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Leadership role in creating strategic and harmonious employment relations in South Africa

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Abstract: The increasing significance of employment relations (ER) in the workplace has prompted this study, which explores how leadership positions ER as a strategic role player within the human capital (HC) function. A qualitative research approach was employed to investigate the role of leadership in ER, utilizing grounded theory as the research strategy. Data were collected through purposive sampling from 12 participants using semi-structured interviews, and the findings were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that integrating functions within the HC environment is crucial for creating strategic value in the workplace. It also highlighted that the strategic positioning of ER requires strategic leadership and creativity to achieve organizational vision and harmonious employment relations. The study proposed an ER strategic positioning model, offering practical guidelines for aligning the ER function with other HC functions to promote harmony and strategic value. This research contributes significantly to the ER field by providing both theoretical and empirical insights into the leadership qualities and strategies required to implement effective employment relations in organizations.

Keywords: strategic leadership; harmony; organizational anxiety; conflict management

1. Introduction

Modern organizations and leaders face numerous organizational challenges, most of which are caused by the evolution of the workplace. These organizational challenges manifest as complex trends in the workplace that lead to disharmony and affect various workplace relationships (Faugoo et al., 2024). These challenges are usually triggered by universal phenomena such as rapid technological changes, innovation, automation, benchmarking, internationalization, market competition, mobility, and globalization (Setyaningrum and Muafi, 2022). Occasionally, these challenges are characteristic of specific situations, usually as a result of organizational and individual shortcomings such as ineffective organizational structures and strategies, lack of understanding of people management issues, organizational greed, workplace stupidity, personality clashes, and poor leadership skills. Workplace challenges can sometimes also manifest fundamental ideological differences between the players, which are usually exacerbated by factors such as historical background, socio-economic situation, and ethics and motives.

These challenges present a concatenation of intricate workplace dynamics and relationships that require creative leadership to map out practical solutions to sustain modern organizations. They also require strong organizational relationships, processes, and structures for business to survive (de Araujo et al., 2021; Marcucci et al., 2022; Strobel et al., 2024). Leadership is a vital prerequisite for organizational

development and sustainability in the modern-day workplace (Resanovich et al., 2024). Leadership goes beyond just managing people; it encompasses analyzing workplace dynamics, mapping out the direction for the organization, securing and promoting organizational harmony, and driving the organization towards the desired state (Deemie, 2024). Leadership involves crafting a strategy to intentionally coordinate efforts, skills, and methodologies designed to direct a group of individuals or an organization towards positive and sustainable outcomes. Therefore, leaders are responsible for designing strategies and promoting and internalizing strategic thinking (Nuraini, 2024). Strategic leadership means connecting thoughts and ideas from a broader perspective to consider the future and evaluate possible outcomes (Brundin et al., 2024). Applying strategic thinking in leadership is essential in moving the organization forward. Continuous innovation and improvement cannot come from technology alone because technology quickly becomes obsolete. It should come from sound strategies, human creativity, commitment, and employees giving their best at all levels of the organization. Therefore, every organization's success largely depends on people, and to achieve success, people depend on good leaders and strategies (Argus and Samson, 2021).

Amid the diversity of debates about leadership's role in the workplace, the consensus is that effective ER and leadership recognize the value of strategic thinking, creativity, and harmony. This includes the ability and wherewithal to generate ideas, embed harmony in all organizational processes, and adopt and apply long-term thinking. A strategic approach to ER involves managers taking a long-term approach to the management of its workforce and employment relationships (Kaufman et al., 2021; Malik, 2022).

Existing literature (Burke and Morley, 2023; Nel and Kirsten, 2020; Schmid et al., 2021) suggests that the field of ER has indeed evolved and the dynamics have changed. However, there are still different views and theories about what modern ER means, what it entails, and how ER leaders and practitioners should approach the concept. A perusal of the literature also suggests that studying this phenomenon requires open-mindedness and the ability to look at the concept from an integrated and holistic perspective. Arguably, the most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the predilection for formalized African solutions in the ER field. These solutions are not aimed at disregarding already established Western-based practices in the field but at incorporating insights and broadening perspectives.

The theoretical perspective adopted in this study is premised on the understanding that South Africa is a country with a unique and rich history of diversity. Therefore, this uniqueness should be reflected across all spheres of human interactions, including the workplace. Against that background, this study, unlike most, is aligned and grounded in the concept of 'ubuntu' to animate a formal African perspective in the workplace. Africanization, as correctly noted by Nel and Kirsten (2020), has received limited attention and recognition in the field of ER.

This study accentuates the need to embrace the tenets of ubuntu as formal guiding principles adopted and used in the workplace. The philosophy of ubuntu is therefore perfectly aligned to drive and derive harmonious ER in the workplace. Ubuntu embodies deep notions of inclusivity, communal responsibility, and shared interests, yet has never been formally incorporated in the South African workplace and ER

literature as an alternative ideology to western-based traditions. To curtail this hermeneutic epistemic oversight, this study accentuates indigenous knowledge to achieve harmonious ER in the workplace. Although this study specifically makes reference to the principle of ubuntu, it is important to realize that this approach can be applied anywhere in the world to embrace similar customs and to mitigate the epistemic injustice against the natives.

This research adopted an integrative approach to outline how the literature on leadership and harmonious employment relationships interweaves to address modern-day organizational challenges. This paper delved deeper into some leadership qualities required for a harmonious ER to flourish and for the organization to survive. Furthermore, the research design, findings, and theoretical and managerial implications were succinctly outlined to indicate their interrelation in this study.

Research purpose and objectives:

Leadership is critical in creating organizational harmony and generating strategic value for organizations. The primary purpose of this paper is to assist organizations in identifying redundant and toxic habits and attitudes that hinder workplace harmony. The objective of this paper is also to illustrate the importance of investing in introducing or reinforcing progressive initiatives that will prepare organizations for current and future ER challenges. Studies on employment relations have revealed how ER is closely associated with conflict management in the workplace (Frege and Kelly, 2020). Earlier researchers explored the role of leaders in creating harmonious workplace relations through conflict management interventions (Adham, 2023; Krajcsák, 2022). Some studies have successfully linked effective leadership in ER to factors such as motivation (Armstrong and Taylor, 2023), engagement, talent management (Kaliannan et al., 2023), and wellness in the workplace (Van Yoder and Purcell, 2023). Evidently, there is limited existing literature focusing on the strategic positioning of ER in the workplace. Similarly, insufficient literature is focused on understanding the importance of integrating the ER function into workplace systems and practices. The role of leaders in positioning and integrating ER has not been sufficiently explored. This paper focused on the following research objectives:

- (1) To understand the role of leadership in strategic, harmonious ER in the workplace.
- (2) To understand workplace leadership challenges and the strategic value of Harmonious ER.
- (3) To investigate the leadership qualities required for strategic ER in the workplace.
- (4) To propose an ER model suitable for positioning ER in the workplace.

Literature review:

Theoretical framework:

The theory underpinning the current study is pluralism. The pluralist perspective acknowledges the inherent antagonism within employment relationships and the inevitability of workplace conflict. According to Nel et al. (2016), pluralism views an organization as a coalition of individuals and groups with diverse objectives, values, and interests, making conflict a natural and unavoidable outcome of these differing goals. Pluralists also recognize multiple sources of authority within an organization, with disputes often arising over work tasks and reward allocation (Finnemore et al., 2018). Employment is thus seen as a strategic relationship between parties with

competing aims and values, precluding the classification of employees and employers as a cohesive group.

Pluralism advocates for collective bargaining and the role of trade unions in representing employees' interests. However, as Dobbins et al. (2021) argue, the approach has been criticized for inadequately addressing power imbalances, given that employers often wield greater control due to their ownership of production means.

Despite these criticisms, pluralism provides a valuable framework for understanding South Africa's labor environment, marked by diversity, historical inequities, and frequent adversarial tensions (Finnemore et al., 2018; Nel et al., 2016). Effective leadership within this framework can mediate divergent interests and foster harmonious collaboration between employers, employees, and unions (Williams, 2020). Leaders play a crucial role in managing the diverse objectives of stakeholders by creating inclusive structures and processes that ensure fair representation and dialogue (Nel et al., 2016).

To address power dynamics, leaders can implement transparent grievance mechanisms, equitable reward systems, and participative decision-making structures. This approach aligns with pluralism's acknowledgment of workplace conflict while promoting fairness and trust (Finnemore et al., 2018). Visionary leadership is essential in South Africa's multicultural labor environment, where strategic alignment of organizational objectives with employee and union aspirations is critical. Continuous dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and the integration of diverse perspectives can achieve this alignment (Williams, 2020).

While pluralism accepts conflict as inevitable, it emphasizes managing it through leadership interventions, such as robust dispute resolution mechanisms and fostering mutual respect. Transparent communication, equitable reward allocation, and collaborative problem-solving can transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and innovation (Nel et al., 2016; Williams, 2020).

By embracing a pluralist perspective, South African leaders can navigate the complexities of employment relations, balancing organizational goals and employee well-being. This approach enhances organizational performance and contributes to broader social equity in the country's labor market (Finnemore et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing importance of strategic thinking and leadership within employment relations (ER), research has focused mainly on traditional tasks such as conflict management and employee engagement, with limited empirical research on how leadership strategically positions ER as a core driver of organizational effectiveness. Critical gaps include the role of leadership in aligning ER with human capital strategy, integrating ER within a dynamic business environment influenced by global trends, applying creative leadership approaches, and developing metrics to measure ER leadership's strategic impact. This study addresses these gaps by proposing a model for strategic positioning of ER that emphasizes leadership-driven integration of ER with broader human capital functions to promote harmony, innovation, and sustainable competitive advantage. The model provides practical guidelines and theoretical insights into leadership strategies that enhance the strategic value of ER, thus contributing to a more holistic and future-oriented ER paradigm.

Strategic thinking and leadership in ER:

Strategic thinking and leadership encompass the ability to anticipate, envision,

think purposefully, and collaborate with colleagues to initiate changes that foster a viable future for the organization (Perez, 2022; Sayed et al., 2025). Given the complexity level of the challenges facing organizations today, modern-day leaders are required to put in place convincing strategies to improve employment relations in the workplace. Leaders are obligated to identify and communicate the direction the organization should take. They are required to have a clear vision about an enterprise's long-term goals and objectives, the adoption of a course of action, and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out those goals (Armstrong and Taylor, 2023). However, they must achieve this balance while managing both long-term goals and short-term, results-oriented behaviors (Nkala and Chiware, 2022).

Strategic ER is therefore aligned with some elements of a pluralist approach, which promotes a thoughtful, consistent, and longer-term approach to managing the key workforce and employment relationship demands established by various stakeholders (Malik, 2022). A business environment where employee-employer relations exist is vital for achieving a healthy and harmonious climate where both the employee and employer are satisfied with the relationship (Gupta, 2020). Strategic thinking encapsulates creating harmony and building trust to achieve set objectives. It embraces authentic and ethical leadership traits as a strategy to creatively encourage employees to follow the direction and vision of their leaders. Strategic leadership is thus a crucial driver for achieving an organization's vision and mission. Implementing strategic thinking and leadership in organizations hinges upon the leadership skills of working through others, organizing, and motivating people. This also includes improving and reinforcing sustainability prospects by aligning the strategy to the organizational culture and using that as a unique competitive advantage over competitors (Mubarak and Yusoff, 2019).

Strategic thinking also embraces an integrative approach in the workplace. The world of work is evolving, and many organizations are working towards creating a humane organizational culture that integrates and embraces new global and societal trends. Organizations are encouraged to adopt a holistic ER approach to manage workplace dynamics, integrating various business perspectives, methodologies, skills, and value systems. Organizations should also guide employees on global ER practices and standards that foster a harmonious working environment and support a positive organizational culture (Bratton and Gold, 2017; Razali et al., 2018).

To achieve these goals, all stakeholders need to adopt ER strategies that foster an environment where collaboration among participants is encouraged and promoted. The management of ER as a workplace phenomenon requires a strategic and holistic orientation to generate strategic value for the organization. Positioning ER as a strategic imperative also involves proper structural alignment and recognition in the organization. ER leaders need authority to influence stakeholders and decision-making processes to add strategic value to the organization. Therefore, modern-day ER requires shifting from specific workplace dynamics to strategic, holistic, and broader perspectives (Nel et al., 2016; Ogunola, 2018; Slabbert and Swanepoel, 2011).

Harmonious ER leadership and conflict management:

Workplace harmony is the cornerstone of modern employment relations. Workplace conflict or disharmony leads to various tensions and health and safety risks that affect employee well-being and overall employment relations (Frege and Kelly,

2020). These tensions are frequently distressing and problematic, contributing to workplace stress. They have the potential to create a negative atmosphere in the workplace, which is characterized by uneasiness, workplace harassment, abuse, panic, and vexation. An organization faced with unabated dissonance and negative conflict risks capitulates to organizational anxiety, demonstrating the extent of disharmony. Organizational anxiety, therefore, denotes an adverse workplace climate fueled by workplace conflict (Proksch, 2016). Workplace conflict can include a myriad of triggers and manifestations such as workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, diversity management, communication, globalization and mobility, multiculturalism, and even generational gaps (Cooper and Leiter, 2017; O'Donovan, 2018). Dysfunctional conflict also divides teams, often resulting in passive or aggressive team communication or behaviors (Proksch, 2016).

Sometimes, it results in deception, theft, sabotage, and hostile behavior. This can cause significant personal psychological damage or damage to material property. Moreover, such conflict can increase absenteeism and employee turnover (Frege and Kelly, 2020). A dysfunctional conflict can be insidious, subtle, complex to define, and challenging to manage. It can become an economic problem if it escalates, develops into a power struggle, or freezes in tension and paralyzes an organization over time. From a strategic perspective, leaders should be equipped with various people management tools and conflict management skills to create a conducive work environment that helps the organization retain and attract employees (Liddle, 2017).

Leadership creativity in employment relations:

There are various challenges facing modern-day ER leaders, including the ability (internal) to transform organizations to adapt to emerging global trends. Moreover, leaders are faced with the challenge of aligning their leadership styles to suit modern-day organizational demands. Leaders are generally responsible for creating an environment and culture that promotes and encourages innovation and creativity in the workplace. Transparency, communication, integrity, encouragement of risk-taking, and collaborative efforts contribute to cultivating an innovative culture within organizations (Abecassis-Moedas and Gilson, 2018; Mickahail and Eira de Aquino, 2019). Effective and supportive leadership can result in improved employee retention (Dong et al., 2017; Kamalaveni et al., 2019), technological advancements (Brhane and Zewdie, 2018), increased employee engagement and participation (Aylott, 2018), reduced turnover, and enhanced talent management (Collings et al., 2019). It can facilitate organizational change (Hodges, 2019).

However, ER leadership challenges today transcend merely being expected to intellectually switch between cultural and operational norms. Leaders are expected to exhibit high emotional maturity and control to engage their diverse teams (Harkiolakis et al., 2017). Whereas traditional leadership approaches rely mainly on policies and power to get the job done, modern-day leadership approaches require creative ER strategies to achieve the same objectives. Leaders are regularly required to embrace the qualities of a transformational leadership style and creative problem-solving processes. Creativity is used as the cornerstone of the approach and a mechanism to deliberately share power with employees by providing them more control and autonomy through delegation, coaching, sharing of information, and soliciting inputs. At the core of the modern ER leadership approach is explicitly adopting and

acknowledging employee involvement, employee voice, and employee engagement. (McKay et al., 2021).

Another innovative approach in contemporary employee relations involves emphasizing workplace trust to enhance staff engagement, job retention, and satisfaction (Ansah et al., 2018). Practices such as maintaining behavioral integrity, consistency, effective communication, sharing control, and demonstrating genuine concern for employees are essential for fostering trust in the workplace (Hall, 2020). Ultimately, leadership creativity is a conscious response that involves the adoption and adaptation of various tactics in a calculative manner, rendering the integration of modern ER solutions a creative balancing act.

2. Materials and methods

This section outlines the research approach, strategy, and method employed from the initial stage of the research to the final reporting stage.

Research approach and strategy:

Accordingly, an interpretive paradigm was selected for this study to understand the subjective world of human experience, acknowledging the critical tenets of the interpretivist paradigm that suggest that reality is socially constructed. In order to understand the role of leadership in creating strategic and harmonious ER, participants' personal experiences were interpreted and analyzed within a specific context. The focus was on the richness of the information shared and understanding participants' own understanding of their actions, specific situations in which they find themselves, and the rules applicable under such situations (Balsvik, 2017; Creswell, 2017). A qualitative method was adopted for this study. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded understandings based on rich, contextual, and detailed data. There is more emphasis on 'holistic' forms of analysis and explanation in this sense than on charting surface patterns, trends, and correlations. Qualitative researchers draw meaning from textual data rather than from numbers and work with small groups of participants (Pitney and Parker, 2019). These attributes of qualitative research allowed for an in-depth and rich understanding of the role of leaders in preparing and transforming organizations using harmonious ER in modern-day workplaces. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz's perspective) was adopted as the suitable research strategy for this study. Grounded theory was appropriate to the current study because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex, nuanced phenomena under investigation, particularly in relation to participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings. Grounded theory is particularly appropriate as it enables the generation of theory based on data, which is valuable in exploring a relatively under-researched area and building new theoretical insights. This genre of grounded theory is explicit in its ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions. The strategy complements an interpretivist approach selected for this study, mainly because it is flexible and explicitly endorses the researcher and participants' co-construction of knowledge and mutual interpretation of meaning, which in turn benefits all role players. The strategy is aligned to research trends in the 21st century and also represents a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism. Most importantly, this approach is consistent with constructivist philosophy, which holds that research

does not occur in a vacuum but rather is influenced and informed by the context in which the researcher is operating (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Thus, the strategy allowed for a flexible engagement with participants on various topics, particularly their understanding of the concept of ER and how they interpret other concepts such as harmony, conflict, and leadership.

Research participants and sampling methods:

Qualitative researchers often study only a single setting or a small number of individuals or sites, using theoretical or purposeful rather than probability sampling, and rarely make explicit claims about the generalizability of their accounts (Maxwell, 2008). A purposive sampling method was adopted in this study, involving 12 participants selected based on their expertise or experience in ER guided by data saturation when no new themes emerged (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). These participants were sampled across various levels in two ICT organizations based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The sample included ER managers at the top management level, line managers, union leaders, union members, and non-union members. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method in this study. Information was obtained firsthand from the participants. Semi-structured interviews are usually based on a pre-established set of questions or broad themes guiding the interview process. This method was selected because it allows for greater flexibility and engagement with the participants to capture their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about various leadership and ER topics (Brennen, 2021; Pitney and Parker, 2019).

Research setting:

This study focused on employees employed in the ICT sector. Two organizations based in Gauteng Province, north of Johannesburg, were selected to participate in this study.

Entry and establishing research roles:

In order to gain entry into the selected organizations, the HR departments were approached, and formal permission was sought. The same channel was used to arrange the initial meetings with the potential participants. After rapport was established with the selected participants and necessary documents such as consent forms were finalized, both contact and online sessions were arranged to commence the data collection process.

Data quality and integrity strategies:

Following data collection, all interview notes and recordings were securely maintained until transcription. Participants were allowed to review and validate the transcripts before the final analysis. Weaver-Hightower (2019) emphasizes the need to maintain 'trustworthiness'. Whatever their study methodology, researchers commonly address five trustworthiness concerns. Firstly, credibility refers to whether the study effectively assesses its intended aims and reflects the participants' social reality. Secondly, transferability/applicability analyzes how well findings can be used in different contexts. Thirdly, dependability/consistency ensures that results can be reliably duplicated with participants in the same setting. Fourthly, confirmability/neutrality reduces bias by recognizing the researcher's predispositions, ensuring that their objectives or interests do not influence the investigation. Finally, integrity/truth value refers to how researchers build confidence in their findings and

ensure that incorrect information provided by study participants does not influence them.

Data analysis:

In this study, the data analysis technique employed was thematic analysis (TA). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used within various ontological frameworks across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017; Willig and Rogers, 2017). Another benefit of thematic analysis is its flexibility, enabling its application in inductive and deductive research methodologies (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). A well-structured thematic framework should be comprehensive and demonstrate how the researcher establishes links between codes, categories, and themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). The current study followed six steps by Braun and Clarke (2021) to analyze data, which include (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing up.

Reporting style:

Alvesson and Sköldbberg's reflexivity model was adopted in this study to outline the researcher's thinking and actions during the research process. This model was also used to reflect on how the researcher engaged participants, how the researcher's influence in the research process was managed, and how the research material was presented to reflect the approach and the purpose of the report (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018).

Ethical considerations:

Ethical considerations require that research be conducted with integrity to ensure that the most appropriate procedures and methods are adopted. This also includes ensuring that all data are reported appropriately and honestly (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018). In this study, the ethical concerns involved guidelines on the research participants' privacy, safety, confidentiality, and anonymity. To preserve anonymity, the personal details of participants were kept confidential during the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. To mitigate the risk of a paper trail with the potential to weaken the issue of confidentiality in the case of informed consent, the researcher only asked participants to sign the consent forms but not to write their names on the forms.

3. Results and discussion

This section outlines the biographic data of the participants and key themes of the findings.

Biographic data:

A total of 12 participants took part in this study, drawn from various levels within two ICT organizations. The sample included two participants from senior management, four from middle management, two union leaders, two union members, and two non-union member employees. The sample comprised seven males and five females, representing 58% and 42% of the sample, respectively. Most participants were Black Africans (67%), followed by Indians (17%), with Whites and Coloureds making up 8% of the sample. Importantly, participants were not selected based on gender. The three main themes (with related subthemes) extracted from the study are

summarized in **Figure 1** below:

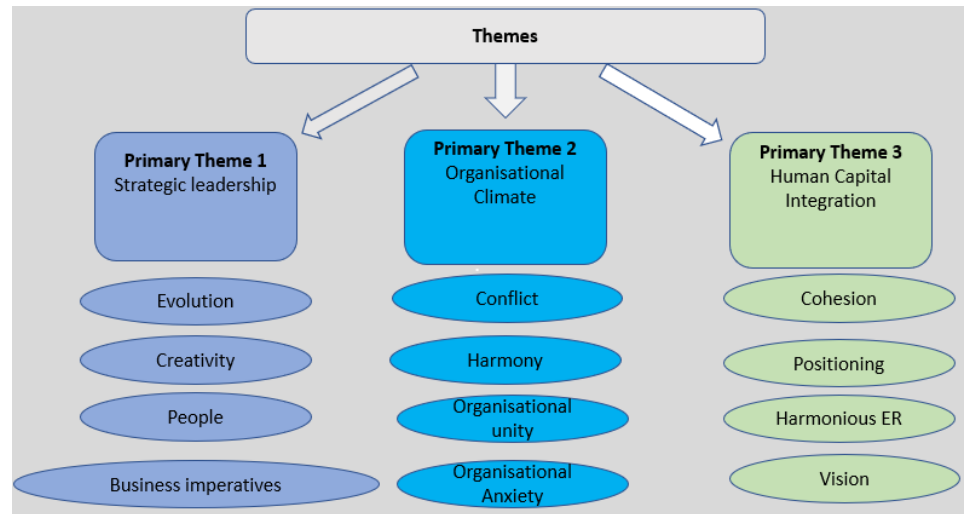


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes identified from the data.

Theme 1: Strategic leadership in ER.

This theme is linked to research objectives 1 and 3, which deal with the role of leadership in strategic and harmonious ER and investigating the leadership qualities required for strategic ER in the workplace. Strategic leadership in this context encompasses leadership’s ability to understand and manage identified challenges brought about by evolution and creatively generate solutions that are aimed at promoting a harmonious, people-centric organizational culture. It also means the ability to design strategies that harmoniously address other business imperatives such as sustainability, transformation, and talent management. This definition is derived from some of the excerpts from the interviews, including the following comments:

“Leadership is the cornerstone of every organization’s success and sustainability because leaders determine the future of organization. They decide on the direction to be taken and define the culture of the organization. To drive modern-day ER initiatives or employee experience strategies, you need strategic leaders with good grasp of people dynamics, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and someone generally passionate about people and people management issues.” (Participant 12).

“There is no doubt that the concept [ER] has evolved immensely over the years. That which we see today is completely different from the old system. Today we see a system centred on stakeholder engagement and management. The old system (IR) was mainly about control, rules and not so much about building relationships.” (Participant 3).

“...strategically ER is a proactive intervention and must be used intelligently to achieve organizational goals. You need creative, smart and influential leaders with the vision to drive this process.” (Participant 4).

Subtheme 1: Evolutions.

Most participants alluded to the fact that the nature and scope of the field of ER have evolved over the years and require leaders to adjust their approaches to match modern-day challenges.

“Today ER is a tool used in organizations to manage relationships between employees and the employer. I believe this system has changed a bit from the traditional IR system to a broader perspective. The old system was more about disciplinary procedures but now it includes other priorities such employee wellness and the health and safety of employees.” Participant 5 explained.

Subtheme 2: Creativity.

The majority of participants stated that they believe that modern-day ER challenges require leadership creativity. Some indicated that most ER initiatives fail because some leaders are not creative enough and cannot get the buy-in from stakeholders:

Participant 11 stated:

“Usually, the main problem is that management is not creative enough to know how to make ER a success story in an organization. How do you get people on board and engaged in your philosophy? It is all well and good to talk about the concept, but the ultimate test is making it a reality in the eyes of the recipients.”

Participant 4 stated:

“It is not an easy task to manage and harmonise an environment like that [Diverse] if you are not creative, hence, for me, creativity is perhaps the most important quality in ER today. So, all these leaders without clear plans of how to accommodate diversity in their organizations will find it tough nowadays to compete.”

Subtheme 3: People.

The majority of the participants identified a people-centric approach as the cornerstone of ER. This sub-theme encompasses issues revolving around the value of people in the organization and how they should be viewed from a strategic leadership perspective.

Participant 2 opined:

“...ER adds a lot of strategic value in organizations because whatever we achieve as a business, we achieve through people. So, ER is about people; it's about trying to make employees comfortable by creating harmonious working conditions. If that can be achieved, then it is usually very easy to achieve strategic objectives.”

Participant 12 added:

“Every bright leader knows that employees are the most important assets in business and harmony is essential in the workplace. That is the only reason why in the olden days organizations used to do job satisfaction surveys; they wanted to understand employees' needs and concerns. Workplace harmony is an important ingredient in the organization, not just from an ER perspective but from a strategic perspective too.”

Subtheme 4: Business imperatives.

The majority of the participants identified business imperatives as a key topic in ER, particularly because of the need to understand and manage various interests in the workplace. This covers management's approach to key processes such as organizational performance, reputation management, transformation, and retention of key resources.

Participant 9 explained:

“...ER affects every little corner of the business: marketing and branding, effectiveness and performance, OD, HR—everyone. It is a pillar that should not be ignored or underestimated but, unfortunately, it is in most organizations.”

Theme 2: Organizational climate.

This theme is linked to objective 2—“To understand workplace leadership challenges and the strategic value of Harmonious ER”. In this study the meaning of organizational climate was derived from participants’ shared views and perceptions of the overall employee experience, including their sentiments on processes, policies, practices, and plans that affect their relationship with the workplace.

Subtheme 1: Workplace conflict.

The majority of participants identified workplace conflict as the main concern and perhaps the most prevalent risk in the workplace.

Participant 3 explained business risk in relation to workplace conflict:

“If you don’t manage conflict properly your organization will be badly affected and impossible to manage. In our company, we always try to identify issues that are toxic in the workplace and deal with them. We understand that people are different and will not always like each other but we always make them understand that they don’t have to like each other, they must just work together and share a common goal.”

Subtheme 2: Harmony.

The majority of the participants indicated that harmony is extremely important in an organization. Some indicated that they believe that organizations should invest more in promoting organizational harmony so that the workplace can be a peaceful and conducive environment.

Participant 9 asserted:

“Harmony is a key prerequisite for ER to flourish ... workplace harmony means we can embrace all our differences, work together and resolve disputes and conflicts in a more sophisticated and mature manner. It doesn’t mean the absence of conflict; it doesn’t mean the absence of disciplinary actions. It simply means understanding that we have a common goal as role-players, and we should respect each other and work towards the attainment of those goals.”

Participant 3 added:

“Sometimes stupidity in the workplace is the cause of conflict. I have seen managers costing organizations a fortune because of simple stupid mistakes. It is sad because most of the errors can easily be avoided in most cases—only if people can stop being arrogant unnecessarily.”

Subtheme 3: Organizational unity.

In this study, the term ‘organizational unity’ is adopted to describe a particular workplace atmosphere, characterized by the potential to create, stimulate, or cause workplace harmony, cohesion, engagement, and ‘positive vibes’ in the workplace. This definition emerged from the interview data and summarized how participants described articles and properties of a positive organizational climate, informed by their lived experiences.

Participant 8 summarizes it this way:

“I sometimes think people underestimate the importance of communication and collaboration in the whole process. ER is about managing relationships in the

organization—how to work together and help each other grow in our respective departments. It is about building relationships with one another, embracing our diversity and prioritising organizational goals.”

Subtheme 4: Organizational anxiety.

In this paper, the term ‘organizational anxiety’ is coined and adopted to describe particular aspects of the organizational climate. Focus is on certain workplace conditions, factors, behaviors, and drivers that create or have the potential to create, stimulate, or cause uncertainty, negativity, fear, panic, or instability. This definition emerged from the various descriptions and explanations of the personal experiences of the participants themselves and their observations in their workplaces. Some of the main concerns are shared below:

Participant 11 identified diversity as a source of organizational anxiety:

“Diversity management is very important in the workplace. People must learn to accommodate each other; we are different. The other problem is that sometimes you get a sense that some people’s cultures and traditions are prioritised over others. You see it everywhere. It’s a pity that, so many years after achieving freedom here [South Africa], nothing really changed. We still use Western beliefs and guidelines for almost everything in the workplace. Africans are not accommodated by these traditions, and, for me, that is where we are missing the point.”

Participant 8 added:

“I believe that for organizations to flourish people must find ways to embrace their differences. The problem is that in this organization and across the sector, racial discrimination is still a big problem. Sometimes people are afraid to talk about it because of the rainbow nation spirit but the reality is that people are still treated differently merely based on the colour of their skin. We need leaders who are capable of taking these issues head-on.”

Participant 3 raised the issue of sustainability and organizational performance as a concern to many people:

“Unfortunately, if you don’t have harmony in the workplace, you will achieve nothing. People will be disengaged and get stressed; people will miss deadlines and your customers will suffer. But also, people will leave and look for comfort somewhere else where there is harmony...People don’t like uncertainty, they prefer leaders who can provide direction and assurance that their future is secured.”

Participant 11 also raises the issue of workplace bullying as a source of organizational anxiety”

“For me, workplace bullying is the one offence that must be monitored closely because it can negatively affect ER plans and can be very costly to the organization. You cannot achieve anything if employees are being bullied by managers or they bully each other. It defies the whole purpose of trying to create harmony in the workplace. That is the biggest risk in the organization.”

Theme 3: Human capital integration.

This theme is linked to research objective 4—to propose an ER model suitable for positioning ER in the workplace. The majority of the participants identified the ability to integrate processes and ideas to enhance organizational cohesion as a vital

leadership quality in modern ER. A holistic, broader perspective helps ER leaders to understand workplace challenges better. It makes the stakeholder management process more meaningful and easier to manage. Most importantly, an integrative and holistic approach fosters a culture of analytics in human capital, where strategies, structure, processes, decisions, and initiatives are analyzed and revised to assess the value created for the organization. A holistic approach thus helps ER leaders to mobilize human capital and align the human capital strategy and structure to the overall organizational vision.

Subtheme 1: Cohesion.

The majority of the participants indicated that they believe that it is important to create awareness about the importance of collaboration in the workplace. Collaboration in the workplace is the cornerstone of organizational harmony because it allows individuals and teams to work towards common goals.

Participant 4 remarked:

“ER is not something that can be achieved by an individual. ER is an agenda that the entire management is supposed to drive. In our case, we have linked it to most of the KPIs at a senior management level. We monitor ER issues closely and always create awareness within our teams.”

Participant 1 remarked:

“...organizations fail when decisions are taken without consultations and power-mongers are tasked with deciding the organizational vision. ER fails when people stop involving each other in joint consultative processes and use the law or policies for everything or when management prioritises profit over wellness and personal benefits over organizational goals and sustainability.”

Subtheme 2: Positioning.

The majority of participants also linked structural inadequacies and discrepancies to integration and leadership challenges in human capital. This specifically refers to the inability of leaders to strategically position ER properly in the organization.

Participant 5 remarked:

“...for ER to work it must be integrated into almost everything in the organization. It is not an HR function; it is a strategic imperative that can be used to facilitate any business process or plan, the same way that change management can be used in most business areas. It is a key leadership competency in my view.”

Participant 3 explained:

“...I believe ER should be an independent department or function as part of organizational development. I don't believe ER should reside in HR and my only problem with that is that I feel it will be ineffective and maybe even be consumed in HR processes.”

Subtheme 3: Harmonious ER.

The majority of participants stated that for ER to be effective in the organization, the function must promote harmony. It must create a sense of compassion and promote the spirit of ubuntu in the workplace.

Participant 7 remarked:

“Harmony is very important, especially if you want people to cooperate with you. The thing is that sometimes people sabotage your projects or give you attitude

because of the unhealthy relationship they have with you as the manager.”

Participant 12 added:

“Harmony makes communication easy, leadership easy and a lot of things easy because harmony is a positive concept and motivates people. It is very important.”

Subtheme 4: Vision.

The majority of participants linked the human capital vision to those plans and strategies designed to help the organization to achieve its goals and objectives from a people management perspective. This includes the ability and capacity to define and align various functions in the human capital environment to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

Participant 4 explained:

“Strategically ER is a proactive intervention and must be used intelligently from an organizational development and people management perspective to achieve organizational vision. ER is the heart of human capital, it should reside wherever the human capital strategy resides. I don’t think you can isolate ER from the organizational development strategy. This however requires creative, smart and influential leaders with the vision to drive such a process.”

4. Discussion

This study examined the role of leaders in creating strategic and harmonious employment relations in the workplace. The three most significant themes were extracted from the data and analyzed in line with the research objectives. This section outlines the meaning and significance of the results entrenched in the identified theme. The primary finding is that strategic thinking is seen as a key element of modern-day ER, which means that organizations are beginning to recognize and acknowledge the transition from traditional perspectives to modern ER. However, the finding that some managers are still struggling to grasp and apply modern ER principles is indicative of the slow-paced transformation and awareness level in the workplace. The study further found that external factors such as globalization and mobility play a significant role in the field’s evolution as organizations adopt emerging trends from each other across the globe. This finding suggests that modern ER is gradually becoming a more complex field than it previously was. Moreover, the complexity levels are compounded by geographical cultural dynamics and labor laws, which affect the extent to which ER can be used to achieve certain organizational objectives.

Similarly, the study found that key internal factors affect modern ER, such as leadership creativity, people dynamics, organizational interest, and imperatives. Although these factors can be controlled, some are extremely difficult to manage. The finding indicates that some managers are struggling to devise and implement successful ER initiatives due to a lack of creativity. Some are unsuccessful with getting the buy-in from key role players and stakeholders due to lack of creativity and interpersonal skills. The organizations are also struggling to put in place convincing processes to promote harmonious ER in certain areas. Where leaders are creative, and ER is strategically used to drive business imperatives, the benefits are immense. These findings mean that although there are areas where ER is creating value, the current strategies are not comprehensive enough to generate optimum value for the

organizations.

This primary theme is significant in this study because it demonstrates three key issues about modern ER that need to be given attention in the workplace today. Firstly, this finding indicates that ER is a broad and complex phenomenon; thus, it is not just a responsibility for ER practitioners but a leadership competency for all leaders. Secondly, this theme demonstrates the importance of having the right leaders with relevant qualities in ER positions to drive awareness and instill ER principles in the workplace. It is clear from the analysis of the findings that ER requires strategic leadership capabilities and not just management skills. Thirdly, this theme indicates that treating ER as a functional or non-strategic item in the workplace can affect some business imperatives such as organizational competitiveness, performance, and harmony.

The application of strategic thinking in leadership is very important in moving the organization forward. A critical leadership responsibility is to create an environment and culture that encourages innovation and creativity. Organizations are responsible for developing creative, people-centric, and ethical leaders who can gain trust and collaboration from their teams (Mickahail and Eira de Aquino, 2018). Organizations should not only rely on technology for continuous innovation and improvement in the workplace but also on strategies, commitment, and human creativity from their members (Argus and Samson, 2021).

The second primary finding is that organizational climate is a critical factor, which means people consider their wellness an essential part of the employment relationship. In line with this finding, the study found that workplace conflict, triggered by various sources, is still a serious problem in the workplace. Some participants reported triggers associated with diversity management challenges, bullying tactics, and, in some instances, utter idiocy as some of the common sources of conflict. These findings suggest that the concept of harmonious ER is not embedded in the existing ER guidelines or leadership philosophies of the organizations in question. This view is also supported by the finding that some leaders use organizational harmony as a strategic tool to build unity within teams and improve employee engagement across the organization. These initiatives, however, are voluntary and inconsistent, which indicates that they are not instilled in the culture of the organization and leadership philosophy. Furthermore, the study found that a hostile organizational climate leads to undesirable workplace consequences such as panic, uncertainty, stress, sabotage, absenteeism, and turnover.

This theme is enormously important in this study because it highlights the risk associated with a lack of strategic ER leadership. These findings demonstrate how organizations that fail to turn ER into a strategic priority expose their human capital to organizational anxiety. Most importantly, this theme demonstrates how destructive conflict is in the workplace and how important it is to view “Harmony” as a strategic ER tool, not just a desired state.

Conflict can be detrimental, stressful, and costly. When conflict becomes dysfunctional, it offers minimal to no benefits to the involved parties, their colleagues, or the organization overall. Such conflicts seldom result in positive outcomes and, if not addressed, can significantly affect employees’ and managers’ psychological, emotional, and physical well-being (Liddle, 2017). Thus, organizations should have

rituals that can be used as strategies to navigate conflicts, manage anger and frustration, and move towards a more constructive relationship. Rituals can bring awareness, reflection, and mindfulness to increase people's ability to manage negative energies at work (Ozenc and Hagan, 2019).

The third primary finding is that some organizations perceive the ER function as a sub-division in the human capital structure is that the function is sometimes used merely as a support structure with a limited strategic role in human capital. The study revealed that in some instances ER is seen as a sub-division of other departments such as Human Resources Management, Industrial Relations, or organizational development. Some participants also reported that they hardly have ER discussions as managers or interact with employees on ER issues, as the perception is that you only interact with ER if you have problems. This finding means that ER is, in such cases, not an integral part of the HC strategy, and thus it is not optimally used to achieve strategic objectives.

However, the finding also indicates that some ER managers have a good understanding of how ER should be used to create cooperation and cohesion within teams and across the organization. In one of the two organizations studied, the findings indicate that the organization has immensely benefited from ER because of how the function is positioned in the organization. The organization has an ER executive who reports directly to the CEO and forms part of the Executive Committee. Organizational anxiety was reported to be low in this organization as ER is used to build trust between stakeholders, create harmony, and help facilitate other business imperatives. The organization views harmony as a fundamental aspect of ER and a key enabler of integration in the human capital division and across the organization. Harmonious ER is deliberately embedded in the processes of the organization and leadership ideology, but most importantly, ER is being driven from the top as the ER executive consistently engages stakeholders about the importance of building a harmonious ER culture.

This groundbreaking finding is extremely significant because it places "positioning" at the center of modern ER as a phenomenon. The data analyzed clearly indicates that where ER is embraced and positioned as a strategic tool, it can add massive strategic value to the organization. However, the crux of this finding is in understanding the concept of "positioning" from a holistic analytical perspective and not just the linguistic reference or meaning. This finding implies that positioning ER as a strategic function means practically locating the function on the top organizational structure and psychologically embracing the concept and embedding it in the leadership ideology. For ER to be effective, the function must be vested with the necessary authority to influence behavior and be part of the process of delivering the organizational vision, i.e., being afforded a seat at the "dinner table" and not being treated as an alternative support structure. Once ER is seen as the foundation and a key enabler in the human capital environment, integrating it into various other business processes and imperatives becomes seamless and inherent in all business processes.

The integration of employment relations management with organizational strategy is also imperative for organizational success in South Africa. An organization's strategic framework guides its employment relations strategy and policies. (Nel and Kirsten, 2020). No matter how carefully strategies are formulated or crafted, they have to be implemented successfully, which entails getting the right

organizational structures in place, the right kinds and quality of people, and all these elements need to work in a harmonized manner to achieve the organizational vision. (Slabbert and Swanepoel, 2011).

Practical implications:

Based on the significance of the findings discussed, the implications for application are presented as the proposed Dinner Table Model for strategic positioning and harmonious relations in the workplace. The Dinner Table Model (DTM) presents an innovative conceptual framework that illustrates the interconnected relationships between various stakeholders and functional areas within human resource management (HRM) and organizational development (OD). This model metaphorically represents these relationships through a dinner table setting, suggesting the importance of collaboration and shared objectives (Armstrong and Taylor, 2023).

Figure 2 presents a graphic representation of the model. The primary argument advanced by this model is that ER deserves a seat at the dinner table—a phrase that is analogously used to illustrate the significance of the strategic ‘positioning’ of the ER function in an organization. The Dinner Table Model (DTM) provides a metaphorical framework for understanding the interconnectedness of human capital (HC), Human Resources (HR), organizational development (OD), and employee relations (ER) functions within organizations. It positions these functions as pivotal elements in achieving strategic, harmonious, and sustainable employment relations. The purpose of the model is to demonstrate the integrative nature of the function and how it interlinks with other HC functions.

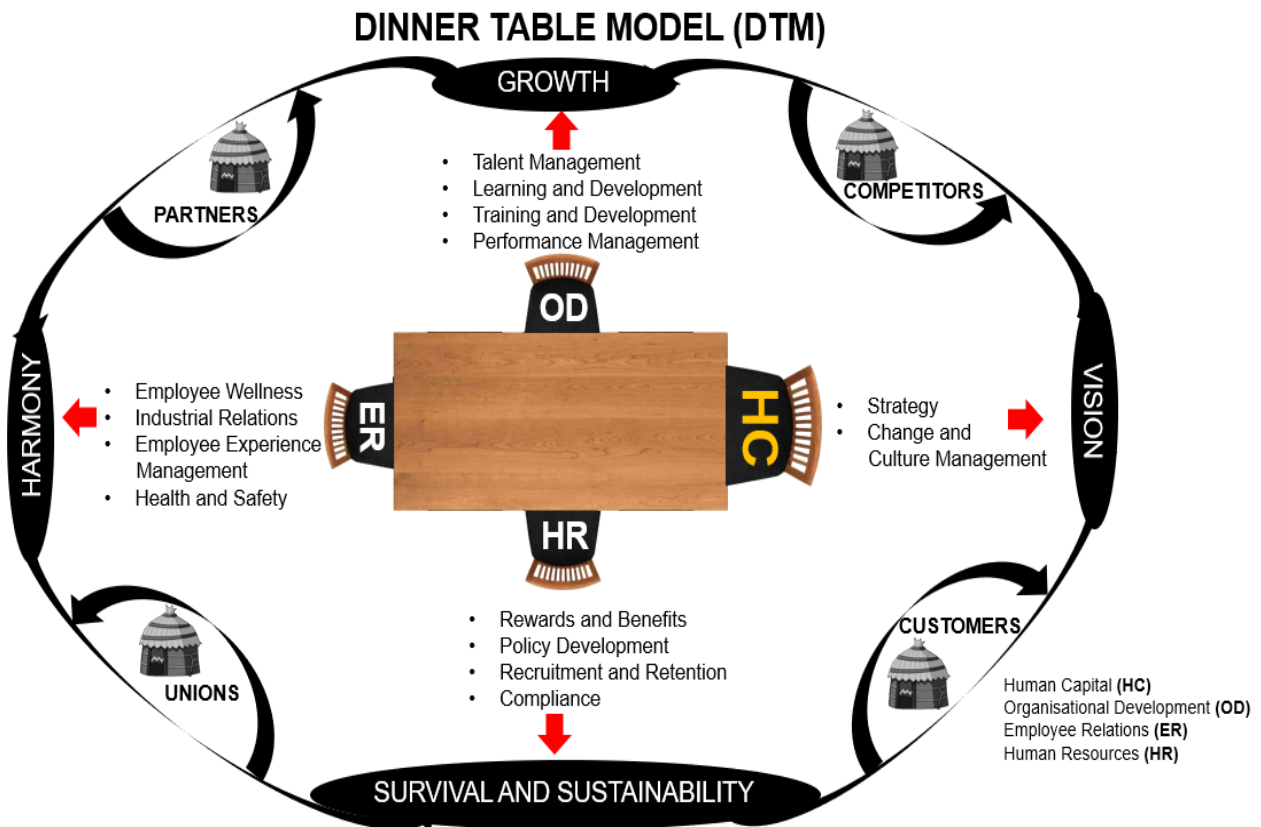


Figure 2. Dinner table model for strategic ER.

As indicated in the existing literature and interview data, various organizations have various structures, mandates, and leadership philosophies that influence their structural choices. Sometimes such decisions are also influenced by organizational sizes and budgets; therefore, the proposed HC structure is by no means absolute. The primary purpose of the DTM framework (**Figure 2**) is to address the question of how ER should be structurally positioned in an organization for it to be effective and visible. Data collected from the interviews indicated that in most organizations ER is positioned as a sub-function of IR or HR, which often degrades the strategic capacity of the function.

Human capital (HC)—Vision:

Human capital focuses on aligning organizational goals with its mission and vision through strategic, cultural, and change management initiatives. The role of HC is pivotal in creating a cohesive framework where leadership and workforce dynamics are strategically aligned to drive the organization forward. Practically, this involves developing strategic leadership capabilities by training leaders in effective decision-making to guide the organization toward achieving its long-term objectives (Wang, 2018). Change management is addressed through the implementation of structured frameworks like Lewin's (1951) Change Management Model, ensuring seamless transitions during periods of transformation. Culture management plays a critical role in fostering a positive organizational ethos, supported by initiatives such as diversity and inclusion workshops that promote collaboration, understanding, and shared values across the workforce.

Organizational development (OD)—Growth:

Organizational development is the engine of growth, emphasizing talent management, learning and development, training, and performance management to enhance the organization's capacity and agility. The foundation of OD lies in building a strong talent pipeline through succession planning and skills-gap analysis (Schultz, 1961), ensuring that the organization is equipped to meet future challenges. Continuous learning programs, e-learning platforms, and mentorship schemes are integral to upskilling employees and fostering a culture of lifelong learning. Performance management is strengthened through the establishment of key performance indicators (KPIs) and robust feedback systems that monitor and enhance productivity. Diagnostic tools such as 360-degree feedback are instrumental in identifying and addressing performance gaps, enabling targeted interventions and sustained improvement (Lewin, 1951). OD's primary role is to drive growth through talent management, learning and development, training, and performance enhancement. OD aligns with Lewin's Change Management Model, which advocates for structured change processes to foster growth and development (Lewin, 1951). It also integrates principles of human capital theory, emphasizing investment in employee skills and competencies (Schultz, 1961). A plethora of literature indicates that leadership is an important component of organizational development and sustainability. Leadership goes beyond managing people; it involves mapping out the direction for the organization and guiding it towards desired outcomes. Leadership involves intentionally coordinated efforts, skills, and methodologies used to guide or direct a group of individuals or an organization towards positive and sustainable outcomes. Strategic leadership involves connecting thoughts and ideas from a broader

perspective to view the future and evaluate potential outcomes (Wang, 2018). This argument is consistent with the findings of Ogunola (2018), who discovered that employees' personal development (work and otherwise) is based on the amount of peace, harmony, and stability they can derive from the work to which they devote their physical, psychological, mental, and emotional lives.

Employee relations (ER)—Harmony:

Employee relations plays a central role in fostering harmony within the workplace by addressing employee wellness, industrial relations, conflict resolution, and safety initiatives. Wellness programs targeting mental health, physical fitness, and work-life balance are essential for building a resilient and engaged workforce (Fox, 1966). Ansah et al. (2018) noted that factors such as diversity, unions, communication, discrimination, wages, lack of trust and respect, and company culture can affect employer-employee relationships and organizational growth if they are not properly managed. Argus and Samson (2021) also pointed out that the key to achieving trust is the practice of 'deep listening'. This means thoroughly listening to the concerns of employees and stakeholders and also listening to employees in the lower echelons of the organization. Malik (2022) added that leaders must not forget that strategy is not just the exclusive domain of management; even unions have strategies that can have a profound impact on shaping the nature of employment relationships and a range of employment outcomes. The literature is replete with examples of the numerous benefits of effective ER in the workplace. Wargborn (2008) highlighted the positive effects in organizations: strengthening corporate communication, motivation, and culture and facilitating access to company training. Brhane and Zewdie (2018) found a strong relationship with organizational performance. Gall (2017) linked it to partnership and Hyman (2018) to employee voice. Aylott (2018) noted participation and involvement, whereas Bendix (2019) linked it to workplace democracy and workers' participation. Wilkinson et al. (2018) highlighted benefits such as effective conflict resolutions and workplace harmony as a result of effective ER. Finkelstein et al. (2021) also noted that the changing nature of workplaces, workspaces, and job demands affects everyone regardless of age or life stage. However, certain perceptions exist in the workplace and should be managed carefully to secure organizational harmony. Conflict resolution mechanisms, such as grievance procedures and mediation practices, ensure workplace disputes are managed constructively and fairly (Rousseau, 1995). Safety compliance is reinforced through regular audits and training programs aimed at minimizing workplace hazards and promoting a safe working environment. Engaging employees in decision-making processes further strengthens the psychological contract between staff and management, building trust and mutual respect.

Human resources (HR)—Survival and sustainability:

Human resources are fundamental to the organization's survival and sustainability, focusing on rewards and benefits, policy development, recruitment and retention, and compliance. Developing tailored total rewards strategies that meet the diverse needs of employees, especially in a post-COVID-19 landscape, ensures workforce satisfaction and motivation (Nel and Kirsten, 2020). Clear and comprehensive HR policies aligned with labor laws and organizational goals provide a stable framework for operations. Recruitment and retention efforts leverage

employer branding and employee engagement initiatives to attract and retain top talent (Asenath et al., 2017), ensuring the organization remains competitive in a dynamic market. Additionally, compliance with labor regulations and standards is maintained through regular audits and targeted training programs, safeguarding the organization's legal and ethical integrity.

External stakeholders and alignment:

External stakeholders are critical in aligning organizational strategies with broader social and market contexts. Collaborations with unions and other partners foster harmony by promoting fair labor practices and ensuring mutual understanding between management and workforce. Benchmarking against competitors identifies gaps and highlights opportunities for growth, enabling the adoption of best practices. Customer feedback serves as a valuable resource for refining organizational strategy and cultural initiatives, ensuring alignment with market expectations. Finally, engaging unions in policy-making fosters survival by maintaining labor harmony and aligning organizational objectives with employee rights and well-being.

The DTM provides a balanced approach to organizational management by integrating key functions to achieve strategic goals. Each "seat" at the table is interconnected, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between HC, OD, ER, and HR for long-term sustainability.

The literature also supported the empirical evidence that positioning ER as a strategic function is beneficial.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the role of leadership in positioning ER as a strategic role player within the human capital function in the workplace. The study presented qualitative evidence, supported by existing literature, demonstrating how ER has evolved from a traditional IR-oriented field to a broader perspective. Three key findings indicated that modern ER requires strategic thinking and creativity, a harmonious organizational climate, and proper integration of the field in the organization. ER positioning is identified as the core enabler of integration and a critical success factor in strategic ER.

This study proposed adopting the Dinner Table model, a practical framework that provides guidelines for how the ER function should be aligned to other functions in the human capital environment. The study makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge by examining the trends in the field of ER and how organizations should respond and align to such trends.

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