The Role of Human Relationships in Organizational Sense-Making During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from a Structural Model

Anna Marrucci*, Riccardo Rialti†, Cristiano Ciappei‡, Marina Gallucci§

Abstract

The current Covid-19 pandemic disrupted traditional organizational business models. In this regard, one of the principal effects has been related with prolonged absence from the workplaces. Due to these changes, it has been observed how cohesion deriving from organizational-sense making is starting to disaggregate. Henceforth, this research focus on the exploration of relational goods (deriving from inter-subjective and reflexive relationships) as a mean of sense-making within the organization. In particular, the effects of relational goods on affective commitment, willingness to share information online, and turnaround intention. To do so, a conceptual model has been developed and tested trough a survey administered to employees of several Italian enterprises recurring to smart-working during the pandemic.

Keywords: Human Relationships; Relational Goods; Sense-Making; Smart Working; Covid-19.

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1. Introduction

The quest for profit has driven enterprises toward models focused on overcoming competitors. Accordingly, the most of organizations poses amidst their main objectives the pursue of increased profit for shareholders. Such models, while coherent with traditional stewardship theory, often mismatch with objectives that organizations should pursue in current times.

As an example, nowadays stakeholders ask organization to be more environmental conscious. One the principal objectives should therefore be the reduction of carbon emission and the increase of their social responsibilities. Likewise, organization should try to become inclusive workplaces, thus respecting the right of minorities and be capable to hear their voices. Then, it emerged how organizations should currently become places allowing individuals to develop themselves (De Leede & Heuver, 2016). Each individual, in fact, spend the most of their lives in their workplace with their colleagues. Hereby, the need to understand how organization may become more human-centric places is fundamental (Stigliani & Elsbach, 2018). Organizations are in fact formed not only by bricks, mortars and infrastructures, they are formed by people living organizational life every day. Organization are networks of social relationships, and their success if often related to this specific element. Human relations in the workplace are therefore the bases of individual and organization-wide sense-making, which is fundamental to create and share new knowledge within the organization (Vaggelas & Leotta, 2019). Likewise, trough sense-making and human interactions people may contribute to the development of a broad organization culture, thus shaping the ways the business operate and how it is perceived in the external environment (De Gennaro et al., 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought back the need to study the relevance of relations within organizations and sense-making back to organization scholars' tables (Donati, 2019; Fiocca, 2020). In particular, among the effects of pandemic there was the forcibly distance from the workplaces and colleagues, thus relationships existing in the workplaces started to disaggregate (Donati, 2011). Quarantines, social distancing, increased job rotation, and smart or remote working, as well as any other measure implemented to reduce the spread of the contagion, imply indeed the reduction of inter-personal relationships which represent the fabric of our societies. The case of smart-working (or remote working) is anyway emblematic among the previous ones. While in the past working from home was perceived as a benefit for the most of employees, nowadays it is principally a psychological burden for the most of people. Indeed, the effects of continuous distance from peers has proven challenging and capable to strain the most of work-based relationships (Youndt et al., 2004). Specifically, prolonged absences from physical work is causing employees to lose touch with organization reality and their colleagues. In this regard, it is possible to observe how employees feel estranged from their organizations and their job when they are coming back to work.

Such an occurrence may be attributed to increasing loss of sense-making due to prolonged distance from their colleagues and their everyday routines (Randon et al., 2008). The absence of relationships could in fact make people not develop their inner

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selves (Sacco & Vanin, 2000). Specifically, if employees are not receiving positive feedbacks from their colleagues, they may not improve their capabilities, or their abilities to related with different tasks (Chen et al., 1998).

Building on these problems deriving from increasing alienation, it is henceforth necessary to identify the importance of human relationships in creating sense-making within the organizations (Guiso et al., 2004; Donati, 2019). In detail, it fundamental to observe if these relationships could be useful in the development of employees' affective commitments, their willingness to share information during smart-working, and reduced turnaround intention when returning in the office. In detail, there is the need to observe how employees may use digital communication tools (i.e. any ICTs) to communicate work and personal related information as a consequence of relational goods existing in the organization (Donati, 2019; Cristofaro, 2021). Thus, it is fundamental to observe how relational goods may be fundamental to develop a sense of commitment within the organization which may be related to continuance of communication between employees even during difficult times. Relational goods and their effects could therefore represent a way to keep organization united while employees are working remotely (Marrucci et al., 2020).

Hereby, the research tries to reply the aforementioned research questions:

RQ: Are relational goods relevant for the development of organization-wide sense-making, affective commitment, and intention to share information through online platforms? Likewise, could they be useful to reduce turnover intention.

To do so, a conceptual model has been developed and tested trough structural equation modelling.

The research is structured as follow. The next section describes the importance of relational goods for organizational sense-making. The third one deals with the selected method, namely SEM (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The fourth one instead deals with conclusions and implication for managers. Then, the final ones propose some avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Sense-making and relationships between subjects

Enterprises are relational networks characterized by multiple identities. In his explicative research, Fisher (1987), highlighted the concept of relational network by pointing out how the organizational system is manifested through a series of actions, words and facts that acquire meaning for those who are involved in the enterprise, i.e., the employees (Pellegrini et al., 2017). Ideas and values of an enterprise are indeed transmitted through sharing procedures that aim to consolidate a sense of corporate identity. Henceforth, the notion of identity becomes a fundamental aspect to outline the corporate culture and the meaning of what is intended to be communicated, the process of identification -for both an individual and an

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organization- is dynamic (Colville et al., 2012). Thus, it is necessary to abandon the concept of identity-root to accept the identity-relationship to create a bridge that can transmit culture and value (Gioia et al., 1996). Any company in fact determines its identity through the internal relationships in existence in within its boundaries. It is thanks to these relationships between employees that the company is able to generate sense and meaning with the aim of prospering and surviving in the market (Grant et al., 2008). Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to take care of the relations between the subjects present internally (and externally) to the company.

Although the market is evolving, it is important for a company to cope with the transfer and retention of knowledge between employees. (Lau et al., 2019). Corporate culture is related to the materiality of a company and its daily life; the culture of a company consists of people, objects, places, hierarchies, and processes that are organized through planned actions and rituals. In this context of value generation and sense-making, human beings play a crucial role (Bagnoli & Tabaglio, 2020). Analyzing the concept of sense generation means delving into the concept of sense-making.

Indeed, sense-making is the process by which people make meaning of their collective experiences through the continuous development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing (Weick et al., 2008). Weick (2008) emphasizes the role of the cognitive process that allows the active subject to create meaning (sense-making) by organizing streams of experience. Accordingly, the individual actively continues to make sense of his or her activity and work in the organization in a continuous process of breaking and regrouping sense-making (Weick et al., 2005).

The process of sense-making transforms multifarious and disordered streams of experience into ordered, generative, and meaningful experiences. Consistently, it is possible to interpret experiences, giving them sense and logical order (Bertezzaghi, 2010). The concept of sense-making is closely related to *pràgma*, that action (activity) that undergoes a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation (Pellegrini et al., 2021).

Subsequent research shows that the sensemaking process is carried out initially at an individual level and then collectively. Thus, the sensemaking process is interpreted as an interaction of interconnected individual and collective levels. The escalation from the individual to the collective sense making takes place through sensemaking–sense-giving cycles confirming the interdependence between the entities through the exchange of mutual feedbacks (i.e. Reflexive-Sensegiving; Robert & Ola, 2021). These cycles, which are not strictly sequential but also take place simultaneously (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015), are based on the emotional and cognitive contagion between the organizational agents. In addition, influences can occur in terms of culture, identity, emotional states, organizational and over-organizational environment (Cristofaro, 2021).

This new interpretation leads to the reinforcement of behavioral decision-making theories such as Affect-Cognitive Theory (Cristofaro 2020a; b; 2021), leading to the explanation of the link between sensemaking and decision-making processes in a structured and interrelated way. Accordingly, this theory "emphasizes the role of affective states in determining/being determined by cognition and its errors, emphasizing the influence of decision makers as the result of multilevel adaptations

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to the physical and social environment" (Cristofaro, 2020). Therefore, decisions are modified according to the physical and social environment.

Also, Maitlis and Christianson (2014) and Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) conclude how the sensemaking process is triggered through external and identity threats. They demonstrate how the cognitive and emotional process of generating meaning is influenced by the social and contextual environment in which it takes place. Moreover, they affirm the great importance held by the organizational sense that is at the base of organizational learning (Abatecola et al., 2018), of the relationship between employees and of the generation of sense in the enterprise.

Thus, sense-making is a process that gives meaning and creates value for the individual and the community. Sense-making is the element that places agents' stimuli into a shared frame of meaning and structure. In line with this idea, sense-making is the result of relationships that are continuously redefined between subjects immersed in a contextual environment that implies and conditions actions and behaviors.

In this regard, recent research argues that today it becomes essential to communicate and share the meanings that guide one's actions. Most innovations are the result not of the single company, but of processes shared by the network of heterogeneous actors involved (Prior et al., 2018; Robert & Ola, 2021). To support this, it has been observed how a business strategy based on sense-making may bring an increase in innovative employee behavior. (Shin et al., 2017). Anyway, sensemaking research somewhat limited its reach a focal event occurring within organization's life, but the pandemic situation has led some scholars to expand and better understand the nature and interconnection of sensemaking processes in a broader context (Stigliani & Elsbach, 2018). As the pandemic is leading to a constellation of crises - for example, the accompanying economic crisis, civil unrest in the face of racial inequality and the rapidly intensifying consequences of climate change (fires, hurricanes, etc.) - and an increase in the number of different sensemaking and sensegiving entities - from government institutions to medical professionals to social media celebrities - it is necessary to shed some lights among these emerging narratives (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

Thus, it is appropriate to point out the concept of sensemaking to better understand the path that companies can take in order to maintain and develop meaningful relationships. In the post-covid 19 context, individual sensemaking can also be motivated by the need for social connection. Since many suffer from isolation from colleagues, friends and family, the desire to connect - to find their own community - can lead to narratives shaped by the desire to ally with a social movement or claim a political identity (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Therefore, it denotes how the concept of organization can be, at the relational level, also seen as community.

What sustains the business cycle, and the success of a company is the existence of communities of meaning that arise and develop around the sharing of common meanings and experiences. The design of meaning requires high investments in relationship, in dialogue, in opportunities to meet and compare with others. Specifically, human capital concept is becoming increasingly important in

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organizational contexts. It is the engine of the processes of change and business innovation and fundamental key to sense making with the aim of the improving enterprise's performance. It follows that the organizational climate becomes the unit of measure of the relations present within the organization. Today, the importance of the employee's well-being and how this leads to create business value and profit, is increasingly being supported (Mattiazzi, 2019).

Thus, the return to the relational capacity of people is the step to be taken to develop new possibilities and give life to new realities (Rullani et al., 2014).

2.2 An approach to Sense-making: relational activity

To foster sense-making within the organizations, relationships between subjects emerged then as fundamental. The importance of relationships in the enterprise increases its knowledge sharing capital. Moreover, they positively impact the competitive advantage held by the company, making it more sustainable over time (Debicki et al., 2020). Enterprises are indeed made up of interrelated entities. Human relationships and their connections and the creation of networks of relationships are fundamental for the life of a person and, therefore, for the generation of business sense. Thus, it becomes increasingly important to understand and keep them active (Nakayama, 2020).

Philosophically, human beings by nature are social animals by the fact that they connect and relate. A human being refers to other human beings in personal/individual environments or organizations. Through communication, messages are sent from one person to another or from one group to another group. Communication, like other human efforts, should promote the good and well-being of people, society and organizations (OmorovieIkeke, 2021).

One strand of the sensemaking literature suggests that groups of people generally tend to see and understand actions and events in similar ways (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Then, meaning is collective, and organizations become networks of intersubjectively shared meanings (Brown et al., 2008). Securing a set of shared meanings is critical for an organization: this makes it easier to govern and manage employees and new business dynamics. Employees to develop similar meanings need to be able to relate to each other: then social relationships have relevance in businesses. Indeed, managers should try to foster relationships among employees and should try to value the encounter for at least two reasons: first, groups of people who relate develop similar meanings; second, developing similar meanings could be a necessary condition for the success of job transformation situations, such as the adoption of remote work. This situation assumes that in face-to-face work contexts the company has valued relational activity. In this regard, Ahn and Hong (2009) examined the process by which individual knowledge is transformed into organizational knowledge clarifying the sensemaking process and shows how learning for the generation of organizational knowledge depends on participation and communication and requires voluntary and dynamic interactions based on inter-objectivity between members of the organization.

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Scholars have recently tried to include the theoretical modelling of relational dimension in the economic debate, focusing some research on the study of relational goods (Randon et al., 2008). This construct has emerged in sociological (Donati, 1986) and political fields (Uhlaner, 1989). Its different applications permeated the several spheres of social sciences (Bruni, 2004; Becchetti et al., 2011). Different studies suggest relational goods are those social relations that promote personal development and optimize economic resources towards sustainable and supportive modalities (Giorgi, 2008). Due to their social nature, relational goods can never be generated, consumed, or obtained independently, because they depend on interactions with others (Bruni & Stanca, 2008). Moreover, researches on this view assessed that relational goods are human relationships intrinsically motivated and not mediated by markets (Bartolini & Bilancini, 2010). Indeed, relational goods are social interactions resulting in co-production and co-consumption of relational activities. Hence, examples of relational activities are empathic communication, emotions, solidarity (Gui, 2005).

Regardless of the different fields of application, relational goods require reciprocity, simultaneity, motivation, gratuitousness (Bruni, 2013). More specifically, many studies have shown that the consumption of relational goods is positively associated with the development of subjective well-being (a.k.a. SWB; Bruni & Stanca, 2008) and, have as a result a sharing sense-making. Notwithstanding the extensive emphasis, there is still a gap in the economic literature on measurement of relational goods. Moreover, the literature on this construct is stalled: specifically, it has been deemed too complex to measure the magnitude of relational goods both on individual and on aggregate level (Bruni, 2013). Many studies have been undertaken to measure the importance of relational goods in non-profit organizations (Pena-Lopez et al., 2017). The literature highlights how NPOs engaged in care and treatment services, can produce relational goods. In these activities, face-to-face meeting and human development are in fact identarian prerogatives (Mosca et al., 2007). Despite the enormous importance given to sense-making and therefore held by relational activity, currently the meaning of relational good seems elusive and confusing. In more recent times, Donati (2011) defined social relationship as the immaterial reality of the interhuman link, i.e., a kind of entity that stands between two or more people. Accordingly, social relations are not merely interactions of exchange between individuals. Relations emerge from interactions, but they have their own reality. Relationships exceed the contents of exchange and communication (Donati, 2019). Affirming that relationships have an own reality means accepting that they have their own structure. Feelings and emotions, on the other hand, do not identify a relationship but are rather a reflection of individual subjects. Intersubjectivity and reflexivity are crucial in social relationships. Both aspects are intrinsically present in the relationship. Intersubjectivity refers to the concept of mindfulness and mutual awareness (Mori & Hayashi, 2006). Other approaches conceptualize intersubjectivity as an implicit behavioral orientation (Coelho & Figueiredo, 2003). Donati (2019) argues that the intersubjective relationship is an emerging social relationship having, as a necessary but not sufficient condition, an encounter of a scalar nature. Conversely, reflexivity is defined as a systemic act of questioning (Sandywell, 1996).

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Essentially, the purpose of reflexivity is to -crack the codes- bringing human creativity back to the center of the debate (Sandywell, 1996). Donati (2011) claims that reflexivity is the activity exercised by the human mind relating to something else. According to Donati "reflexivity is a relational operation made by an individual mind in relation to another within a social context, which generates a relationship that is an emerging effect among the terms it connects" (Donati, 2011 p.79). Intersubjectivity and reflexivity are the key drivers for the conceptualization of a social relationship. If a social relationship owns these two aspects, this same relationship will produce effects, i.e., relational goods.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical understanding in terms of effects that these goods could produce within for-profit enterprises who are adopting smart working.

To conceptualize and measure relational goods, it will be essential to investigate the aspects of intersubjectivity and reflexivity, since only these two factors define a social relationship and produce relational goods and common sense-making. Hence, the authors propose:

H1A: Relational Goods emerge if exit an intersubjective relationship

H1B: Relational Goods emerge if exit a reflexive relationship

2.3 The Importance of Relational Goods in post-Covid19 organizations: a conceptual framework

Market globalization and digitalization requires companies and individuals to deal with profound environmental changes and complexities. Indeed, technological changes should be accompanied by the constant search for sense-making. Following this line, the development of a more sustainable and humane environment requires the rediscovery of sense-making in experiences, and in work activity (Rullani et al., 2014). Finding meaning in everyday tasks is a challenge that businesses must face if they want to be seen as actors of social promotion. To develop a new significance of day-to-day activities, companies could seek to rediscover and enhance the social relationships that exist between employees.

Indeed, enterprises are organizations formed by human beings: if they lost their sense of cohesion, social development, and innovation, the whole society would lose. Many economic studies have explored social relations (Guiso et al., 2004), but relationality is conceptualized using an instrumental perspective, i.e., as a necessary tool to provide other goods and services. However, economic and social crises require solutions to individualistic isolation that can only be found in relational thinking.

Following this perspective, relational goods may be considered as a connector between the need to give meaning to human relationships and the isolation caused by technologies and remote working forms (Donati, 2019). Consistently, to address our research gap, we will empirically verify the influence that Relational Goods could exert on the first's grade variables Affective Commitment, Digital Information Exchange, and Turnover Intention.

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The research proposed a conceptual model based on the Self Determination Theory (SDT). According to STD, human-beings should be conceived as entities capable of realizing their capacities (Ryan, 2009). More specifically, an individual should satisfy three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relationality. Consequently, when these three needs are supported and satisfied within a social context, people experience more vitality, self-motivation, and well-being (Ryan, 2009). Following SDT, we assume that relationality creates knowledge sharing, leading the employee to exchange digital information with colleagues and increasing competences. Relationality allows employees to feel part of a group promoting identification with the organization. Generally, identification is connected to Affective Commitment (Meyer et al., 1993).

Relationality and Affective Commitment encourage an individual's self-determination by raising well-being and reducing Turnover Intention.

To support this idea, also Rhoades et al. (2001) through their research, affirm the inverse proportionality bond between an increase of Affective commitment and the consequent decrease in the Turnover Intention. Mercury's research (2015) indicates that affective commitment is one of the most predictive elements of the main organizational consequences such as turnover, absenteeism and organizational citizenship behavior. Thus, affective commitment more strongly influences work behaviors than other components or proposed forms of commitment and may be reasonably considered an essence of organizational commitment.

The model assumes that relationships are formed by the aspects of intersubjectivity and reflexivity, promoting relational goods. The literature has investigated the meaning of relational goods, especially on a theoretical level. The most important attempt was made by the sociologist Donati (2019) who has been able to seminally conceptualize and measure relational goods. Specifically, Donati's relational goods questionnaire (2011) will be replicated within for-profit context. We assume that relational goods are formed by an intersubjective and a reflexive aspect. Moreover, we hypothesize that relational goods could be an antecedent of Affective Commitment (Meyer et al., 1993) and Digital Information exchange (adapted from Youndt et al., 2004). Sense-making represented by social relationships, i.e., Relational Goods, may allow the employee to develop a greater emotional attachment, to become part of the company and involvement within the organization, even when working remotely, facilitating the exchange of (digital) information among employees and reducing information asymmetries. Moreover, social relations conceptualized as relational goods would reduce the employee's Turnover Intention (Chen et al., 1998).

Recent socioeconomic and technological changes in business environments have enabled new ways of working based on flexible work arrangements and an extensive use of information technologies that support employees to potentially work in any time and space (De Leede & Heuver, 2016). More exhaustively, smart working (SW) has been defined as an agile and dynamic way of working that leads to high performance, increased productivity, and improved job satisfaction that result is a "triple-win" configuration for customers, employees, and organizations (Gastaldi et al., 2014; Zheltoukhova, 2014; McEwan, 2016). To that regard, many scholars have indicated a new paradigm shift that "is being driven by extreme changes in

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approaches to work, work cultures, business architectures, premises, decision making, communications, and collaboration" (Boorsma & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2). The use of SW is not just related to efficiency, but implies a change in mentality and working methods, and improving work processes. For a company that is committed to the digital business transformation, using the positive influence that digital technologies have on labor organization, is an essential condition for a new organizational culture that should emerge in the coming years. For these reasons, managers cannot be focused only on performance and productivity indicators but should also be concerned about employee welfare and satisfaction (Menshikova et al., 2020).

With globalization and in the socio-economic context in which we live, we expect technology to always be at our service. We live in a digital world; our smartphones contain all the information needed to ensure daily productivity and to interact with others. However, when technology is lacking, we feel a sense of emptiness (Marquardt et al., 2012). Digital transformation, especially post-covid 19, has also impacted significantly companies going to create a sense of union and relationship between the exchange of information and digital tools, first only implemented at a personal level now also required at the corporate – professional – working level.

To do this, it becomes increasingly important to recruit new employees who are able to use new devices and tools and to bring novelties to the company, creating a harmonious, diversified and fully competitive company (Prezioso et al., 2020).

In this changing context, to achieve an efficient and simple exchange of information, the company could lead employees to take an active part in transforming the labor organization and process (Menshikova et al., 2020). This deeper participation results in a new possibility way, for the company, to exchange digital information between employees and through employees and enterprise. Managers who aim to fully benefit of SW practices should not only invest in the enabling digital technologies, but also make the complementary transformations in organizational policies and workspace settings, according to the contingent conditions under which they operate (Gastaldi et al., 2014). An empirical analysis establishes that Information, Connectivity and Automation systems are considered the most important elements of a Smart Working Environment (Angulo, 2015). The authors suggest the importance of the idea of a company as a community of people based on trust, on the individual and its relationships, on the creation of a shared meaning and an efficient business re-organization process (in line with SW). This could lead employees to feel in harmony with the enterprise. Together with innovative technologies, existing software, and process, this could result in an improvement and a new possible way of exchanging digital information.

Indeed, extant research shows how the importance of relationships between subjects (and employees) is crucial for the well-being of the individual and for sense-making. First, it shows how, during the pandemic, the use of media has increased, including text messages, voice calls and videos, the use of social media, email and online gaming platforms (Nguyen, 2020). Second, focusing on work context, compared to the pre-pandemic levels there is an increase in the number of meetings per person (+12.9%) and the number of participants per meeting (+13.5%) (De

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Filippis et al., 2020). The covid-19 situation and the relative exponential growth in the use of digital tools to maintain relationships between subjects (and employees), has led to (re)think of an innovative organizational model based on flexible work, namely like "smart working". This would help to maintain relationships between employees and therefore to the continuous generation of meaning, fundamental for a company (Sardi et al., 2021).

Nowadays situation is placing increasing importance on the issue of corporate welfare and how it should be improved in order to positively influence the employee's work. In this way, a working environment is created that positively influences the generation of meaning and, together, on the improvement and maintenance of social relations within the company especially if smart working and digital tools are used and maintained (Maino et al., 2020). Henceforth, it becomes pivotal to explore the role of digital information exchange in the organizations and its role in successive employees' motivations to continue to work in a specific work environment. Nowadays, in fact, information is mostly digitally exchanged.

Randel et al. (2007) demonstrate how motivation to maintain workplace relationships facilitates an individual's job performance. Also, the authors find that individuals with job facilitation motivation for maintaining social ties with coworkers engage in more interorganizational information exchange than do those with relationships one. When individuals have turnover intentions, the relationship between job facilitation motivation and interorganizational information exchange is stronger.

In sum, through sense-making and relational goods, an affective attitude, and a willingness to exchange digital information will develop. Thus, despite remote work, relational assets would lead to improved employee engagement with the company, increased work ethic, and improved psychological well-being. Consistently, employees will be more motivated to continue to work for the same company. Hence, the authors propose:

H2A: Relational Goods positively influence Affective Commitment.

H2B: Relational Goods positively influence digital Information exchange, reducing information asymmetries.

*H3A: Affective Commitment negatively influence Turnover intention.*

H3B: Information exchange negatively influence Turnover intention.

As a result, we hypothesize Affective Commitment as the mediating variable of the relationship between Relational goods and Turnover intention. Hence, the authors propose:

H4: Affective Commitment significantly mediates the relationship between relational goods and Turnover intention.

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Building on the previous assumptions, we propose the following structural model:

Figure n.1 - Conceptual framework
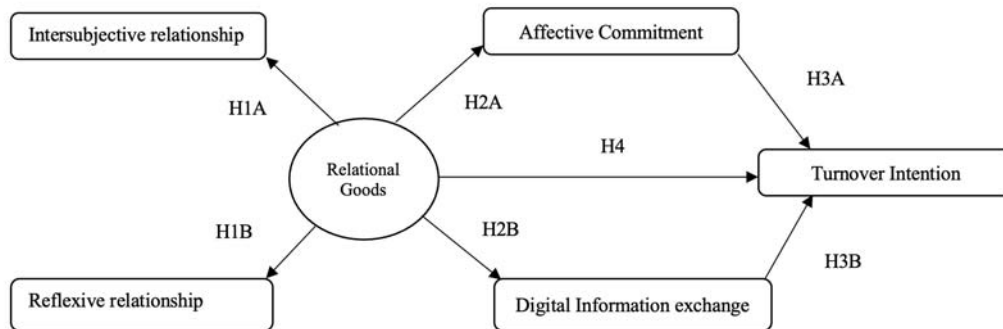
Source: authors' elaboration

3. Methodology

3.1 Research instrument

We developed a self-reported questionnaire consisting of thirty items to be validated and fourteen items previously validated by the pertinent literature. The first section of the survey questionnaire consisted in five control variables related to respondents' socio-demographics (i.e., gender, education, employment continuity, job position, company size). The following section was formed by thirty items to be validated: fourteen items was related to investigate intersubjective relationship; sixteen items was referred to reflexive relationship. According to Donati's research (2011), the dimensions that compose Relational Goods are intersubjectivity and reflexivity. We have decided to accept this essential assumption: Relational Goods derive from the union of two latent variables, intersubjective relationship, and the reflexive relationship. It was necessary to adapt the items to ensure the survey was clearly and easy to complete, appropriate in length, and with no grammar/lexical mistakes or ambiguous items. The third section of the questionnaire was comprised of fourteen items in three latent constructs: Affective Commitment (Meyer et al., 1993); digital Information exchange (adapted from Youndt et al., 2004); Turnover Intention (Chen et al., 1998). Differently, the original questions were translated and adapted from English to Italian following back-translation techniques. To decrease the social desirability bias and the relative variance of the common method (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we emphasized in the cover letter of the survey that the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the researchers were guaranteed. Furthermore, following Podsakoff et al. (2003, p.887), we separated

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items pertaining to independent variables – such as Relational Goods – from items pertaining to dependent variables – such as Turnover Intention. Items included in the research are shown in table 1.

Table n.1 – Constructs and Items

Constructs and Items		Alpha
Relational Goods		
Intersubjective Relationship		
IR1	I spend time on activities with intersubjective relationships	
IR2	I prefer to spend on dining or traveling with friends than to buying a state-of-the-art television set	
IR3	It is better to make new friends than to hang out with the usual people	
IR4	To overcome disagreements, dialogue must be re-established first	
IR5	Being together with others relieves tensions	
IR6	Being alone is sad	
IR7	Having lunch together with colleagues is a pleasant habit	0.779
IR8	It is useful talking to someone to understand our mistakes	
IR9	Taking yourself seriously requires confidence	
IR10	When an opportunity arises, others won't screw us over	
IR11	People's needs have the same relevance as ours	
IR12	Gratitude is demonstrated in person, with daily gestures	
IR13	If a friend treats me rudely, I should continue to see him or her	
IR14	There is only one human nature, different purposes and expressions are expressions of similar desires	
Reflexive Relationship		
RR1	To avoid risks, it is better to relate to people who look good	
RR2	People often understand our moods and feelings	
RR3	It's good to meet people you've lost touch with	
RR4	It is useful to discuss with people who have different opinions from ours	
RR5	Being with friends makes you feel good about yourself	
RR6	When you have problems, you can always count on the help of others	
RR7	Conversation is a pleasant way to spend time	0.748
RR8	Money matters do not threaten a fraternal friendship	
RR9	Establishing a reputation helps to build stable relationships	
RR10	It is important to have a close and informal relationship with friends	
RR11	It is important to meet friends even if you don't want to, otherwise you might lose them	
RR12	Giving confidence rarely leads to disappointment	
RR13	It is always possible to find common ground with people who think differently	

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RR14	Love requires reciprocity	
RR15	Friendships depend more on our will than on habits	
RR16	Meditating in solitude makes us understand the meaning of life	
Affective Commitment		
AC1	I feel part of a family in my workplace	
AC2	I feel emotionally attached to my workplace	0.905
AC3	The place where I work has important meaning to me	
AC4	I feel a strong sense of belonging to the place where I work	
Digital Information Exchange		
DIE1	Even though digitally, I like to collaborate with other employees to solve problems	
DIE2	Even though digitally, it is important to share information at work, learning from others	0.854
DIE3	Even though digitally, I interact and exchange ideas with people working in different areas of the organization	
DIE4	Although digital, I apply the knowledge I have learned to solve problems	
Turnover Intention		
TI1	I often think about resigning from my current job	
TI2	There is a high probability that I will look for a new job in the future	0.834
TI3	If I had to rechoose where to work, I would not select my current workplace	

Source. Author's elaboration

3.2 Data collection and analysis

We decide to use a sample of Italian SMEs employees to empirically validate the Relational Goods construct and test the hypothesized relationships. The target group consists of employees, self-employed workers, entrepreneurs, freelancers and other similar categories that have experienced smart working. The choice of these broad inclusion criteria was justified since social relations, i.e., relational assets, may affect any working environment (thus selecting any employment level was deemed appropriate). The collection method included dissemination on the main social networks, i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn and e-mail. A snowball sampling was therefore selected as the main procedure to collect data (Rialti et al., 2017; Zollo et al., 2021). Participant were anyway screened by active employment status and (main) working location in Italy. Effective use of smart-working tools was another selection criterion. Data were collected from April 2020 to June 2020.

We were able to collect 344 responses, which considered the sample size was adequate to conduct structural equation modelling analyses (Kline, 2015). The most of respondents were white collar workers (about the 65% of respondents). Average age of the respondents was 45 years.

Consequently, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using SPSS v.26 statistical software. This statistical analysis has provided the conditions to extract some considerations in terms of reliability and variance referred to the dimensions of Relational Goods. Factor analysis is structured on the assumption that the correlation

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between variables is determined by unobservable factors. After the exploratory factor analysis, we assessed the psychometric properties of the hypothesized model constructs (reliability and statistical validity). According to the traditional two-step analysis of covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), was performed a measurement model assessed the psychometric properties of the hypothesized model constructs; next, a structural model examined the statistical influences between the latent variables.

4. Results

4.1 Psychometric Properties and Correlation Analyses

We proceeded to calculate the reliability of each construct and their correlations. Adequacy is evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. This measurement verifies the effectiveness of the scales examined. Values below the critical limit (0.60) must necessarily be discarded. Affective Commitment achieves a high level of reliability (0.905); Information exchange's items results very good: the scale composed by 4 items is very reliable (0.854); Turnover Intention is the dependent variable of our conceptual model, composed by 3 items. Cronbach's Alpha is at high values (0.831). Aforementioned, the reliability of intersubjectivity and reflexivity is above the critical threshold (0.779; 0.748).

Table n.2 - Correlation matrix

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Intersubjective Relationship	*(,779)*				
2. Reflexive Relationship	,655**	*(,748)*			
3. Affective Commitment	,347**	,296**	*(,905)*		
4. Digital Information Exchange	,323**	,253**	,431**	*(,854)*	
5. Turnover Intention	-,213**	-,171**	-,625**	-,307**	*(,834)*

*Notes: Cronbach alpha's values in italic on the diagonal. ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; values without asterisks indicate non-significant correlations.*

Source: Author's elaboration

Once analyzed the different inter-item correlations that judge or prejudice the reliability of the single latent variables, it is useful to observe what degree of correlation there is between them. Through Pearson's correlation index we have

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analyzed the systemic relationship between the model variables. Intersubjective relationship and Reflexive relationship are the most positively correlated variables. This result is indispensable because, as widely discussed in the previous pages, it would be the union of the two relations to give origin to the construct of Relational goods (r = 0.655). Following this perspective, it is possible to explain the notion of social relation, moving away from the economic conceptualizations of relation and clinging to the sociological sphere. Affective Commitment shows a high correlation with Turnover Intention (r = -0.625) and Digital Information exchange (r=0.431). Table 1 shows correlation matrix.

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

We conducted both exploratory and confirmatory analyses (CFA). Varimax rotation confirmed two factors associated to relational goods scale: intersubjective and reflexive relationship. Therefore, has been calculated Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's test (KMO) to measure the level of sample adequacy (Kaiser, 1974). This procedure has been applied to both components. The factors adequacy is above acceptable range (0.795 - 0.786). The proportion of variance of each variable, -communality- and the total variance explained was then calculated. We also assessed the internal reliability of the two dimensions of relational goods by calculating a Cronbach's alpha for each dimension: the 14 intersubjective items =. 779, the 16 reflexive items =. 748. All values were appropriate. To determine the validity of our hypothesized model, we used structural equation modeling to conduct confirmatory factor analyses. We investigated if the loading factors (λ) - pathways between the second and first order variables - were significant ($\lambda \geq 0.3$) (Kline, 2015).
Figure 2 shows loading factors.

Figure n.2 - Factors loading
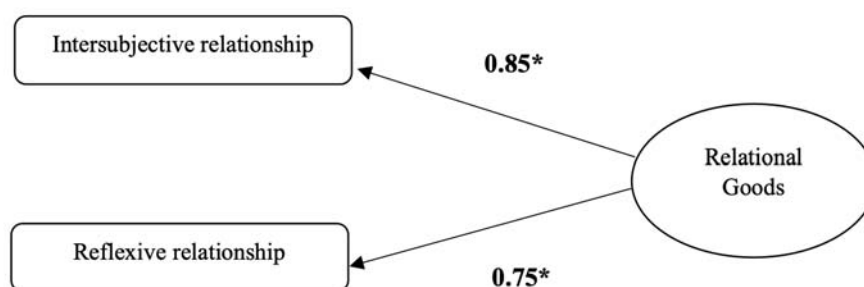
Source: Authors' elaboration

4.3 Structural model

Finally, to test our assumptions, we evaluated statistical influences among latent variables, as shown in Figure 3.
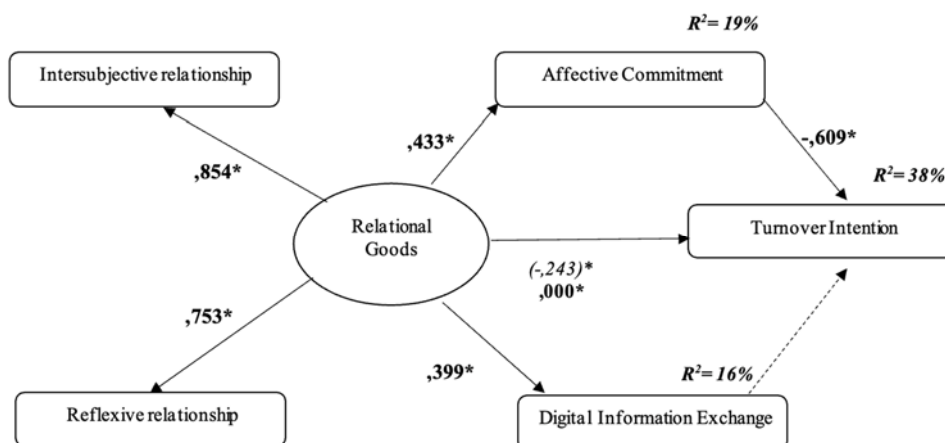
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As previously demonstrated, the intersubjective relationship and the reflexive relationship constitute the Relational Goods scale. Thus, supporting H1A and H1B. According to Donati (2019), Relational Goods are formed by two types of relationships, allowing the emergence of relational goods, i.e., benefits. Subsequently, Relational Goods positively influence Affective Commitment (β= +0.433; p<0.01), supporting H2A. According to SDT, Relational Goods positively influence Digital Information exchange (β= +0.399; p<0.01), confirming H2B. Relationality generates knowledge and ideas sharing, promoting the digital exchange of information between colleagues, and increasing identification with the organization, i.e., Affective Commitment. H3A found empirical support: Affective Commitment negatively influence Turnover Intention. If a person identifies with the organization, this same social identification reduces the person's willingness to leave his or her workplace. Digital Information exchange does not exert any influence on the dependent variable Turnover Intention, even if these variables are significantly correlated. Accordingly, H3B has not been demonstrated.

The mediation analysis (H4) follows Baron and Kenny's four step method (1986). First step implies that input variable – Relational Goods- significantly influences output variable – Turnover Intention (β=+0.243; p<0.01). Next step involves that input variable significantly impacts the mediating variable Affective Commitment as we have shown previously (H2a). The third step implies that Affective Commitment exerts an impact on dependent variable (H3a). Finally, the fourth step shows that the original relationship between Relational Goods and Turnover Intention (β=+0.243; p<0.01) must be lessened or become non-significant because of the mediating variable, resulting in partial or full mediating effects. Because the original influence was totally reduced, we could consider Affective Commitment as full mediating variable on the relationship Relational Goods-Turnover Intention. H4 found empirically confirmation.

Figure 3 shows the results.

Figure n.3 - Results

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*Notes: * p < 0.01. R2 is the squared multiple correlation indicating the explanatory power of the predicting variable. The regression weight in parentheses indicates the original influence before being partially mediated. Standardized regression weights are presented in the figure.*

Source: authors' elaboration.

5. Discussions, Managerial Implications, and Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this article was to statistically validate the Relational Goods construct in a real-world context of SME employees who are coping with remote work situations; second, to empirically validate our hypothesized relationships (see Figure 1) to highlight the key role of employees' relational goods in reducing their turnover intention in digital work contexts. Indeed, relational assets give new meaning to work relationships by increasing sense-making and reducing the isolation that employees may perceive in remote work context. As expected, we were able to confirm the construct of relational goods as a first-order variable composed of two sub-dimensions, namely Intersubjective Relationship and Reflective Relationship. Indeed, this construct was originally tested mostly in NPOs contexts, likewise it was not observed how it could be employed as a first order construct (Donati, 2011; 2019). Our results indicate that these two sub-dimensions are highly associated with the construct of relational goods, which means that managers of organizations and particularly human resource managers should pay attention to these employee behavioral patterns. Next, our empirical analysis showed that Relational Goods are a significant predictor and antecedent of employee affective commitment and digital information exchange, two important key variables according to the organizational behavior literature (see Marrucci et al., 2020). Indeed, through true social relationships employees identify with the organization even though they work remotely and are likely to exchange information digitally, increasing knowledge sharing. Thus, relational assets give new meaning to remote work activities, creating a relational ecosystem in which employees truly feel part of a whole. Interestingly, while affective commitment strongly reduced employees' turnover intention, their digital exchange of information did not have a significant influence on this outcome variable. Consequently, we suggest that HR managers invest primarily in the organization's relational assets to promote employees' affective commitment, which significantly reduces their turnover intention (Ahn & Hong, 2019). Notably, affective commitment is a crucial mediating variable in our framework that can provide a "full" mediating effect on the relationship between relational assets and turnover intention. This means that employees' affective commitment to the organization is a micro-mechanism that explains the full link between behavioral relationships and turnover intention. Creating digital knowledge sharing through remote work is not a sufficient condition for turnover intention reduction. Identification with the organization has been found to be an essential element. These results indicate that even in smart work contexts, it is necessary to invest in social relationships in presence, because they

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promote organizational identification and digital information exchange. However, the variable on which it is necessary to force attention is identification.

Our research, aside from traditional limitation of survey-based research (i.e. self-reporting), suffer from some limitations. Specifically, first of all we focused only on one country, Italy. Next, we didn't attempt to develop a new relational good construct. Third, eventual antecedents of relational goods were not explored.

Based on the above, we suggest future researchers to re-test our hypothesized model in different cultural contexts than Italy, such as more collectivistic (Asia) or more individualistic (USA) countries, to assess whether significant differences occur. In particular, it would be interesting to validate the Relational Goods construct in other organizational contexts as well and test what kinds of comparisons might emerge from the different statistical influences of the framework.

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