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## Emerging characteristics of business culture under the influence of Covid-19 pandemic

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# **EMERGING CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS CULTURE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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*Abstract: The current article explores and assesses the coming into being of new business culture characteristics due to the extreme conditions of Covid-19 pandemic. Based on conducted focus group with students in Organizational culture module and performed subsequent literature review of scientific and professional literature, and blogs/sites of opinion leaders and companies, four comparatively stable new business culture characteristics are identified – as adoption of new face to face greetings, appropriate e-mail etiquette, new dominating attitude to office and production facility space, and shaping fashion trends for the new normal. The most probable streams of management that may become sources of the emergence of new cultural characteristics for business organizations are also identified through the literature review.*

*Keywords:* organizational culture, business culture, crisis management, business organizations.

*JEL:* H12, M14

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic represents a multifaceted crisis with its medical, economic, social, and other aspects. But it also has the potential to serve as an effective key marker event, setting into motion diverse fast and deliberate change initiatives in the societies and business organizations, incarnating the results of the so called “traumatic way of learning” for a group, company personnel and entire society (Schein, Schein, 2017). The anti-crisis measures, intended to limit the negative medical impact of the current crisis - distance, discipline, disinfection and control, force the undertaking of urgent transformations in enacted operational models not only in business organizations, but also in the state administration and NGOs. In such turbulent situation managers not only struggle for the survival of their companies, but also try to unleash to the full the collective untapped potential of their talent by accelerating the penetration, proliferation and integration of high technologies in conducting production and service processes, and stakeholder relationships, even applying a more human approach. Disruptions on certain markets and entire sectors of the economy are the inevitable consequence of completing such organizational change interventions, bearing in mind that customer and all other

stakeholders' behaviors are predominantly motivated by their continuous pursuit of personal, family and group safety at least in the beginning (see Ismail, Malone, van Geest and Diamandis, 2014). Five months after the outbreak of the current health crisis (in July 2020) is the right moment to reflect on how the interval of "new normal" builds and evolves culture by means of new manifestations and forms at different levels through the realized shared learning processes. Now diverse experiences of the leaders in coping with all the aspects of the crisis become evident, because in this challengeable situation the establishment and maintenance of a rapid connection between decisions and results is inevitable. Of course the specific experiences of business leaders cannot be assessed unambiguously because of unique climate in each company, contributing to a wide discretion in demonstrated on-the-job behaviors. Thus, managers and employees may not always make decisions and undertake logic actions, based on what they already know, but succumb to specific office politics impacts, provoking numerous hesitations, fears, feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt. In this way the human discipline of thinking (i.e. reflecting and capturing shared learnings) and action (i.e. retesting these shared learnings for validity in practice by accelerated feedback cycles) in business organizations may be aggravated (Kuppler, 2020). In this realm some cultural characteristics seem to be in the state of becoming, others - in the state of being, and still another group – in the state of disappearing. *That is why the aim of this article is to identify some emerging and relatively stable cultural characteristics, possessing the potential to deeply influence how things are done in the firms under the conditions of Covid-19 health crisis.* The cultural analysis is based on conducting a focus group discussion with students in Organizational culture (summer semester, in May 2020) that was followed by an expert appraisal of the expressed opinions, and accompanied by critical analysis of appropriate scientific articles, opinion leader and company blogs/ sites. Thus, four emerging characteristics of business culture under the influence of covid-19 pandemic are identified, having great potential to achieve stability.

## **1. Disclosing the specificity of business environment factors during Covid-19 pandemic**

Now it is a time when a pretentiously sounding acronym as VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) entirely incarnates the real business environment with its conditions and situations that impacts and elaborates the awareness and readiness of managers and employees in companies to make decisions, plan forward, manage risks, foster change and solve unique and pending problems (Confederation of Indian industry, 2019; Bennett, Lemoine, 2014). Not only leadership responses as building organizational capacity to anticipate the important issues, understand the consequences of these issues and actions, appreciate the existence of interdependence of variables, prepare for alternative realities and challenges, interpret and address relevant opportunities that matter in this realm, but also changing organizational and/or personal (leaders') vision, understanding of factors with great impact on desired results, having courage and compassion to step up to challenges and take risks smartly, heavily relying on the adaptability of strategies and plans. It is irrefutable that surviving and

pursuing development business organizations should discover their own (specific, unique) ways of deliberate and fast re-design to a low-touch business, characterized by developing key organizational competence, as follows (see De Ridder, De Mey, 2020):

- Efficiently realizing low-touch interactions between the majority of constituencies, especially in concern with carrying out of intensive interactions among some of them (for example: customers and employees), necessary to perform the respective business activities.
- Ability to operate carefully under imposed restrictions by national administrative institutions as travel bans, new hygiene measures, etc.
- Maintaining and boosting the achieved levels of organizational performance, preserving and increasing company's market share, sales volumes and profit margins without accessing vulnerable groups and involving large gatherings of people.
- Flexibilty to navigate through multiple aftershocks, arising in the global economy and resulting from the Covid-19 crisis.
- Ability to create high impact through new innovations and timely implemented, improved business models.

The contemporary VUCA perspective of the analysis ensures a useful option of exploring the impact of the current health and economic crisis on companies that may be clearly and succinctly outlined at the current moment by disclosing two aforementioned, but recently coined terms as "Low Touch Economy" (\*\*\* 2020a) and "Careful economy" (\*\*\* 2020b). The term *Low Touch Economy* defines how "businesses across the globe have been forced to operate in order to succeed as a result of Covid-19" (\*\*\* 2020a). The important nuances in the meaning of the aforementioned construct are suitably described by means of its four main characteristics that emerged up to the moment, as follows:

- 1) *Health risks mitigation* – an obligatory abiding and adapting by companies to strict policies (for example: low-touch interactions, limited gatherings, travel restrictions, etc.).
- 2) *Anticipation of multiple aftershocks on global markets* (for example: shifts in consumer behavior, enacted new regulations, supply chain disruptions, etc.).
- 3) *Making prognostications for the end of the current crisis*, based on provided analysis by medical experts and business leaders (i.e. end point of direct influence on the economy until late 2021).
- 4) *Building the image of the surviving companies* – relying on "business models tailored to this new normal while keeping everyone as safe as possible".

The construct of *Careful economy* (\*\*\* 2020b) indicates the ways in which "financial stability, security, and safety are being redefined for an uncertain future". An important differentiation between the starting point of the crisis and its potential end point. "The transition to quarantine life" is defined as the starting point, characterized as rapid and shocking, but the end of the crisis ("emergence from it") is characterized as slow, cautious, and "with the next normal, looming just on the horizon" (\*\*\* 2020b), as follows:

- 1) *Stability* – reflecting on to what extent a potential career or business move may be pandemic-proof.
- 2) *(Financial) Security* – putting an emphasis on saving that is used as a means for protection against the next crisis or unemployment. The spending is done more carefully.
- 3) *Scenario planning for safety* – deeper reflection on safeguards and contingency plans both for: (a) people (self-improvement) - people's low confidence in their government's ability to provide unemployment benefits is strongly related to the strengthening of their entrepreneurial orientation, i.e. "setting up, or doubling down on, existing online businesses or taking on additional part-time work"; and (b) companies, forced to propose offerings to their clients that are intended to deliver value in new ways, i.e. empathizing with the newly careful consumer.

In this way it becomes evident that the current situation may be logically characterized as emerging, dynamic, chaotic, ambiguous, insecure and unstable, predetermining diverse behaviors by the constituencies from different sectors of the economy. That is why few comparatively stable characteristics of business culture under the influence of Covid-19 pandemic are in process of being and may be identified at this early development stage as adoption of new face to face greetings, appropriate e-mail etiquette, new dominating attitude to office and production facility space, and shaping fashion trends for the new normal.

## **2. Adopting new face to face greetings**

The objective of limiting the spread of the virus forced business people to introduce new forms of greetings, abandoning the practices of handshake and kisses on the cheeks in order to keep the required social distance between employees. Soon after the official declaration of an ongoing pandemic the World Health organization and other institutions recommended several alternative forms of greeting, i.e. the (soccer team) footshake, the waving of the hand, the 'elbow' bump (touch), just bowing, the The Thai "wai" bow with hands folded, prayerlike, the gong shou gesture (a fist in the opposite palm), head nods, even applying a kind of verbal handshakes (i.e. I really appreciate you, or I really value you), etc. (Guardian staff and agencies, 2020; Gurchiek, 2020; Aubrey, 2020; WHO, n.d.; Volpe, 2020). Although all of these alternatives of handshake are applied simultaneously, some of them became more popular in comparison to others due to diverse reasons as a successful past experience with them ('elbow' bump: Ebola crisis), identifiable cultural specificities in countries, regions and organizations, emotional meanings, embedded in the adopted new ways of greetings, dominating emotional human reactions to stress and fear for one's life, etc. (see Dumont, 2020; Kuppler, 2020) (see table 1).

Table 1. The new recommendations for a handshake

STATE	RECOMMENDED PRACTICE
China	The traditional gong shou gesture (a fist in the opposite palm) to say hello.
France	Looking into a person's eyes can suffice as a greeting.
Australia	People should give each other a pat on the back.
Germany	Smile and throwing one's hand up in the air.
Italy	Waving from a distance.
Iran, China	The participants tap the soles of the shoes on their feet against each other as a greeting (also called Wuhan greeting).
UAE	Greet each other "by waving only".
Tanzania	Two-part salute, using both hands, raised in the air by each person and bumping the feet.
Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo	The 'elbow' bump (touch) between two people (Ebola greeting).
New Zealand	a casual lift of the chin and eyebrows to acknowledge each other (a head nod).
Turkey	Placing the hand over the heart and bowing slightly (The eyvallah greeting).
Afghanistan	A right-handed salute or wave.
Sources: (Guardian staff and agencies, 2020; Aubrey, 2020; WHO, n.d.; Volpe, 2020; Dally-Steele, Terry, 2020).	

### 3. The new e-mail etiquette during the pandemic

The significance of the electronic business communication increased during these dangerous times of required social distance and strict hygiene when it is obligatory to better signal a sympathetic tone and to establish a rapport with target subordinates, superiors and other stakeholders of the company. This is the reason why working people should consider (see table 2):

- Adhering to concisely providing only important and practical information, related with the performed current business activities and undertaken changes in business models of companies due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Nesterenko, 2020).
- Undertaking necessary revisions in the content of automated emails, scheduled before the current crisis, in a due course (Nesterenko, 2020).
- A stronger propinquity between professed organizational culture and daily leadership and employee actions is needed in order to preserve entity's reputation and identity to stakeholders during crises (Nesterenko, 2020).

- Adjusting the greetings and sign-offs of their e-mails (Sebag-Montefiore, 2020; Steinmetz, K. 2020).
- Modifying the first sentence of the e-mails, because people now feel stronger others' genuine wishes that help them stay comfort, warm and calm (Sebag-Montefiore, 2020).
- E-mail is not the only communicational business related channel, since managers and employees may collaborate through other applications as Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, Messenger on Facebook, Skype, and Apple's FaceTime, Google docs, iMessage, Google Hangouts/Meet, etc., especially for employees under thirty (Lloyd, 2020; Meier, 2020; Bajarin, 2020).
- Both coldness and overexpression of emotions may be harmful for the business relations between working people, but politeness and demonstration of caring is a mandatory condition (Hughes, Canals, 2020; Humphrey, 2020; Goode, 2020).

Table 2. The new e-mail etiquette

ATTRIBUTES	Don'ts	Dos
Initial greetings in the e-mail...		good morning/ afternoon/ evening “Hope you’re well” or “Hope you’re staying safe”
Sign-offs of the e-mail...	<p>Avoid humour unless you know someone pretty well, especially jokes with the crisis.</p> <p>Avoid using “stay safe”.</p> <p>Hope you’re having a great week!</p> <p>Cheers! All best! Best regards!</p> <p>Warmest regards!</p>	<p>‘I hope you and your family are all safe.’</p> <p>I look forward to your reply at your leisure</p> <p>‘Sending thoughts of health and peace’.</p> <p>‘Take care’ or ‘Sincerely in these strange times’.</p> <p>(some employees still accept...) ‘best regards’ or ‘kind regards’, With regards, ‘Stay well’.</p>
The first sentence of the e-mail...	Don’t go overboard with expressing concern.	<p>I hope things are okay, I hope you are well, considering...</p> <p>“I hope you’re doing as well as can be expected right now”</p> <p>But do leave an opening for colleagues to share their struggles (deadlines, flexibility, deliverables, etc.).</p>

Table 2. The new e-mail etiquette (continued)

ATTRIBUTES	Don'ts	Dos
The content (of automated) emails, scheduled before the current crisis...	<p>Do not offer promotions that are the least relevant right now (travel items, luxury items, limited booking sales that expire soon, etc.).</p> <p>Do not use: (a) subject lines or copies with words or emojis that may be considered inappropriate now (hugs, kisses, high fives, handshakes); (b) words as crisis, virus, disease spreading, etc. in a figurative sense.</p> <p>Do not send alert on the enacted important changes (as ticket change, booking cancellation, possible problems with delivery due to high demand in the service or product) to people who are not subscribed to you or unsubscribed from you years ago.</p> <p>Do not take advantage of fear, panic and stress in people by trying to (over)sell “illness prevention wellness programs,” “antivirus supplements,” or “silver ion masks to battle pandemic.”</p>	<p>Reappraise the appropriateness and offensiveness of the campaigns to some recipients in the current situation.</p> <p>Exclude from offers any challenges/tasks, involving physical contact or outdoor activities.</p> <p>Be concise with your messages. Get to the point.</p> <p>Show empathy and ask if people feel like hearing from you (propose preferences updates).</p> <p>Consider pausing your promotional emails or reducing the sent volume.</p> <p>AI supported recommendation algorithms should be adjusted, because of expected divergences from observed, regular customer behavior that may impede the choices made by customers after the crisis (Recommended for You or Staff Picks).</p> <p>New customer segmentations are needed, based on current Covid-19 outbreak in each country or region.</p> <p>Adding some gamification content (options) to e-mail is considered useful (self-isolation challenges, quizzes, puzzles, trivia, bingo, board games, etc.)</p>
Handling e-mails...	Don't double message.	<p>Respond or if you can't, at least confirm the message is received and acknowledged.</p> <p>Minimize your multi-messaging.</p> <p>Think carefully about your direct (to:) and indirect (cc:) recipients.</p> <p>Write meaningful subject lines.</p> <p>Say thanks when an ask for an action is satisfied.</p>

Table 2. The new e-mail etiquette (continued)

ATTRIBUTES	Don'ts	Dos
Concerning the use of email signature...		Use an informative and succinct email signature (your mailing address, email address and phone number, your title and other contact information)
Preparing the e-mail...		<p>Clearly state what you are asking the recipient to do.</p> <p>Check (proofread) your message before sending it.</p> <p>Name attachments systematically and list them in the text body.</p> <p>Offering good wishes or company gifts in the body of your email ("We hope that this small gesture supports you during this time.").</p>

Sources: (Nesterenko, 2020; Sebag-Montefiore, 2020; Steinmetz, K. 2020; Torres, 2020; Lloyd, 2020; Weingarten, 2020; Hughes, Canals, 2020; Humphrey, 2020; Goode, 2020).

#### 4. The new dominating attitude to office and production facility space

The leading role of organizational physical localizations in implementing pursued strategy through personnel members' collaborations, oriented to performing scheduled daily activities, decreases, because of the enforced remote work during the current pandemic (Luz, 2020). The electronic employee collaborations gradually form certain workplace culture features that may not be appraised unequivocally, as follows (Luz, 2020; Ryan, 2020; News Editor 2020; Balgeman et.al, 2020; CBInsights, 2020a; Boehm, Kaplan, Sportsman, 2020; Boehm, Kaplan, Sorel, Sportsman, Steen, 2020):

- Strong devotion of employees to stay connected in new and creative ways with clients, colleagues, superiors, etc. by means of technology, reestablishing their unique balances of "personal and work life".
- The dominated culture of setting strict boundaries between personal and business wheels is deeply transformed into a new state of being, characterized by high interconnectivity between work and home life, increasing the personal life exposure to colleagues. On one side, this situation may contribute to rehumanization of work-related human relations in digital environment, but on the other hand, it may disclose certain personal vulnerabilities that may be used appropriately in diverse office politics manoeuvres.
- Low percentage of working people live near the physical locations of their employer companies and for this reason the working day load for the majority of employees increases with the necessary commuting time to reach the respective office or production facility by means of transportation and overwhelming traffic-jams. Now, these people not only spare time, but also decrease their work-related fatigue. This, in turn, proves beneficial to their work devotion, achieved and maintained personal productivity, their personal lives and happiness as a whole.

- The increased telecommuting time imposes new schedule of work and rest that should be kept strictly in order to preserve the mental and physical health of employees that represents one of the main HRM objectives of the contemporary, succeeding managers, performing under the condition of war for talent, despite higher unemployment rates during Covid-19 crisis.
- Now, it proves to be the time (i.e. the new prevalence of remote work for the majority of employees) when some business organizations eliminate existing discrimination from the past and provide a more equitable experience for (and treatment to) different categories of employees, i.e. those who worked in the main office before the crisis, those who work remote, and those who work outside of their company's headquarters location. In this way the quality of decision-making and performance is boosted.
- Observed undertaken changes in office design, necessary to reduce the spread of coronavirus crisis, incarnating managers' lasting emphasis on health and welfare and to a less degree - on "togetherness.": (a) encompassing heavy reliance on appropriate materials used for upholstery (abandoning the uses of germs and bacteria breeding unfinished wood, soft stone, and stainless steel, and orienting to antimicrobial synthetic materials like crypton and metals as copper and brass for door handles and other high-touch surfaces), (b) ensuring employee pre-entry wellness checks and healthy social distance by introducing new overall layouts of floor plans and appropriate heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems of premises, (c) replacing diverse touchpoints, like keypads and control panels for lighting, climate control, A/V systems, elevators, rest rooms with software applications on employees' personal phones, (d) orientation of companies to offices, providing more access to outdoor space (e.g. gardens) for the employees, thus facilitating community building, learning and upskilling, (e) adding more separation between workstations and/or re-orient them, so people do not face one another, (f) implementing alternating work schedules - office work (for collaborative assignments) versus contributing from home (for completion of individual tasks by employees) and strict cleaning policy (restrictions on personal items or assigned work space for each employee, etc.), (f) improvements in employee's home setup by means of granting them technology stipends by company management; (g) applying autonomous cleaning devices.
- Cultivating stronger cybersecurity culture in personnel members and other company stakeholders through consistent implementation of respective measures in this field, due to the massive use of IT inside and beyond the premises for performing of business-related activities. The management initiatives in this field are intended to maintain both security and business continuity of the firm during the pandemic.

As far as the observed cultural evolution of production plants is concerned, it should be noted that the behaviors of succeeding managers strictly adhere to three principles in addition to the aforementioned key points, as follows (Furtado, Kolaja, Mueller, Salguero, 2020):

- Emphasizing workforce protection by formalization, standardization and flexible adaptation of operating procedures, processes, and tools, planned to keep staff safe. Establishment and maintenance of efficient two way communication between managers and employees, intended quickly to respond to their concerns, thus strengthening workforce confidence.
- Heavily relying on risk management in order to ensure business continuity, i.e. anticipation of potential changes in the environment and creation of rapid, fact-based management actions by means of modeling plant's reactions before the emergence of the respective fluctuations.
- Driving plant's productivity by effectively managing performance at the plant, preserving the already enacted company policies of physical distancing and remote working.

## 5. Shaping fashion trends for the new normal

There is strong evidence that previous crises disrupted the fashion industry and changed human preferences of clothing, creating consumer and production cultures that contributed to further development of this business, for example (Sowerbutts, 2020; Wicker, 2020):

- *The Spanish influenza pandemic*, when surgical face masks were worn both indoors and outdoors due to provided essential protection by them.
- *The World War I*, when a huge shift in womenswear emerged - from restrained corsets to comfortable attire. For example the famous designer Coco Chanel created women's couture pieces from foraged fabrics (e.g. jersey men's underwear) due to sharp scarcity of materials.
- The World War II – the 'Escape and Evade' maps, printed onto durable silk to be easily concealed under soldiers' clothing, were then re-used to produce items of clothing after the end of the conflict.

Two main reasons may be indicated to shape any emerging fashion trends during the current crisis (Schnitzer, 2020) – *first*, searching for some comfort by working people, expressed in what they may wear when they log in remotely for work, and *second*, helping the employees to master their emotions in relation with expressed fears to return to the office or production facilities, when allowed, by means of starting with a more relaxed dress code. The main scene of human business interactions has changed from life inside an office or production facility to life inside your home or mixed patterns when unavoidable. Typical workplace routines just disappeared at least for a while as for example employee commutes, coffee runs, desk lunches, office chitchat, etc. All these artifacts were mercilessly replaced by video conferencing, audio calls, messaging and other types of electronic collaboration among managers and employees, but still the business attire constitutes one's professional image and the understanding of dominating business culture. Generally prescribed medical anti-crisis measures in the majority of countries all over the world also contributed to the emergence of certain fashion trends in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. These fashion trends may be succinctly summarized, as follows

(Fashion Revolution 2020a; Schnitzer, 2020; Fashion Revolution 2020b; United Nations Environment Programme 2020; Sowerbutts, 2020; Wicker, 2020; Shamblott, 2020; Amodio, 2020; ECDC technical report 2020; CDCP, 2020):

- *Changing users' attitude to better caring for clothes, mending (creative re-invention concepts, the art of wardrobe swaps) and making (a potential return of sewing skills) clothing, and adopting a mindset of longevity for our garments that are expected to be sold on lower prices, clothing that is easy to wash, increasing the interest to the house dress.*
- *Increasing persistence in struggling to cultivate the "dreams", included in the "MANIFESTO FOR A FASHION REVOLUTION", pursuing the achievement of better balance among the constituencies in the fashion sector (i.e. a struggle for the establishment of professed culture at industrial level).*
- *Raising loudly the discussion and searching consensus for increase of sustainability in the field of fashion, e.g. going green, thinking in smaller piece collection, that is beautiful, wearable, produced with less waste, by fairly treated workers.*
- *Strengthening shared opinion on certain fashion characteristics that may dominate after the completion of the current crisis: sweeping, colourful fabrics, maximalist shapes, bold co-ordinates and unrestricted silhouettes, easy-to-wear, durable items, athleisure and casualization.*
- *Widespread desires to modify the obligatory accessory "the mask" by designing beautiful, functional, washable and lasting for an extended period of time multi-filtered silk ones, differentiating people who wear them from the look of a medic. If the aforementioned accessory matters to the general public, there exist other work-related accessories which functionality represents the top production and consumer priority as respirators, surgical masks, goggles (or face shield), long-sleeved water-resistant gowns and gloves, that are a part of the professional attire of concrete stakeholders as people who know or think they might have COVID-19, caregivers (medics, nurses, health inspectors, etc.) of people with COVID-19.*

## **Conclusion**

The conducted focus group and accomplished scientific/ professional literature review evidenced the existence of four new, shaped to a great extent, and comparatively stable business culture characteristics as adoption of new face to face greetings, appropriate e-mail etiquette, specific attitude to office and production facility space and fashion trends for the new normal. For sure the end of the COVID-19 crisis seems far away, but company managers are forced in a timely manner to design and implement strategies at different levels in order to foster organizational, broad-based, sustainable and exponential growth. Furthermore, other streams of management, showing great potential to generate new business culture characteristics under the development of the current pandemic, are outlined, bearing in mind that cultural issues there still have not become a target topic for the researchers who limit their contributions to presenting sporadic stories

of company successes and giving recommendations for the right way to proceed in these difficult times, for example:

- Supply-chain management
- HRM (e-HRM, Talent management)
- (strategic, organizational) leadership
- strategic management
- customer relationship
- project management
- the functioning of state administration
- the performance of diverse sectors of the economy, negatively affected by the aggravated health and economic conditions
- the specificity of some sectors of the economy, already conquering higher performance levels due to the pandemic or having the potential to achieve them in the post-Covid 19 world according to some early research results (see CBInsights, 2020b).

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