision of the organization, which was imposed on them in most cases, did not match their needs and expectations and harmed their engagement.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to the understanding of the consequences of switching to working partially or fully from home for work centrality and engagement in crisis situations and in general. A change in employment mode that is dictated to employees in times of crisis does not harm their engagement if they understand the

circumstances of the decision. Even partially or fully reducing their physical presence in the organization does not cause a decrease in their engagement to the organization. Employing workers in crisis situations, when other organizations lay off employees and unemployment rates soar, appears to increase appreciation of the organization and contribute to strengthening the psychological contract of mutual obligations. Furthermore, the trust that the organization provides when it grants complete independence to employees working partially or fully from home, contributes to their psychological empowerment (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Sousa et al., 2021). All these factors preserve and deepen the emotional attachment to the organization in the situations described above (Hu et al., 2021; Maleka, Schultz, van Hoek, Dachapalli, & Ragadu, 2017). But irrespective of crisis situations, work centrality decreases as employees are present at work less, because household-family tasks take a more central place.

As a rule, the engagement of parents of young children is higher than that of workers without or with older children, therefore they show a lesser tendency to leave the organization. We found that the transition of parents of young children to working from home did not guarantee the preservation of engagement. The transition to working from home was best suited for single parents with young children, and their engagement increased significantly when their needs were fulfilled. The needs of parents of young children who had a partner to work partially or fully from home should be examined further. If the partners also work from home, some may prefer to work fully or partially on premises, which will make it possible to preserve their engagement. Similarly, to Klerk et al. (2021) we found that participants preferred a hybrid work mode to get the most out of both options, this transition made it possible to better preserve employee engagement and work centrality.

In conclusion, it can be said that crisis situations present organizations with ethical and managerial dilemmas concerning employees and other stakeholders (customers, suppliers, shareholders, etc.). Downsizing and layoff solutions are based on short-term thinking, and their price is expressed in loss of trust, commitment, and engagement of the remaining employees. The challenge of retaining employees and providing a sense of job security in a crisis environment reflects long-term thinking because it strengthens the psychological contract between management and employees. The result is high organizational performance owing to the employees' high motivation, engagement, commitment, and work centrality (see (Hu et al., 2021; Sousa et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2022)).

The COVID-19 crisis forced organizations to use a variety of forms of coping and undermined earlier paradigms and axioms. Working in a hybrid mode becomes a standard and requires managers to adopt a different approach that empowers employees and strengthens their engagement. Surma, Nunes, Rook, and Loder (2021) noted the need to redesign the workplace, including rethinking how we measure employee engagement. In their opinion, managers play a crucial role in ensuring that employees feel engaged and involved, even when they are not physically in the office.

The research limitation is sample size. Three hundred participants form a relatively small sample, and the segmentation into subgroups made it difficult to obtain clearer findings. Future studies can test the employee engagement and work centrality of employees working partially or fully from home and compare the results with the findings obtained during the crisis period. An examination of other variables that may affect the employees' engagement and the centrality of their work (type of organization, type of work, employment status, etc.) could contribute to the field. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research could provide a deeper understanding of the factors that strengthen and weaken employee engagement and the centrality of work.

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