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An Explanatory Model of Generation Z Empowerment Experiences and Its Managerial Implications within a Multinational Corporation

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An Explanatory Model of Generation Z Empowerment Experiences and its Managerial Implications within a Multinational Corporation

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This dissertation is dedicated to
Serena, with love

Certificate of Originality

I certify that the work in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree. I also confirm that I am the only author of this document. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the dissertation itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I declare that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the dissertation.

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I have experienced a sense of community with all of you.

Abstract

Since the term ‘empowerment’ entered the business world, many line managers have changed their approach to managing relationships with their employees, with the intention of ensuring higher levels of job satisfaction, greater commitment to organisational objectives and better employee performance. For line managers, empowering has meant abandoning the hierarchical style of ‘power over’ and to a certain extent giving their employees the power, freedom, responsibility, resources and information to make decisions and solve work-related problems.

This dissertation explores the structural empowerment interventions conceived and implemented by the line managers of a multinational company belonging to the Fortune 500 list and the psychological empowerment dimensions of their Generation Z employees. Eight line managers and twenty-six employees in the Italian subsidiary participated in qualitative online interviews, describing how they experience their professional relationships within their own team and with colleagues from other teams.

The original contribution of this dissertation to academic knowledge and managerial practice consists of the qualitative analysis of the empowerment experience from both structural and psychological perspectives to offer an in-depth understanding of the relational dynamics that arises and grows between line manager and employee. In the past, most studies on empowerment have considered only one of the two perspectives, forgetting that it is their interaction that determines the essence of empowerment. Furthermore, studies prior to this dissertation have often been performed using quantitative methods and without a specific focus on Generation Z.

This dissertation has contributed to the discourse on empowerment, discovering that formal empowerment-supporting mechanisms such as corporate policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working only partially contribute to the psychological empowerment experience of Generation Z employees. In the company under review there is room to improve support for empowerment, allowing employees to use social media at work and extending hybrid job opportunities (meant as work from anywhere in the world and at any time). The formal approach to performance management is useful in defining individual objectives, but then it is through informal conversations that empowerment can grow, because it is in

those conversations that feedback can be provided in a timely manner when it is needed. The relationship between line manager and employee is essential to support psychological empowerment, because generally the line manager is the person who can transfer power permanently, give feedback and build trust with the employee. Generation Z employees experience all the psychological dimensions of empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995), but sometimes they seem abandoned in the search for meaning to be attributed to their individual work in relation to objectives of greater scope, for example at an organisational or societal level. The meaning dimension could have negative consequences for the entire experience of psychological empowerment if it is not adequately supported.

The experience and professional skills of the line managers described in this dissertation may be similar to those of other managers who are at the bottom of the chain of command, supervising staff in operational roles and converting strategic objectives into goals that are appropriate for their staff on a daily basis, with all the difficulties and contradictions that this activity entails. Therefore, the reflections, behaviours and actions of line managers described in this dissertation in relation to the empowerment experience of their staff may resonate with a wider audience of managers, especially since this dissertation was conducted across teams operating in different areas of the business. Consequently, the explanations offered by this case may represent lessons not only for line managers working with operational staff in the company under review. With due caution, even middle managers in organisations with long chains of command or entrepreneurs within family-owned companies can reflect on the issue of employee empowerment from the results of this dissertation.

Keywords – Employee empowerment. Psychological empowerment. Structural empowerment. Line manager. Employee. Generation Z. Explanatory model. Fortune 500.

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Preface

I chose to study employee empowerment with a focus on Generation Z because the experience I had gained as a business management consultant and university lecturer before I started my doctoral studies sparked my interest in and passion for management innovation.

My first job after I graduated in engineering catapulted me into a corporate environment, where I had to report back to a manager who struggled to let the team I was part of work autonomously. That manager spent a lot of time explaining in detail to each employee what tasks to perform and how to do those tasks, enquiring daily about the progress each of us had made and staying at work much longer than was actually required.

Over the years, as I progressed in my career, I also had the opportunity to coordinate different teams and I often found myself faced with the dilemma of wanting high performance, secretly thinking about my quality standards (which were more stringent than corporate ones), and at the same time wanting each team member to grow professionally, potentially offering everyone the opportunity to learn not only by making mistakes but also in a fun and positive environment. “How nice it would be,” I said to myself, “if each employee could increase their confidence, competence and trust in me and in their colleagues by doing their job!”

I have encouraged my teams to carry out quality work even in my absence, because I have always thought that leadership lies in the ability to teach others to make decisions autonomously, without having to ask me for answers and opinions unnecessarily. In short, I felt uncomfortable having power over people.

There is often a gulf between the theoretical approach to empowerment and its context-specific implementation. I met managers who said they empowered their people while showing very different behaviours, sometimes rather directive and controlling ones. Some managers seemed capable of empowering employees successfully without seeing their role downsized, while others struggled to let go of their power.

These differences in the implementation of empowerment led me to reflect on what employee empowerment means today when a new generation of workers,

Generation Z, is entering the world of work, and whether employee empowerment can be considered an effective approach to manage professional relationships.

All these experiences and considerations have influenced my decision to update empowerment knowledge and practices to understand to what extent this relational dynamic can be a response to the transformations that the world of work is going through as a result of frequent technological innovations, greater sensitivity to sustainability issues and the search for new meaning that people attribute to their work in the current post-pandemic context.

My intention is to share all my findings about empowerment with the academic and corporate world.

Introduction

Aims and objectives

This dissertation explores how line managers support the empowerment process of their Generation Z employees. Line managers' thoughts, actions and behaviours provide the structural perspective (Kanter, 1977), while Generation Z employees' meaning, impact, competence and choice provide the psychological perspective (Spreitzer, 1995; Conger and Kanungo, 1988). To enrich the structural perspective, there are also empowerment-supporting mechanisms such as company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working, which are useful for a more in-depth understanding of the business context. The different points of view presented by the research participants show behaviours, reflections and criticisms that can make the empowerment experience more effective not only in the organisation under study but also in similar organisations.

The structural perspective of empowerment, as presented by Kanter (1977), places emphasis on the line manager's interventions aimed at creating a relationship based on trust with the employee, balancing support and freedom appropriately. Support is provided through feedback from the line manager and other colleagues, through access to the information and resources that the employee needs and through the professional and career-development opportunities that the organisation makes available to the employee. Freedom is fostered by promoting autonomous decision-making processes and therefore by permanently transferring power from the line manager to the employee. This freedom is, however, exercised in compliance with company rules that determine the degree of autonomy, and therefore the extent of empowerment that the employee can experience. The line manager helps the employee give meaning to their work, promotes their participation in decisions, expresses confidence in the potential that the employee can reach and offers freedom proportionate to the level of competence that the employee possesses, in order to avoid the employee feeling abandoned if they do not have sufficient competence to manage the freedom granted.

The psychological perspective of empowerment arises in the employee's psychological response to the actions of their line manager and to the working conditions. Employees experience psychological empowerment when they feel they have

freedom, independence and discretion in carrying out their tasks (self-determination); when they attach meaning to the work they do (meaning); when they have the skills to do their job and confidence in the ability to improve themselves (competence); and when they consider the contribution they make with their work to be relevant (impact). These four independent dimensions (Spreitzer, 1995) are still used today to analyse psychological empowerment, because no one has refuted them, and no one has been able to determine further independent dimensions (Huq, 2016b).

The models of structural and psychological empowerment discussed in detail in the literature review provide insights into how the empowerment experience can be improved by line managers and their organisations. However, there is a research gap that has not yet been filled. Pearson and Chatterjee (1996: 17) observe that “Overall, a great deal of interest has been shown in how empowerment works rather than how to make it work”. Years later, these words are still true and, if possible, have an even greater impact because since they were uttered a new generation of people has entered the world of work: Generation Z. Wang and Lee (2009: 290) recall that “empowerment theorists must focus on identifying optimal combinations that represent balanced or fit situations in different work contexts, which are essential to employee well-being and other job outcomes” and, more recently, Huq (2016a: 551) writes that “organisations may attempt to implement employee empowerment without a clear understanding of what it means, how to implement it or the complexity that surrounds it”. However, perhaps the reader recalls Argyris’ (1998) remark that many executives and CEOs are quick to publicly acknowledge the value of empowerment as an effective managerial tool but then privately complain they are unable to see any difference in their employees’ results compared to relational approaches in which managers tell employees what to do.

This dissertation aims to explore the complexity of employee empowerment and its implementation, updating the theoretical knowledge and managerial practices related to it, in order to fill the research gap represented by many different voices that describe how complex the implementation phase of this managerial practice is. It was decided to focus on Generation Z because today this cohort represents about thirty per cent of the total world population, according to The World Economic Forum (Koop, 2021), and will represent twenty-seven per cent of the global workforce by 2025 (Koop, 2021). In addition, the increasing and ever more frequent influence of macro-environmental changes on the world of work makes organisations places where human relations must be

reinterpreted or reinvented (Marchington, 2021) and therefore it is worth starting with those such as Generation Z who still have an idealised view of work in companies or at least are free from strongly rooted preconceptions.

This dissertation also stems from the personal and professional curiosity of the researcher who conducted it, a curiosity based on the experience of a person who has worked for over five years on training and development issues as a business management consultant in close contact with line managers and their staff employed in the industrial automation sector.

Drawing upon the structural perspective and the psychological perspective, employee empowerment can be interpreted as a three-dimensional construct that benefits the organisation, line managers and their employees, as shown in Figure 1.2. Line managers are involved in carrying out activities to encourage their employees to have responsibility, competence and confidence to be able to successfully perform all tasks related to their role. Employees are expected to have, or progressively develop, desire, motivation and confidence in their ability to take responsibility, shape their work role, take decisions and manage their workload in such a way that they excel in their role and add real value to the organisation. Organisational systems and processes should be available to and used by all members of the organisation. The employee can understand and influence the goals, objectives and strategy of the organisation and have access to mechanisms and tools that will help them define and measure their contribution to organisational effectiveness and to work with their line manager to create their own development and career path within the organisation.

The research questions that are answered by this dissertation are as follows:

- Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees?
- How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment?
- How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?

By using the structural approach and the psychological approach to empowerment, this dissertation adds a new perspective to the existing body of knowledge on the topic of employee empowerment. In the past, research has been

conducted from one perspective or the other, ignoring the fact that it is the interaction between these two approaches that determines the essence of empowerment.

Moreover, by using a qualitative approach with interviews as a method of data collection, this dissertation offers a new perspective on the topic of employee empowerment. While research in the past has mainly used quantitative methods to explore the existence of employee empowerment, this dissertation uses a qualitative research strategy to explore the role of the line manager in the empowerment relationship with the Generation Z employee and to fully understand the interaction between manager, employee and organisation.

Miles *et al.* (2020) warn against generalising from specific cases, explaining that each case has a characterising history and in the process of generalisation people overlook some aspect of this history, with the risk of incurring possible inaccuracies or misunderstandings. Despite the difficulty of generalising beyond the boundaries of the organisation under consideration, the aim of this dissertation is still important because the empowerment experience has not been explored through structural and psychological perspectives in the past, because empowerment studies have rarely been conducted through qualitative analysis and because the topic of employee empowerment has not yet been adequately updated concerning Generation Z.

Research context

Great resignation, digital transformation and ecological transition are issues that today require some reflection on the part of companies, because in the current post-pandemic economic context there are many workers who question the meaning of their work (Rusconi, 2022; Ifenthaler *et al.*, 2021; Couppey-Soubeyran and Espagne, 2022). Empowerment could be a way of responding to the needs of those who are entering the labour market for the first time and do so with new expectations compared to previous generations.

Although empowerment in companies has been discussed for over forty years (Calvès, 2009), the problems related to empowerment have not yet been fully understood and overcome. Forrester (2000) argues that the concept of empowerment is not problematic to understand at a theoretical level, but it is problematic in its implementation, because the line managers' need for control and their struggle in freeing

themselves from the practices connected to this need (Lynch, 2021; Edwards, 1979) act as factors that inhibit their ability to empower.

Empowering does not mean delegating. Delegation of power and authority has been a key theme in organisations for decades (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020; Forrester, 2000; Shapira, 1976; Tannenbaum, 1968). Over time, this has led line managers to use delegation as a development tool for their employees, transferring power to them temporarily (Tracy, 2019; Stitt, 2018; Leana, 1987). Unlike delegation, however, empowerment involves a permanent transfer of power from the line manager to the employee and therefore not all line managers are willing to use it as a development tool. This dissertation analyses how much the relationship between line manager and Generation Z employee is based on a permanent transfer of power.

A line manager is the person in charge of the management of employees who are directly involved in the design, production and quality assurance of products. For better or for worse, the role of line managers is crucial in the experience of psychological empowerment that their employees live (Hakimi *et al.*, 2010; Forrester, 2000; Argyris, 1998; Deci *et al.*, 1989). Leader-empowering behaviours concern not only the delegation of authority and responsibility of line managers to their employees (Hakimi *et al.*, 2010), but also the sharing of resources and information, the participation of employees in the decision-making process and the development of employees' skills (Bloom, 2020; Konczak *et al.*, 2000).

This dissertation focuses on Generation Z employees. The interviewed employees are not statistically representative of the entire generation to which they belong, but the decision to carry out a non-probabilistic sampling that includes the generational criterion makes the perspective of the interviewed employees who share their empowerment experiences more credible and dependable.

Defining the years that set the boundaries of a generation is always a difficult exercise because contextual factors can be common to several generations. Generation Z members are often considered to be those who were born between 1996 and 2010 (McCrindle, 2022). This generation was the first to be exposed from childhood to a series of technological innovations that were unthinkable for previous generations, such as the internet and social media. On the other hand, generations are not defined only by their year of birth. A generation is a group of people who share a time and a space in history

and can be represented by a collective persona (McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009). Therefore, to fully understand a generation, one must take into consideration the political, economic, social and cultural context that has a lasting effect on that group of people during their formative years and shapes their opinions and behaviours for the rest of their lives.

In this dissertation, the analysis of the context cannot ignore the organisational culture that the headquarters of the company under review, based in the United States, promotes at all its branches around the world. The organisational culture encouraged by the US headquarters shows particular attention to individual and group performance. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the organisational culture in which workers are immersed is affected by the cultural influences of the country in which the company operates and the specific working conditions. In this case, the national context is the Italian one. The employees who were interviewed all live in Milan or the surrounding area. Milan is the most industrialised city in Italy and has lower unemployment rates than the rest of the country (ISTAT, 2022). The multinational company in which the research participants work, all with permanent and full-time contracts, is a centre for the design and production of biomedical devices, where people can breathe an organisational culture based on values such as inclusion, creativity and leadership. Performance is given importance, not so much from a punitive point of view, with the risk of losing one's job in the absence of results, but rather from a rewarding point of view, because results are an incentive to be able to fill roles of greater responsibility.

This dissertation focuses on the empowerment experience of eight line managers and their twenty-six Generation Z employees, all working in the Italian branch of a multinational organisation which is included in the Fortune Global 500 list, the world's top five hundred companies with the highest revenue levels, and the similar Fortune 500 list, which includes only US companies. The line managers and their employees were interviewed to understand how they interpret and experience their empowerment relationship, identifying positive and negative aspects. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were given the opportunity to investigate their own experience of empowerment, reflecting on behaviours, attitudes, thoughts, activities and processes that can foster or inhibit this relational dynamic.

The concept of empowerment has been heavily criticised in academia and has long been considered to be utopian after the observations of Argyris (1998: 98-99), who wrote: “Managers love empowerment in theory, but the command-and-control model is what they trust and know best. For their part, employees are often ambivalent about empowerment – it is great as long as they are not held personally accountable. Even the change professionals often stifle empowerment. Thus, despite all the best efforts that have gone into fostering empowerment, it remains very much like the emperor’s new clothes: we praise it loudly in public and ask ourselves privately why we can’t see it. There has been no transformation in the workforce, and there has been no sweeping metamorphosis.”

This dissertation adopts an analytical approach to understand in detail the empowerment experience of the research participants, who are line managers and their Generation Z employees, proposing an explanatory model of empowerment for the organisation under scrutiny, offering line managers a plan for empowerment development and assessment, and reflecting on the implications of empowerment for the HR function.

The concept of employee empowerment

The roots of employee empowerment are to be found in democratic supervision and participatory management. These issues have been studied since the 1930s in relation to strategic planning, total quality management and quality circles. Lewin *et al.* (1939) and Herzberg (1964) contributed to defining the concept of job enrichment, supporting the importance of involving employees in decision-making processes and giving them autonomy and control, which have proved to be essential aspects of empowerment. Other contributions to empowerment come from authors such as Bennis (2009) and Kanter (1979), who see empowerment as an effective organisational management technique.

In this dissertation empowerment is conceptualised as a three-way collaboration that benefits employees, their line managers and the organisation and promotes success and sustainability. Employees have full responsibility for their role, line managers enable the development of full ownership of that role and organisational systems support employees in being accountable for their own performance and organisational effectiveness, all in a context where the organisation’s mission and vision are aligned with the plans and goals related to individuals, groups and departments. This definition,

which reflects the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.2, undeniably places more emphasis on the strategic alignment between individual, managerial and organisational objectives than on the activities and behaviours that make this type of collaboration work in practice.

Del Val and Lloyd (2003: 102-103) are more specific in indicating the different areas in which managers and their organisations can intervene with a structural approach, since they affirm that “empowerment is the management style where managers share with the rest of the organisational members their influence in the decision-making process – that is to say, the collaboration in the decision-making process is not limited to those positions with formal power – with certain characteristics as far as information systems, training, rewarding, power sharing, leadership style and organisational culture are concerned”.

On the other hand, the definition of empowerment provided by Conger and Kanungo (1988: 474) is needed to appreciate the essential psychological implications of this construct: empowerment is “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information”. On the same line of thought Abun *et al.* (2021: 14) affirm that “Empowerment is trust given to the employees to perform their job on their own. Employees are the ones to decide how to carry out their duties and responsibilities”.

From these definitions emerge three levels of empowerment: the organisational level with its supporting mechanisms implemented through policies and procedures, the managerial level with the structural empowerment actions that managers can implement for the benefit of their employees, and the individual level characterised by specific psychological dimensions that the employee experiences in the relationship with their line manager. However, it is worth noting that empowerment is effective only when line managers are willing to transfer power to their employees and those employees are willing to receive power. If the employees do not want to receive power, giving up both associated benefits and responsibilities, it is unlikely that psychological empowerment will grow quickly and consistently.

Vogt and Murrell (1990) use the term “interactive empowerment” to emphasise how empowerment is a process that evolves over time and involves a gradual advancement that results from the interactions between line manager and employee. In its psychological connotation, empowerment is certainly not a two-state switch, but rather a cognitive state characterised by a sense of perceived control, perceived competence and goal internalisation (Menon, 2001).

In this dissertation, key aspects of the empowerment process were considered, such as the employee’s freedom to decide not only what needs to be done, but also how and when a task should be performed, the employee’s initiative to monitor how their work progresses, the ability and willingness of a line manager to encourage their employee to work independently, the degree of openness and collaboration between the line manager and the employee in assessing the employee’s performance and finally the organisational mechanisms to support empowerment such as institutional communications and policies on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working.

Research problem

Empowerment challenges traditional human resource management practices: it changes the balance of power between roles; it introduces a relational dynamic focused on developing competence rather than controlling resources; it offers benefits to employees in terms of job satisfaction, performance and commitment towards organisational goals; and it promises flexibility to organisations when the changing expectations of customers or the turbulence of the environment require a fast and flexible response which is incompatible with the old-style command-and-control organisational models (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Several companies in the world, more or less formally, are moving towards business processes that give space to employee empowerment practices and to a greater democratisation of working relationships (Huq, 2016b). This transformation inevitably occurs at the individual, managerial and organisational level (Blanchard and Johnson, 2015). Empowerment tools, discourses and practices can generate behaviours and activities that often coexist with human resource management dynamics that are typical of more hierarchical organisations, but they can be presented to managers as desirable choices through behavioural nudges (de Ridder *et al.*, 2022).

This dissertation focuses on the empowerment experience of eight line managers and their twenty-six Generation Z employees. It explores how research participants interpret and experience empowerment, why line managers empower their staff members, which organisational processes support empowerment and whether there are limits or drawbacks to this type of relationship. Based on the analysis of the interviews conducted with the research participants, the author of this dissertation formulates a theory to explain how empowerment occurs in the organisation under observation, provides a plan for line managers to improve their assessment and development skills to effectively carry out structural empowerment actions, and analyses the implications of empowerment for the HR function, enabling the readers to understand the tensions and implications that empowerment interventions determine on the HR function.

Justification for this dissertation

The current decade has opened with a global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This event, in combination with an increasingly uncertain international context, has created unexpected implications for the world of work, accelerating the use of digital technologies and hybrid workspaces, generating new insights on the meaning of work and work-life balance, and posing new questions on how to manage working relationships (Marchington, 2021). In light of these transformations, it is useful to explore how the employee empowerment experience occurs within a multinational company that in many respects can be considered a typical case, similar to many other international business contexts.

An in-depth reflection on the conceptual framework of empowerment processes, actions, behaviours and activities, with a focus on Generation Z, can contribute to the understanding of new human resource management practices, with the awareness that empowerment takes place along temporal and spatial dimensions, in a specific context and at a level of micro-foundations (Loscher *et al.*, 2019), such as in the professional relationship between line manager and employee.

Therefore, this dissertation finds its justification in the contribution to the advancement of academic discourses and managerial practices related to empowerment. The contribution of this dissertation consists of investigating how line managers experience their involvement in the empowerment of their younger employees and how line manager and employee achieve their goals through empowerment. In the past,

research on empowerment was conducted using mainly quantitative methods. This dissertation, on the other hand, adopts a qualitative approach to provide a more in-depth exploration of the experience of the different parties. More specifically, this dissertation focuses on Generation Z employees by updating knowledge on empowerment in relation to this segment of the working population. Furthermore, in the past, both the psychological perspective and the structural perspective were rarely used in the same research study, ignoring that it is the interaction between the two that enables a more in-depth understanding of the line manager's role. Finally, it is worth noting that this dissertation also explores the organisational mechanisms that support the empowerment experience, recognising that empowerment relationships are influenced by the empowerment climate (Seibert *et al.*, 2004) which is promoted by the organisational culture.

The Fortune 500 company

The organisation within which the research participants work is active in the electronics industry. The company is a major player in the field of semiconductors and other electronic components. The researcher decided not to name the organisation to protect the participants' privacy. Making the organisation anonymous allowed the respondents to share information freely about their role and workplace. However, it is useful to provide some information about the organisation to clarify elements of the organisational context to help interpret the results of this dissertation. The organisational culture of the company under review is based on values such as inclusion, creativity and leadership. Almost two hundred thousand employees work in one hundred different locations worldwide. Revenues are around twenty-five billion dollars and profits were around five hundred million dollars at the end of March 2018. With these figures, it is not surprising that this organisation is included in the Fortune Global 500 list, the world's top five hundred companies with the highest revenue levels, and the similar Fortune 500 list, which includes only US companies.

The choice of this organisation and the Italian subsidiary where the dissertation was carried out, as well as being justified for expediency, proved successful because it met the researcher's expectations of ensuring that the company under study was a typical case in which other multinational companies would recognise themselves (when observed under the McKinsey 7S framework). This is an organisation that has been in

business for around fifty years, is financially successful, has clear processes that people have to adhere to for much of their work and is keen to promote talent within the organisation by actively encouraging staff to develop their skills.

The two HR managers who authorised this research on behalf of the Italian subsidiary in Milan and promoted participation among their colleagues confirmed that the Italian subsidiary is in good financial health, the staff were willing to be involved in this dissertation and the organisational culture promotes a democratic leadership style, although there are no specific policies to actively support empowerment within the subsidiary or more generally within the organisation. The Italian subsidiary operates as a biomedical device development centre where over four hundred employees work as engineers in design, production, research and development, and quality control areas of the business.

The researcher expected to find some evidence of empowerment at the Italian subsidiary because he knows that people like the idea of empowerment, having worked with line managers and their employees in similar organisations on how to design and implement leadership development programmes. Conversations with line managers on the topic of empowerment usually take place in terms of how companies should support the empowerment of their staff and how they actually do it, while staff often talk about power, autonomy and motivation.

Before this research project was approved by the chosen company, the researcher had the opportunity to meet several senior managers of the Italian subsidiary who voiced their hopes for an improvement in the approach of line managers towards their employees, wishing for a more engaging and coaching-oriented style. However, they also added that there was no formal process for encouraging empowerment, in particular no specific reward for empowerment and no specific organisational development programme aimed at empowerment. It was simply an informal aspiration. They and other managers used the word 'empowerment' during management briefings and meetings. It is the I-wish-empowerment-would-happen-by-itself attitude that this dissertation considers typical of many other organisations, and it is those organisations and their managers that this case study addresses.

Key elements of the methodology

This dissertation uses a case study strategy whereby the case is the Italian branch of the organisation referred to in the title. In addition to the expedience of selecting this business as a case study, such as the willingness to collaborate, the multinational was selected because it represents a typical example of a company in which many managers and executives would recognise themselves: the organisational culture favours a democratic leadership style but empowerment does not happen spontaneously, despite favourable surrounding conditions.

A qualitative approach was used, because no theory has yet been developed on activities and behaviours that enable line managers to support the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees. By adopting a qualitative approach, this researcher has shown interest in meanings and perceptions rather than numerical data and has focused more on depth than breadth of research. In this dissertation, a qualitative approach is aligned with the research objective of exploring the empowerment relationship between line managers and Generation Z employees.

Interviewing was chosen for its ability to explore points of interest and clarify meanings (Myers, 2020). This tool allowed valid, reliable and relevant information to be collected that would answer the research questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

The selection criteria for becoming research participants were as follows:

- line managers must have been in the role for at least two years and could only be included in the dissertation if at least two of their staff were participating; and
- employees must have been in the role for at least one year and could only be included in the dissertation if they belonged to Generation Z.

The criteria required of managers and their staff regarding their length of service in the role were defined to give them all time to become familiar with the working environment, understand the requirements of their role and develop meaningful relationships with colleagues within their team and with other company colleagues. Making line manager participation dependent on that of at least two of their employees allowed the cross-comparison of the empowerment relationship within the same team, but also the comparison of experiences between employees reporting to the same line

manager and between employees reporting to different managers. The purpose of the age criterion for employees was to have a homogeneous sample of employees with regard to the generation to which they belonged. The age criterion was applied to increase the credibility and generalisability of the findings.

Although the adoption of a strategy based on a case study may limit the generalisation of the findings to the company under consideration, the value of this dissertation comes from the value of the discussion which ultimately led to the formulation of an explanatory model of employee empowerment, from the analysis of the implications of employee empowerment for the HR function and from the insights presented as limitations, suggestions for future research and conclusions.

Dissertation outline

This section outlines the content of the next chapters.

Chapter 1 presents a literature review on employee empowerment, starting from the evolution of managerial practices at work and then considering the basic elements from which the concept of empowerment was developed, such as job enrichment, participative management, and power. The relational dynamic that is established between line manager and employee is analysed in detail through a reflection on the structural and psychological aspects related to empowerment, explaining which leadership styles are more aligned with the idea of empowerment and how performance management is a critical success factor in shaping the empowerment experience. Furthermore, the literature review contains a focus on generations research to explain why it makes sense to consider the working population based on generations and how generational lenses can be applied to Generation Z. This section also explains the main criticisms of the literature on generations research. Finally, the chapter closes with the presentation of the conceptual framework through which the author of this dissertation has decided to organise the ideas presented in the literature review in order to explore the answers to the research questions.

Chapter 2 illustrates the research methods used in this dissertation and justifies them, showing the internal coherence that the author of this dissertation has been committed to maintaining throughout the research process. The chapter begins by explaining the philosophical assumptions that have inspired the author and then

continues with a broad discussion of the reasons that justify this dissertation and in particular the research questions. The methodological choice is analysed in detail, showing how the research strategy is suitable for the research aims and objectives and how other options would be less effective or incompatible due to the constraints imposed by the organisation or due to the time required by the doctoral programme. Ethical considerations are included to show the extent to which research integrity is a principle that has guided the author of this dissertation at every stage. Ample space is given to the discussion of quality criteria and what has been done to raise as much as possible the rigour in identifying the findings and evaluating their implications at a managerial level. Finally, a section has been included that explains what came from the pilot interviews and how this information has enabled the researcher to improve the information collection process and to better understand the empowerment experience of Generation Z employees.

Chapter 3 analyses the empowerment experiences by considering the structural interventions of line managers. Each theme is supported by direct quotes from the research participants. The empowerment-supporting mechanisms promoted by the organisation are also considered. They include for example company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working, which are useful for a more in-depth understanding of the business context. The next section discusses how performance management is accomplished through formal and informal approaches line managers can rely on. The chapter continues by examining the mechanism through which company information is communicated to all employees.

Chapter 4 analyses the psychological dimensions of the Generation Z employees who report back to the line managers interviewed in the previous chapter.

The analysis of the interviews with line managers and employees and other information relating to the context made it possible to develop an explanatory model of the employee empowerment experiences in the organisation. Drawing upon this model, which is presented in Chapter 5, a plan for the development and assessment of the effectiveness of line managers' empowerment actions was developed and insights on the managerial implications of empowerment for the HR function were advanced.

The dissertation ends with a final evaluation of the empowerment experiences of Generation Z employees and the managerial implications that Generation Z

empowerment poses to line managers and HR practitioners. Furthermore, the conclusion reaffirms how the underpinning concepts are linked to the findings, underlines the academic contribution of this work to the body of knowledge on employee empowerment, and includes the limitations of this dissertation and suggestions for future research.

In the appendices there is a scheme to help the reader appreciate the internal coherence of this research study and there are operational documents such as the step-by-step process followed to identify the organisation to collaborate with, the standard questions to ask the research participants during the interviews, the information sheet, the participant consent form, the research plan and the coding scheme. Demographic information about the research participants is provided to better understand the quotations extracted from their interviews. A dissertation summary written in French is included to facilitate the access to this research work by the French-speaking scientific community.

Chapter 1 – Literature review

This chapter begins with a discussion of how managerial practices in business contexts have evolved over the years, starting from the principles of Taylorism and moving on to consider the different forms of employee involvement and participation practices. The foundations of empowerment are then introduced and analysed to explain how this concept represents a way of going beyond traditional organisational hierarchies, which do not always cater for the expectations of Generation Z workers. The concept of power is also explored, in the knowledge that power is the backbone of any exploration of behaviour in organisations (Clegg *et al.*, 2006) and that different interpretations of empowerment are possible depending on how power is distributed between line manager and employee. Power as a hierarchical concept and the use of control systems by line managers (Edwards, 1979) are analysed to explain how they relate to line managers supporting employee autonomy.

The two approaches to empowerment considered in this dissertation are structural (Kanter, 1977) and psychological (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Structural empowerment is explored to see how relevant it still is in today's organisations and how it has been adapted over the years. Likewise, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), agency (Giddens, 1994), the cognitive model of psychological empowerment proposed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and the multidimensional interpretation of psychological empowerment suggested by Spreitzer (1995) have also been investigated. Further insights into psychological empowerment have been considered to highlight the implications for line managers (Spreitzer, 1996; Logan and Ganster, 2007; and Wang and Lee, 2009). In addition, this chapter examines the impact of empowerment on job performance (Tuuli and Rowlinson, 2009; Na-Nan and Sanamthong, 2020) and includes other approaches to measuring empowerment and its effects and outcomes. It also includes an in-depth look at how the line manager's leadership style can affect the empowerment experience. An analysis of the relationship between performance management and psychological empowerment completes the review of the topics covered in this chapter.

The aim here is to examine how the literature aids the understanding of the empowerment experience of Generation Z employees and how the topics analysed provide justification for the research questions and inform the methodological approach used.

1.1 The evolution of managerial practices at work

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed in a workplace that was governed by rules, procedures and control. Shortly after 1880, Frederick W. Taylor outlined an approach to management, later called 'scientific management', which offered a utilitarian view of workers. In scientific management efficiency and productivity were key variables used to increase business profit. Taylor (1911) unquestionably left an important legacy for twentieth and twenty-first-century organisations in terms of task measurement, efficiency drive and a utilitarian view of employees: like raw materials, employees were a means of production. Today, Taylor's principles can be found in lean thinking, particularly in the drive for continuous improvement and the idea of eliminating waste. In this dissertation, the organisational culture of the company in which the interviewees' work was considered. To understand how much and how Taylor's principles have been adapted to the expectations of younger employees, ownership and involvement in the activities required by the respondents' role was carefully examined.

Mary Parker Follett (1918) was one of the first writers to explore power and take a more optimistic view of management, bringing the American ideal of democracy into the workplace and offering a perspective that counterbalanced Taylor's (1911). Follett (1918) accepted that power existed in organisations but distinguished between 'power with' and 'power over' arguing that organisations should adopt the notion of 'power with' so that people would learn to work together and understand that power derives from the function they perform and not from an elite group that controls them. Follett (1918) felt deeply that scientific management had glorified efficiency at the expense of civility and that "democracy rests on the well-grounded assumption that society is neither a collection of units nor an organism but a network of human relations" (Follett, 1918: 7). Therefore, the role of leadership in organisations was to foster partnership and coordination between people and to manage possible conflicts through negotiation to ensure mutual respect and preserve the interests of all. Follett (1918) associated the notion of 'power over' with that of 'coercive power' and the notion of 'power with' with that of 'coactive power'. To her, coactive power brought empowerment. To encourage this, organisations needed to promote democratic governance. Other researchers subsequently dealt with power in organisations and expanded on the idea of greater democratisation in the corporate world. It is worth recalling the Hawthorne experiments

in the 1920s but also Elton Mayo and the Human Relations School of Thought. These studies highlighted the importance of informal relationships at work, individual human needs, personal motivation and job satisfaction. Thus, it seems that social relations and power relations are a central issue, regardless of the position an author takes on empowerment at work. In this dissertation, the distinction between coercive power and coactive power and the concept of democratic governance were used to frame the interview questions. To what extent are line managers truly collaborative? How do line managers intend to use their coactive power? And how do their Generation Z employees experience this coactive power? Power-sharing, involvement in activities and decisions, and the transfer of responsibility seem to be at the core of the empowerment experience.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some organisations began to involve their employees through job-enrichment schemes that offered elements of control and feedback on their performance (Buchanan, 1979). Employees were given a broader view of business processes and more decision-making authority. Both these elements were designed to promote intrinsic motivation and thus increase job satisfaction. Companies such as General Motors and Procter & Gamble were among the first to realise that intrinsic motivation could increase job satisfaction (Walton, 1986).

The word ‘empowerment’ became a byword in the business management books of the 1980s. One such example is *In Search of Excellence* by Peters and Waterman, which argued that organisations should move away from bureaucracy, control and hierarchy and embrace the idea of trusting their employees, involving them and giving them more leeway in serving customers (Peters and Waterman, 1982).

The late 1980s and 1990s saw a shift towards lean manufacturing, responsive organisations and other forms of managerial innovation. Writers such as Drucker (1988) and Kanter (1989) explored de-bureaucratisation, de-layering and de-centralisation and came to acknowledge the benefits of teamworking on projects. This new approach required line managers to promote teamwork and empowerment by encouraging trust among people. It was also important for employee knowledge and skills to be put to greater use (Hyman and Mason, 1995; Walton, 1986). The total quality movement and quality circles began to be appreciated at this time. This was also the historical backdrop against which this researcher became curious about how people in organisations experience empowerment today. To what extent does Taylorism currently exist in

organisations? Are employees engaged? Do they feel free? How much trust does their line manager place in them? What power and social relationships do line managers and their Generation Z employees have in organisations today? The interview questions set out to provide some answers.

1.2 The basis of employee empowerment

Empowerment stems from approaches and concepts designed to democratise the workplace. Two key contributions came from McGregor (1960) and Likert (1961). While Likert's (1961) work focused on the idea of promoting management styles that went beyond the traditional command-and-control approach, McGregor's (1960) X and Y theory suggested there were two approaches to managing people. There were also two approaches to understanding how employees managed their work. According to theory X, managers are authoritarian by nature and employees dislike their work, preferring to be directed and not take responsibility. According to theory Y, managers are participative by nature and employees are willing to take on new responsibilities, preferring to manage their own work and trying to achieve company goals without management control or the threat of sanctions. McGregor (1960) and Likert (1961) sparked a variety of studies on participative management. These studies explored the impact on productivity and quality of work that managers could achieve by encouraging open communication, supporting cooperation between managers and employees, and identifying the motivations and needs of employees.

1.2.1 Job enrichment

Job enrichment gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s as an attempt to move away from the simplification of work that scientific management proposed. People were offered work that made sense. They were also offered the prospect of being responsible for carrying out the task from start to finish. Job enrichment practices spread from production line work to other areas. Work could be enriched both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal enrichment provided people with the opportunity to take more steps in the process of performing the task without having to develop new skills, while vertical enrichment consisted of providing workers with supervisory responsibilities that required the development of new skills, such as checking the quality of work and meeting deadlines. Hackman and Lawler (1971) found that people do not feel psychologically responsible for their job performance if they do not experience both

horizontal and vertical enrichment. Hackman and Lawler (1971) also found that job enrichment is only productive if people are motivated by higher-order needs such as personal growth, achievement, autonomy and competence, which are the same as the requirements for psychological empowerment. Therefore, this dissertation asked questions about the degree and type of enrichment that Generation Z employees could encounter in their jobs. Empowerment implies both horizontal and vertical expansion and assumes that people feel responsible for their performance at work. Can empowerment exist in an organisation as complex as the one on the Fortune 500 list under investigation here?

Lawler (1986) argued that there is a link between empowerment and practices such as quality circles, job enrichment and participative management, recognising the importance of letting employees make day-to-day decisions because being able to decide increases motivation, and motivated people feel involved. These approaches were based on the idea that employees should be trusted to make decisions when these affect their work. Employees were also to be given the opportunity to learn more about the organisation beyond their own area of expertise. These changes in managers' attitudes towards their employees were expected to lead to higher levels of productivity. Different degrees of involvement have been identified: suggestion involvement arises when employees offer suggestions and ideas; job involvement increases when employees design the methods necessary to work at their best; and high involvement comes about when employees can make decisions that affect their company beyond the boundaries of their role. Lawler (1986) identified four aspects of high involvement: information about organisational performance; reward for job performance; diffusion of knowledge that can help employees improve organisational performance; and distribution of power so that employees can influence the strategic direction the organisation takes. These aspects were explored during the interviews. Are Generation Z employees aware of organisational performance? Can they see how they contribute to this performance? Do Generation Z employees feel they can influence corporate strategy? What thoughts do line managers share, what attitudes do they show and what actions do they take when they want to support the aspects of high involvement Lawler (1986) suggested?

Block (1987) helped popularise the idea of employee empowerment by encouraging managers to abandon traditional business bureaucracy in favour of a more entrepreneurial approach to management. The entrepreneurial path to better management

is based on three choices: greatness, not maintenance; courage, not caution; and autonomy, not dependency. The emphasis on creating interesting job roles, the desire for honest and open communication, taking responsibility at a personal level and identifying the responsibilities of employees provided line managers with a new perspective on their role. With the role of line managers becoming one of consultancy, staff could be encouraged to define their own work goals, be more self-managing and take ownership of their objectives and outcomes. This new approach is summed up in a mantra that is still often quoted by managers today: “Better to proceed than to wait for direction. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Better to be seen as stubborn than incompetent” (Block, 1987: 17).

1.2.2 Participative management

Much has been written about participative management. The problem is that there does not seem to be a uniform framework for this area of management. Cotton *et al.* (1988) analysed over four hundred scientific papers and found six variables related to participative management. These included participation in work decisions, informal participation, short-term participation, consultative participation, employee ownership and representative participation. An analysis of these variables revealed how participation increases job performance most effectively when employees have a significant influence on decision-making and when participation is direct and long term.

High-commitment management is aimed at creating a strong commitment to the organisation and creates a situation where employees feel more involved in its success. In high-commitment organisations “behaviour is largely self-regulated rather than controlled by sanctions and pressures external to the individual” (Wood and Albanese, 1995: 217), thus relations within these organisations are based on high trust. Wood and De Menezes (1998) drew up a list of practices associated with high-commitment management, among which were commitment to employee development, career ladders and removal of job descriptions. These practices are generally linked to the structural approach to empowerment.

Ahanotu (1998) observed how empowerment can go beyond continuous improvement programmes and quality circles. On the other hand, high involvement exceeds role empowerment because employees feel they are participating over and above their job description requirements. They seek organisational improvement, believe in

continuous improvement and want decision-making systems that take the employee voice into account (Wood and De Menezes, 2011). High involvement includes role empowerment but goes far beyond it. There are four types of involvement: role involvement occurs when the individual is responsible for managing their own work activities; direct involvement in the organisation happens through processes such as teamwork and quality circles (Lawler, 1986); employee voice happens when employees are offered the opportunity to participate in employee relations; and economic involvement is when employees are offered an incentive to contribute to the good of the organisation. Wood and De Menezes (2011) found that these four aspects are not always used together. Even today it is not easy to find organisational contexts in which all four aspects of high involvement appear simultaneously. Wood and De Menezes (2011) also pointed out that there is no strong evidence that high involvement can have a positive effect on performance. It may even have the unwanted effect of increasing employees' anxiety, and Wood and De Menezes (2011) recommended that organisations promote self-efficacy to minimise this effect.

Other negative effects may occur in high-commitment organisations (Baloff and Doherty, 1989). A person may be subject to peer pressure if asked to cooperate in ways that put their interests or psychological balance at risk. For example, a person may be asked to adopt attitudes that are not consistent with their personality and values or to take part in extracurricular activities that are strongly encouraged by the organisation, even when the individual has little interest in them. Managers may even try to force employees to participate by threatening retaliation if their performance is poor. At the same time, managers themselves may be under pressure from the organisation. For example, they may see their career progression at risk and feel forced to exhibit a more participative management style. Both managers and their staff may then find it difficult to revert to a more traditional and rigid management style at the end of a task involving high levels of participation. These considerations of how managers can encourage the involvement of their staff and how staff experience this encouragement are useful in understanding the experience of empowerment in the organisation under review. The negative consequences highlighted by Baloff and Doherty (1989) may be present and hinder the full involvement of Generation Z employees.

Peer group pressure stems from the fact that people wish to conform to a set of behavioural norms that safeguard the interests of the group. Therefore, employee

participation could be seen as deviant behaviour if the group is not familiar with participative management. Baloff and Doherty (1989) pointed out a variety of negative consequences in terms of the impact on the individual whose behaviour is regarded as non-compliant. First, the group explains to the individual the negative consequences of participation and after threatening psychological punishment goes to the extreme stage in which it decides to take away the individual's membership status and related benefits. The individual is removed from the group and the actions suffered cause "internal conflict, possible feelings of guilt, and a lower motivation to participate and to work creatively" (Baloff and Doherty, 1989: 54). This negative aspect related to group dynamics can be applied, as in the example, to participative management, but also empowerment, and could occur in the organisation under consideration if empowerment were imposed from above without the people involved being adequately prepared.

Numerous paradoxes that create disempowerment may potentially be present in the organisation under consideration (Berti and Simpson, 2021). An exhaustive list of every conceivable situation is impossible due to the variety of cases. However, it should be borne in mind that the road to disempowerment is easily travelled: for example, emphasis on employees' innovative and entrepreneurial skills can lead to exploitation and control (Fleming, 2013); flexible working arrangements that do not clearly specify the boundary between work and private life can induce the employee to work more hours than they are paid for (Putnam *et al.*, 2014); employees sometimes feel trapped when asked to comply with contradictory organisational rules (Wagner, 1978); in matrix structures, younger employees reporting to two different managers feel they lack autonomy and control (Pérezts *et al.*, 2011); employees who are bullied in the workplace may be advised not to respond and to avoid any emotional response, to fight alone or to change jobs (Tye-Williams and Krone, 2017); autonomy-seeking but risk-averse employees may impose contradictory demands on their line managers (Ekman, 2012); middle managers may find themselves promoting change initiatives that threaten their own roles (Dopson and Neumann, 1998); and finally, female engineers may be implicitly required to relinquish their femininity so as to be accepted as equals by their male colleagues (Gherardi, 1994). All these situations were investigated in the company under review to verify to what extent the reported contradictions – and possibly other contradictions – are present.

There are, however, ways of mitigating the effects of disempowerment (Baloff and Doherty, 1989; Berti and Simpson, 2021) and these aspects are also to be considered during interviews with line managers and their Generation Z employees. Internal conflicts can be kept under control if participation is long enough, for example, over six months. The intensity and exclusivity of the activity carried out in a participatory context are also mitigating factors. If the activity in the participatory context is part-time, with employees spending the rest of their time in more traditional, hierarchical and inflexible contexts, motivation is lower on average when the employee is working in the traditional context compared to those who have never experienced a participatory context. If the participatory approach is only used for one project, there will be a negative effect on motivation when the employee returns to more traditional managerial forms. These considerations helped inform the interview questions that look into how any negative consequences of disempowerment are mitigated.

Ramsay *et al.* (2000) studied the impact of high-performance work systems (HPWS) on performance, following on from Huselid's (1995) belief that HPWS "can improve the knowledge, skills and abilities of a firm's current and potential employees, increase their motivation, reduce shirking, and enhance retention of quality employees while encouraging nonperformers to leave the firm" (Huselid, 1995: 635). Ramsay *et al.* (2000) distinguished between high-commitment management (HCM) in which managers reduce their need for control and monitoring and high-involvement management (HIM) in which employees take the initiative and make decisions. Both approaches have in common the idea of sharing information on company performance at all levels and in all functions, providing training to enable employees to contribute, and offering very favourable contractual conditions, employee relations procedures and performance incentives. Ramsay *et al.* (2000) assessed whether HCM or HIM had a positive impact on workplace performance and employee outcomes such as job satisfaction. Their results showed that HCM and HIM did not have a strong impact on employee outcomes but, despite this, high-performance work systems based on, for example, total quality management, team autonomy, job control, upward communication and profit-related pay are positively and significantly related to workplace performance indicators such as labour productivity, financial performance and product quality. The lack of more scientific evidence supporting the positive impact of HCM and HIM practices may be due to several factors. These include the possibility that the statistical model used by

Ramsay *et al.* (2000) may not be sophisticated enough to measure the subtle nuances of any potential positive effects of employee involvement and empowerment; managers are not competent when implementing high-performance work systems; employees actively or passively oppose managers' processes, or there are no measurable benefits for employees. The potential difficulty of measuring the outcomes of empowerment was therefore identified and used to inform the analysis undertaken in this dissertation.

This subsection on the basics of empowerment has served to further understand the link between empowerment and different approaches to employee involvement. Now the reader might wonder whether empowerment is just employee involvement under another name. The question was put to the line managers and their Generation Z employees involved in this dissertation to understand the details of how and to what extent they experience involvement and empowerment.

1.2.3 The exercise of power at work

Clegg *et al.* (2006) used the compelling metaphor that “power is to organisations as oxygen is to breathing” (Clegg *et al.*, 2006: 3) to describe how power can be a positive force when present in combination with other elements. However, like oxygen, it can hurt when there is too much or too little of it. One of the most negative remarks on power in organisations was perhaps made by Aldrich *et al.* (2020) a few years ago: “The concentration of power in organisations contributes not only to the attainment of large-scale goals, but also to some troublesome actions [...] we might view the growth of an organisational society as a record of people enslaved and dominated by organisations, subject to arbitrary and impersonal dictates, and nearly powerless to fight back” (Aldrich *et al.*, 2020: 2-3). Any analysis of the link between empowerment and power cannot ignore these initial judgements.

A first consideration in understanding how power is exercised in organisations lies in the realisation that organisations are microcosms: what happens in the company between people would not happen between the same people in a different environment. Giddens' (1994) idea of structuration helps the readers to realise that actions fit into a broader social structure referred to as context and that the interaction between actions and context determines the value of the outcome. For example, an employee is not completely free to do what they want at work and the social structure within which they find themselves cannot determine their actions one hundred per cent. It is the interaction

between actions and structure that determines the outcome, in society as well as in the company. There would seem to be a connection with Lukes' work (2021), because his three-dimensional view of power also recognises the significance of the social context and how social patterns create power relations: "the bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series [*sic*] of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals' inaction" (Lukes, 2021: 30).

There are different sources of power to draw on. At the individual level, the source of power includes a person's dependence on another (Pfeffer, 1981), a person's characteristics (French and Raven, 1959) and a person's experience or knowledge (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). At the organisational level, power can be exercised through the skills or competencies of a particular group of people, for example maintenance workers (Crozier, 1964). At the interpersonal level, different power bases exist. French and Raven (1959) identified referent, expert, legitimate, reward and coercive power as the most common power bases. A few years later Raven (1965) added informational power. Referent power is derived from the relationship with other employees that an individual forms within the organisation. Those with referent power are often considered to be charismatic and able to earn the respect and trust of colleagues. This may also be due to connections with people in high positions in the organisational hierarchy. Expert power comes from having knowledge or expertise in a given area. The opinions and decisions of individuals with expert power are held in high regard. Legitimate power is derived from an individual's position in the hierarchy in relation to other members of the organisation. For this power to be used effectively, the people to whom it is directed must believe that the power has been honestly earned through mechanisms such as promotions or meritocratically managed selections. Coercive power is derived from a person's ability to influence others through threats, sanctions or punishments. This power base is often used to ensure compliance with company policies and procedures. Reward power is derived from a person's ability to influence the distribution of incentives within the organisation. Incentives include promotions, salary increases or other benefits. Informational power is derived from a person's ability to control the information that others need to complete their activities. Those with informational power are in a position to share, conceal or manipulate information. This

distinction between the different power bases offers a simple and often familiar picture in the business world that can be shared with interviewees to understand what type of power managers in the organisation under review are willing to transfer to their employees and how, if at all, the different power bases illustrated here are measured.

Given his reputation as a social systems theorist, Talcott Parsons is another key figure worth considering. Parsons explored the concept of power in the mid 1960s and defined power as the ability to influence the allocation of resources to achieve collective goals (Clegg *et al.*, 2006). He wrote that power is a legitimate way to ensure commitments are met and debts are honoured, and that power has a positive effect when it is based on organisational norms (Clegg *et al.*, 2006). Barnes (1988) refers to Parsons' views on power as 'normative determinism' in that norms are shared. The socialisation process only takes place where norms are shared. Parsons' work emphasises the impact of norms on power and this perspective seems to be a useful line of inquiry for this dissertation. Parsons has been criticised for neglecting the role of the hierarchical power of senior managers in organisations: a "person taking orders is structurally disadvantaged in relation to a person with the power to give them" (Habermas, 1987: 271), since being dismissed has a greater psychological impact than that of deciding to leave one's job voluntarily. Managers can, therefore, rely on their legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959). They have, for example, the power to set goals, whereas younger members of the organisation can only participate in the process if invited to do so. Younger employees are thus at a structural disadvantage. Power-sharing between line manager and employee, previously referred to as 'power with', may never be a reality. The hierarchical connotation of 'power over' makes it hard for organisations to realise empowerment aspirations and power over may be the norm. Although Parsons' work may seem far removed from twenty-first-century business contexts, his contribution has added a further layer of complexity to the analysis of power that needs to be undertaken during interviews, because he has spotlighted how power is not only restricted by corporate norms but also by the line managers' ability to exercise it effectively. This, for example, means investigating whether line managers rely exclusively on the legitimate basis of their power that is derived from a hierarchical position or whether they display power in the form of technical expertise, professional networks and organisational understanding.

An important area of interest for this dissertation is the increasing use of digital technology and the impact of upskilling employees on the decentralisation of power and

responsibility. It is generally accepted that more highly skilled employees require less direct supervision and monitoring because they have the skills to be more self-managing. Gallie *et al.* (1998) studied this area over twenty years ago and found that there was a close relationship between skill change and task discretion (an element of empowerment), which could not be explained by factors such as age and length of service. This led employers to rely more on employees' judgement, giving them more responsibility and discretion as their skill levels increased. When people were asked whether their responsibility had increased, decreased or remained the same over the past five years, most employees (sixty-six per cent) reported an increase, while only twenty-six per cent reported that responsibility had remained the same and eight per cent saw a decrease. This distribution varied by job class, with the increase in responsibility most marked among managers, professionals, technical or supervisory employees, while semi-skilled and unskilled staff saw the smallest increase in responsibility, although even in this class the number of people affected by the increase in responsibility rose by fifty per cent. This points to a potential shift in the role of the line manager, as an increase in autonomy and discretion shifts the focus of the role from management control to people development (Holtz and Zardet, 2022; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Moving the focus away from management control is a necessary condition for the development of employee autonomy and empowerment (Gallie *et al.*, 1998). In the organisation under scrutiny here, there is a strong use of technology. The research participants can be classed as supervisors or highly specialised technicians. Both categories have at least a bachelor's degree, and often a master's degree, in engineering. This leads employees to expect decentralised power and higher levels of responsibility. Gallie *et al.* (1998) has provided numerous ideas for examining the role of the line manager when a Generation Z employee is indicated, or self-assesses, as highly empowered. The ideas relate mainly to attitudes, expectations and indicators to measure success in their role.

Gallie *et al.* (1998) did not study any of the negative consequences associated with increased responsibility, such as work-related stress, but it has already been pointed out in the chapter subsection dealing with the positive and negative aspects of participative management that any critical issues related to empowerment were considered during the interviews with the participants. In contrast to what has already been observed, the emphasis here is on any evidence that responsibility and

empowerment negatively affect the employee in terms of stress and psychological pressure.

Management control was analysed in depth by Edwards (1979). In his contribution to understanding the 'social relations of production', Edwards (1979) argued that control systems show the conflicting interest between employers and employees since they are developed to increase compliance and prevent conflict between employees. Edwards (1979) indicates three stages in control system development: simple, technical and bureaucratic forms of control. The first stage is the simple control of the team leader or supervisor and involves close, direct control over work processes, resources and employees. The second stage is technical control, derived from Taylor's (1911) approach to scientific management. Control is exercised through work processes and payment by results and is still in practice today where work is standardised and routine. The third stage is bureaucratic control, initially developed in large organisations to control administrative and technical staff. Control is based on performance management, career advancement, value statements and codes of conduct. Edwards (1979) believes that control over workers will never diminish and can only change with the advent of technology or market demands. Control will be developed to keep power firmly in the hands of the employer and to counter any potential influence from organisations such as trade unions that oppose the employer's power. Offering any form of task discretion is perceived as counterproductive because it reduces work intensity. More complex forms of control will be constantly developed to ensure that control sustains productivity. Edwards' (1979) prediction would seem to contrast with the concepts of empowerment, coercive power and high involvement but it may simply be a matter of interpreting his words about the development of ever new forms of control in the light of what Buchanan and Huczynski (2019) say about organisational culture and symbolic management: "The use of organisational culture to control and direct employees' behaviour involves the selective application of rites, ceremonials, myths, stories, symbols, and legends by company managers to direct the behaviour of their employees. It is called symbolic management. It involves encouraging employees to internalize desired company values and norms. External control is thus replaced by self-control [...]. This approach appeals to managers because it is cheaper, avoids resentment, and builds employee commitment to the company and its goals" (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2019: 123). The work of Edwards (1979) and the opinion of Buchanan and Huczynski (2019) are useful to explore how line

managers define their role in an empowered relationship and whether there are more complex forms of control in place in the organisation under study.

Edwards' (1979) analysis of supervisors keeping control is endorsed by Gallie *et al.* (1998) who found that at least seventy per cent of respondents in all employment classes said their supervisor influenced the tasks they were to perform and the quality of their work. This indicates that even complex and knowledge-based work can be controlled, potentially challenging other findings. Edwards' (1979) model of structural control and Gallie *et al.*'s (1998) research indicate that control systems have expanded; almost everyone has a supervisor, although in the managerial and professional classes there is greater personal discretion and accountability. The widespread use of mechanisms such as appraisal systems and other forms of bureaucratic control applies to four out of ten employees and is prevalent in the managerial and professional classes. It would thus appear that task discretion does not significantly alter the traditional management role of supervision. The potential impact of the appraisal system in the company under analysis was considered so as to discover the extent to which it acts as a form of control. The researcher involved in this dissertation has been able during his career as a business consultant to observe and appreciate different appraisal systems including those that control and create compliance and others that focus more on development and ownership.

As Nord (1978) observed, if the challenge is to change the distribution of power no one can forget that: "The distribution of power and resources in existing organisations supports humanized relationships only to a limited degree. Humanization of such systems is by no means inevitable but instead may require considerable struggle. Analysis and facilitation of the process will be aided by greater emphasis on the role of power and the realization that organisations are political systems embedded in larger political systems" (Nord, 1978: 678). The challenge for management in a capitalist system is that they are being called upon to create profit through new forms of collaboration when most organisations over the world still seem to see hierarchy as the main instrument for creating this profit. Attenuation in the hierarchy had already been introduced by Friedman (1977), who explored the concept of responsible autonomy, defined as "the maintenance of managerial authority by getting workers to identify with the competitive aims of the enterprise so that they will act responsibly with a minimum amount of supervision" (Friedman, 1977: 48). The interaction between line managers who have

power and employees who want power highlights the boundary between the discretion of employees on the one hand and the hierarchical structure of their company on the other. The need for managers to monitor and measure employee performance was highlighted by Ripley and Ripley (1992) who wrote that employee discretion will be limited until employees become self-directed, which would lead to the manager's role changing or becoming extinct.

To twenty-first-century managers, keeping the focus on management control is traditional, conservative and neo-Tayloristic behaviour (Gallie *et al.*, 1998), yet the idea only penetrated the business world effectively when Hamel and Breen in 2007 published *The Future of Management*, where they wrote: "Can you remember any instance in which something that was *assigned* to you brought you more joy than something you *chose* to do? No? Well, neither can anyone else in your company. Human beings are most enthusiastic when they're doing the things they *want* to do" (Hamel and Breen, 2007: 208). Objections remain that if everyone in the company only does what they choose to do and not what they have to do, organisational efficiency is reduced. To this criticism, Hamel and Breen (2007) replied that self-direction can reduce efficiency but only if efficiency is defined in a Tayloristic sense as the amount of production carried out in relation to a scarce resource, usually time: if employees are focused on what they care about it is undeniable that they pay less attention to what their line manager cares about. On the other hand, this definition of efficiency does not take into account control costs such as the reporting, auditing and supervision necessary to keep employees focused on tasks they do not like; discretionary efforts that employees are only willing to make if they like what they do but are not forced into it; costs that employees incur to obtain approval without which they cannot do work they would be capable of doing without external intervention; and opportunity costs related to not using employees' full potential. Therefore, Hamel and Breen concluded that these hidden costs do not compensate for the benefit that companies get from keeping unmotivated and disillusioned people doing tasks they do not like: "If your company is going to thrive in this new century, it must build a management system that allows an ever-growing percentage of employees to devote an ever-increasing proportion of their time to projects of their own choosing. The payoff: an ever-growing sense of commitment and passion" (Hamel and Breen, 2007: 211).

The matter of how managers see their role was addressed during the interviews; in particular, the theme of self-direction was put forward as an opportunity to broaden the view of the strategic aspects of the role, and the theme of efficiency was addressed to reflect on performance measurement.

The role of the line manager in an empowerment relationship requires a shift from hierarchical power towards power-sharing and the fostering of autonomy. The evolution of the role is explored in the next chapter section.

1.3 Two approaches to employee empowerment

The term ‘empowerment’ was used in the context of social change and feminism before it reached the world of business (Calvès, 2009). In a literal sense, empowerment means to give power to someone else: “it concerns an individual’s power and control relative to those of others, as well as the sharing of power and control, and the transmitting of power from one individual to another with less power” (Wilson, 2018: 339-340).

Two approaches to employee empowerment are used in this dissertation: the structural or relational approach, which is linked to the context, and the psychological or motivational approach, which starts with the individual. Structural empowerment requires higher levels in a hierarchy to share their power with lower levels in the hierarchy, as opposed to psychological empowerment which arises when people *feel* empowered (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). In essence, structural empowerment is a means used by managers and their organisations to give power to their employees, whereas psychological empowerment is a result. Line managers can perform actions aimed at empowering their employees. However, these efforts will not be successful if employees do not wish to be empowered (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). It seems that the prerequisites and contexts most conducive to empowerment were largely neglected until the work of Conger and Kanungo in 1988. Their paper shows that empowerment could be seen as both a relational and a motivational construct (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). These two approaches will now be explored, looking for commonalities, differences and implications for this dissertation.

The more power a person has, the more easily they can achieve their goals. This generates a culture of dependency, however, which is contrary to empowerment, because

structural empowerment occurs when managers share their power with their staff. As Burke (1986) observes, the manager's role in the empowerment process is to delegate authority for an indefinite period. Managers should involve their employees in determining the paths leading to the completion of the set tasks, stimulate employees to take the initiative, reward them through formal incentive schemes, further employee development by involving them in decision-making activities and appeal to their need for autonomy and independence (Abun *et al.*, 2021). In the structural empowerment approach, managers offer their employees the opportunity to expand their skills, to do more and be more productive. However, this can lead to a negative reaction if employees do not wish to be given additional power or responsibility. In the study conducted by Kerfoot and Knights (1995) managers continued to have the ultimate responsibility for performance because the transfer of power and responsibility to their staff was not successful.

Structural empowerment says nothing about the experience of the employee to whom power and responsibility are transferred. The psychological needs and cognitive state of the person receiving structural empowerment cannot be ignored. Empowerment programmes may fail because employees are not ready to accept this power and responsibility. It makes sense, therefore, to explore both structural and psychological empowerment to get a complete picture of the experience.

This dissertation offers an analysis of the power relationship between line managers and their Generation Z employees in a multinational company. Do employees perceive themselves as having some degree of power? Do line managers perceive the transfer of power when they create structural empowerment for the benefit of their employees? How does the line manager experience this transfer of power? What kind of power is the line manager willing to transfer? How does this affect their self-esteem?

Psychological empowerment sees power as a motivational construct. People have a need for power that can be satisfied when they can control and influence the course of events (McClelland, 1975). When people do not have the skills to succeed, they do not satisfy their need for power and this can lead to a sense of helplessness or powerlessness (Abramson *et al.*, 1978). Other constructs have been developed to analyse the psychological perspective of empowerment, including self-determination (Deci, 1975) and personal self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), which will be considered later in this chapter.

However, the individual’s actions can improve the feeling of self-efficacy and increase the sense of power.

In what has been written so far, psychological empowerment concerns motivation and performance support, whereas structural empowerment concerns the transfer of authority and resources. Whetten and Cameron (2021), however, do not distinguish between the two perspectives, opting to focus on the idea that empowerment encompasses both aspects and that together they involve the acquisition of control over resources and the development of personal efficacy. Distinct or not, the two aspects of structural and psychological empowerment are found in many other definitions of empowerment, suggesting the need to balance authority and responsibility (Neilsen, 1986).

The work of Conger and Kanungo (1988) focused on empowerment as a motivational construct in terms of enablement rather than delegation and defined empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (Conger and Kanungo, 1988: 474). The authors indicated five stages in the empowerment process, as shown in Table 1.1 below.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Conditions leading to a psychological state of powerlessness	The use of managerial strategies and techniques	To provide self-efficacy information to subordinates using four sources	Results in empowering experience of subordinate	Leading to behavioural effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational factors • Supervision • Reward system • Nature of job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participative management • Goal setting • Feedback system • Modelling • Contingent / competence-based reward • Job enrichment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enactive attainment • Vicarious experience • Verbal persuasion • Emotional arousal <p style="text-align: center;"><i>and remove conditions listed under Stage 1</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening of effort-performance expectancy or belief in personal efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiation / persistence of behaviour to accomplish task objectives

Table 1.1 – Five stages in the process of empowerment (Conger and Kanungo, 1988: 475)

This table shows how managers can remove feelings of powerlessness in employees and develop self-efficacy to make an employee feel empowered. When considering the psychological perspective, power and control are seen as motivators. People at work are considered motivated when they have the power to cope with situations and events typical of their role (McClelland, 1975; Abramson *et al.*, 1978) in order to satisfy their need for self-determination (Deci, 1975) or personal self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Any managerial intervention that strengthens self-determination or self-efficacy can increase an individual's sense of power. This can be related to the expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964; Lawler, 1973) whereby an individual's desire to increase effort to complete a task depends on three factors: how much the individual believes that more effort will result in better performance; how much the individual believes that better performance will result in better outcomes; and how important the individual considers those outcomes to be. Bandura (1986) calls the first factor 'self-efficacy expectation' and the second factor 'outcome expectation'. When people are empowered, their self-efficacy increases. They feel they can remain positive even while working hard. They are sure they can achieve the results that are important to them. They present themselves to others in a proactive way. Line managers have a role to play in recognising the effort that one of their employees makes; even if this person does not achieve the desired result, the act of recognising this effort will increase the employee's feeling of self-efficacy. Recognising effort means the line manager can give praise, feedback and recognition.

The article by Conger and Kanungo (1988) did not explore how line managers check increased employee self-efficacy or reduced feelings of powerlessness. This dissertation, instead, through interviews with participants pays great attention to investigating how self-efficacy germinates, grows and matures and how powerlessness is reduced or removed. This study has provided insights into whether empowerment is a linear or roundabout process, whether and how managers distinguish between the different levels of empowerment of their employees, whether employees feel they are on a path to empowerment or whether they experience this approach in their relationship with their manager in on-off mode, for example in empowered or unempowered mode. In addition, other questions were explored, such as how is the transfer of power in the empowerment relationship experienced by line managers? Do line managers feel their role loses in importance? What are their motivations for empowering their employees?

1.3.1 Structural empowerment

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggested before Gidden (1994) and Lukes (2021) that the organisational environment can have a significant impact on how people perceive their own empowerment. Organisational processes may unintentionally lead employees to experience powerlessness, preventing them from realising their potential. On the other hand, better design of the same processes can modify or remove those limiting conditions that induce powerlessness. This is why structural empowerment, based on power-sharing, often appears mechanistic and top-down.

Offering one's employees more power, discretion and problem-solving opportunities implies building a relationship based on trust (Martínez-Tur *et al.*, 2020). Trust is generally understood as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor” (Mayer *et al.*, 1995: 712). In this dissertation, line managers were asked many questions on the topic of trust: Who should they trust? All employees or only some of them? How to choose trustworthy employees? How much trust should be given and how should it be measured? In what areas? What to do when trust is betrayed? Trust in the skills and abilities of one's employees is a critical factor in the success of structural empowerment. However, trust is a difficult attribute to measure and a complex relational dynamic to maintain over time between managers and employees. Sometimes it happens that line managers are called upon to communicate decisions that appear unfair to employees or even if fair are not always communicated appropriately, and these moments in the life of the company can undermine employees' trust in their line managers (Reina and Reina, 2015). This opens up the issue – addressed later in this same section – of the skills line managers need if they are to build trust and manage empowerment relationships to the best of their ability.

It could be said that structural empowerment is a kind of delegation, as the line manager puts the decision-making power in the hands of their employees. However, Leana (1987) defined delegation as the temporary transfer of decision-making to an employee, whereas empowerment is generally seen as a permanent transfer of decision-making power. In this dissertation, the duration of the transfer of power from manager to employee was analysed so as to understand whether the empowerment experience of

Generation Z employees is more akin to delegation or a real act of structural empowerment.

The organisational factors that contribute to structural empowerment were studied by Matthews *et al.* in 2003. These factors are control of workplace decisions, dynamic structural framework and fluidity in information sharing. The control of workplace decisions concerns the possibility for employees to provide information and participate in decisions about all aspects of their careers. For example, an employee has control of workplace decisions when they define their personal and professional goals and share them with their line manager, indicate the responsibilities they would like to have in the company, control the planning of certain activities, intervene in recruitment decisions and propose activities for their own professional development. The dynamic structural framework concerns the guidelines the company sets up to support employees' decision-making. These guidelines can be updated as the organisation evolves, as they include guidance on procedures and behaviours, supervision style, understanding of the company's vision and objectives. Fluidity in information sharing relates to employees' access to all corporate information to allow them to offer suggestions and make informed decisions on work activities that involve them. Matthews *et al.* (2003) found that all three of these factors influence the experience of empowerment as measured by the psychological empowerment scale proposed by Spreitzer in 1995. This underlines the importance of the work environment in encouraging empowerment. However, it is worth considering the number of organisations that can actually demonstrate having taken action to implement these three key factors.

Based on his own experience, the author of this dissertation can confirm that in many organisations there appears to be a move towards partnership in planning employees' careers and setting their performance targets. Mission, vision, corporate values and code of ethics are also present in many organisations. However, the third factor, concerning access to all company information by all employees, is hardly considered. For example, detailed information on economic and financial aspects is often not available and probably would not be clear to all employees anyway, because companies do not as yet feel the need to invest in general training on these issues (Dollins and Stemmler, 2021). On the other hand, even without huge investments in training, it might be useful to keep in mind Heron's words from 1942 (cited by Dollins and Stemmler, 2021): "The first element in sharing information ... is the understanding by

employees that facts about the enterprise are not being concealed from them. The knowledge that they can get the information they want is more important than any actual information that can be given to them” (Heron, 1942: no page, cited by Dollins and Stemmler, 2021: 12). The information shared with employees in the company under study is an element of reflection in the chapter analysing and interpreting the results.

Ripley and Ripley (1992) point out that “empowerment is the vesting of decision-making or approval authority to employees where, traditionally, such authority was managerial prerogative” (Ripley and Ripley, 1992: 21). Therefore, supporting empowerment may bring about changes such as those in organisational culture, leadership style and the organisation of the physical workspace. The structural viewpoint of Ripley and Ripley (1992) “requires senior managers to instruct middle managers to evaluate and approve a company-wide empowerment programme” (Ripley and Ripley, 1992: 31). This would entail senior managers behaving hierarchically, which might seem contrary to the fundamental principle in the empowerment of self-determination. However, it has already been mentioned that in the structural perspective empowerment can be imposed or at least taught through a “process of enculturation” (Ripley and Ripley, 1992: 31) of organisational norms and beliefs. In their article, Ripley and Ripley (1992) focus on managers who give power to others rather than those who seek power. Their stance spotlights the need to develop managers’ ability to communicate and listen effectively, as well as their coaching skills, problem-solving skills and the ability to understand their employees’ motivation and behaviour. On the other hand, employees also need training to fully experience empowerment, which should not be limited only to role-specific technical training. Employee training should include a range of activities to promote team building, improved understanding of the company and its objectives, and quality improvement (Ripley and Ripley, 1992). Structural requirements for self-management are also analysed in the article: there is a need for well-defined boundaries in the definition of responsibilities, access to resources, procedures establishing authority in decision-making and other procedures for team functioning. The focus on structural empowerment in the article provides ideas to help organisations understand what to do when they want to support the empowerment process and not leave the burden of change solely on the shoulders of the other two actors involved, the line managers and their staff. Empowerment is a combination of structural and psychological elements. One form of empowerment without the other may not be successful. The article was useful for

developing interview questions about training and other activities that line managers and their staff carried out as part of the empowerment process. It was also useful to further understand the mechanisms and systems implemented by the organisation in terms of policies and procedures to support empowerment.

Seibert *et al.* (2004) examined the macro and micro aspects of empowerment. The macro aspects, which concern structural empowerment, were analysed in terms of organisational structures and policies. The micro aspects, which relate to psychological empowerment, were analysed in terms of motivation. In considering structural empowerment, Seibert *et al.* (2004) defined the concept of empowerment climate: “a shared perception regarding the extent to which an organisation makes use of structures, policies, and practises supporting employee empowerment. The empowerment climate is composed of [...] information sharing, autonomy through boundaries, and team accountability” (Seibert *et al.*, 2004: 334). The empowerment climate is an important factor in work performance. If the empowerment climate is also accompanied by psychological empowerment, job performance increases. Empowerment climate is a critical success factor for organisations that work to promote psychological empowerment. Seibert *et al.* (2004) found in their study that “empowerment climate explained twenty-two per cent of the variance in work-unit performance” (Seibert *et al.*, 2004: 343). Therefore, this article confirms the importance of organisational structures and policies in supporting psychological empowerment, reinforcing the idea that the empowerment experience is more successful when both structural and psychological empowerment are present.

As suggested by Seibert *et al.* (2004), a broader view of structural empowerment based on the concept of empowerment climate is useful. However, it is worth mentioning that any analysis of empowerment climate should take into account numerous management structures and practices within an organisation, in particular those related to performance management, financial budgeting and the construction of organisational strategy and its communication. In this dissertation, line managers’ opinions and those of their staff were compared to assess any differences in evaluation of the effectiveness of corporate practices and policies that help support the experience of empowerment through building and maintaining relationships based on trust.

1.3.2 Self-efficacy

People's level of self-efficacy can have an impact on their willingness to be empowered and to take on empowerment. Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1994: 72). Situations in turn influence people's beliefs. How people think, feel, behave and motivate themselves depends on their level of self-efficacy. Having a high level of self-efficacy improves the feeling of self-fulfilment and personal well-being so that difficult tasks are seen as challenges to be overcome. Self-efficacy encourages setting personal goals and maintaining a high level of commitment to these goals. A person may experience a decrease in self-efficacy while performing a challenging task if something reveals shortcomings in their abilities or intimidates them (Na-Nan and Sanamthong, 2020). However, people can increase their self-efficacy by working on themselves to develop their skills and create a reserve of confidence to draw on in difficult times. Bandura described self-perceptions of efficacy as "cognitive mediators of action" (Bandura, 1982: 126). These self-perceptions of efficacy are fed by four main sources of information: "performance attainments; vicarious experiences of observing the performances of others; verbal persuasion and allied types of social influences that one possesses certain capabilities; and physiological states from which people partly judge their capability, strength, and vulnerability" (Bandura, 1982: 126). Essentially, self-efficacy depends on direct experience, the experience that other role models have, social persuasion and the interpretation of physiological factors (Black *et al.*, 2018).

The positive feedback a person receives while performing a difficult task persuades that person they can complete the task successfully. Self-efficacy is influenced by the words of encouragement or discouragement a person receives from those around them. Verbal persuasion works at any age, but experiences occurring at a young age contribute more to building self-efficacy (Ng *et al.*, 2018). This is particularly relevant in this dissertation since the focus is on employees at their first major work experience after a bachelor's or master's degree.

The example of when a person feels 'butterflies in their stomach' before speaking in public explains the impact of physiological factors on self-efficacy: a person with low self-efficacy interprets the feeling as a signal of inability, while a person with high self-

efficacy interprets the same feeling as a signal that should be expected and accepted, not related to ability, but to the will to perform well.

Although Bandura was credited with promoting the concept of self-efficacy, other researchers have developed pertinent aspects related to this construct. Maddux (1995) added a fifth source of information for self-efficacy, represented by imaginal experiences. The power of visualisation according to Maddux (1995) helps people to *see* their goals as achievable in their head before they reach them in reality and this positively influences their self-efficacy.

Acting on these sources of information may help managers promote and maintain high self-efficacy among their employees. Direct experience of success is the main source that feeds a person's self-efficacy. Therefore, managers should help their employees to increase their self-efficacy by assigning tasks that lead to success.

Bandura (1982) also reflects on self-directed mastery experiences, arguing that they are the best opportunities to increase a person's self-efficacy. These are unassigned but autonomously chosen tasks that increase self-efficacy when completed. These are even more effective than assigned tasks because they are considered relevant and challenging by the person who has set them for themselves. So it is above all these tasks that should be part of an empowerment relationship.

Research on self-efficacy and empowerment focuses mainly on the employee and not on the line manager. However, useful questions to ask in this dissertation concern how much confidence the line manager has in their own abilities in terms of self-efficacy and how the line manager visualises their role once the job has been transferred to their employees. How often does a line manager think they will lose power, authority and influence if they empower their staff? What sources of information do they use to increase their own self-efficacy? And to increase the self-efficacy of their employees? What role does the line manager play in encouraging the empowerment process? These questions offer a fertile line of inquiry to be explored further with the line managers participating in the interviews.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) identified organisational factors that lead to reduced self-efficacy. These factors include organisational goals that are not meaningful to employees and bureaucratic and authoritarian management styles that create dependency,

preventing self-expression in the workplace. Kanter (1977 and 1983) also pointed out that organisational changes, when they involve job redesign and changes in access to resources and communication processes, affect employee powerlessness, which is negatively correlated with self-efficacy. During organisational change, rules and processes may not be clearly defined; power and responsibilities may change rapidly. The level of uncertainty may affect the employees' feeling of competence and control. Therefore, any assessment of the self-efficacy of the people interviewed in this dissertation must take into account the climate of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021 when the company under scrutiny had introduced restrictive measures on face-to-face working that had an impact on roles, access to resources and communication styles.

Management style can have a positive impact on self-efficacy when line managers show trust, expect high performance from their employees (Burke, 1986), encourage employees to participate in decision-making (Stenmark *et al.*, 2021; Block, 1987), offer autonomy (Kanter, 1979) and set challenging goals (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). This dissertation examined the practices of line managers to see if some of these behaviours are present.

Several constructs are related to the concept of self-efficacy. Among the best known are agency, locus of control, autonomy, implicit beliefs and self-esteem. Giddens (1994) introduced the concept of the 'autotelic self', which refers to an individual who has "an inner confidence which comes from self-respect, [...] a person able to translate potential threats into rewarding challenges [...]. The autotelic self does not seek to neutralise risk or to suppose that 'someone else will take care of the problem'; risk is confronted as the active challenge which generates self-actualisation" (Giddens, 1994: 192). Potentially all these constructs can be taken into consideration to analyse the experience of empowerment. For example, agency is a concept that has some similarities with Bandura's work on self-efficacy (Bandura and Schunk, 1981; Bandura, 1982), because it refers to the ability of individuals to act autonomously and make choices based on their own free will.

The decision to devote a subsection of this literature review to self-efficacy and not to other related constructs stems from the words of Spreitzer (1995: 1443): "Conger and Kanungo (1988) defined empowerment as the motivational concept of self-efficacy".

The exploration of the topic of self-efficacy is therefore justified by the need to investigate an essential element of the conceptual framework employed in this dissertation. As mentioned in the introduction and further elaborated at the end of this chapter, the conceptual framework chosen for this dissertation is to use both psychological and structural perspectives when analysing the experience of empowerment.

This subsection has highlighted the potential impact that organisational processes and management styles can have on self-efficacy. This impact was explored with Generation Z employees and their line managers. More specifically, line managers were asked to reflect on how their actions affect themselves and their staff in terms of self-efficacy.

1.3.3 The cognitive model of psychological empowerment

Drawing on the work of Conger and Kanungo (1988), Thomas and Velthouse (1990) developed a cognitive model of empowerment based on the idea that empowerment is motivating. The intrinsic motivation a person experiences when performing a task was examined by analysing the conditions that determine this motivation and the satisfaction associated with it. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) concluded that it is important to clarify the purpose of a task to the person to whom the task is assigned. The purpose is based on Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job meaningfulness model and Deci's (1975) intrinsic motivation model. The line managers who participated in this dissertation discussed the importance of being clear in communicating purpose when assigning a task. An essential skill for the line manager seems to be that of being able to highlight which aspects of the purpose are most important at the individual, team, department and organisational level for the person to whom the task is assigned. Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) cognitive model, illustrated on the following page in Figure 1.1, shows that an individual's cognition about a task can influence their judgement and behaviour and can affect the likelihood that that person will initiate and complete the task, interpreting it as a positive experience of psychological empowerment.

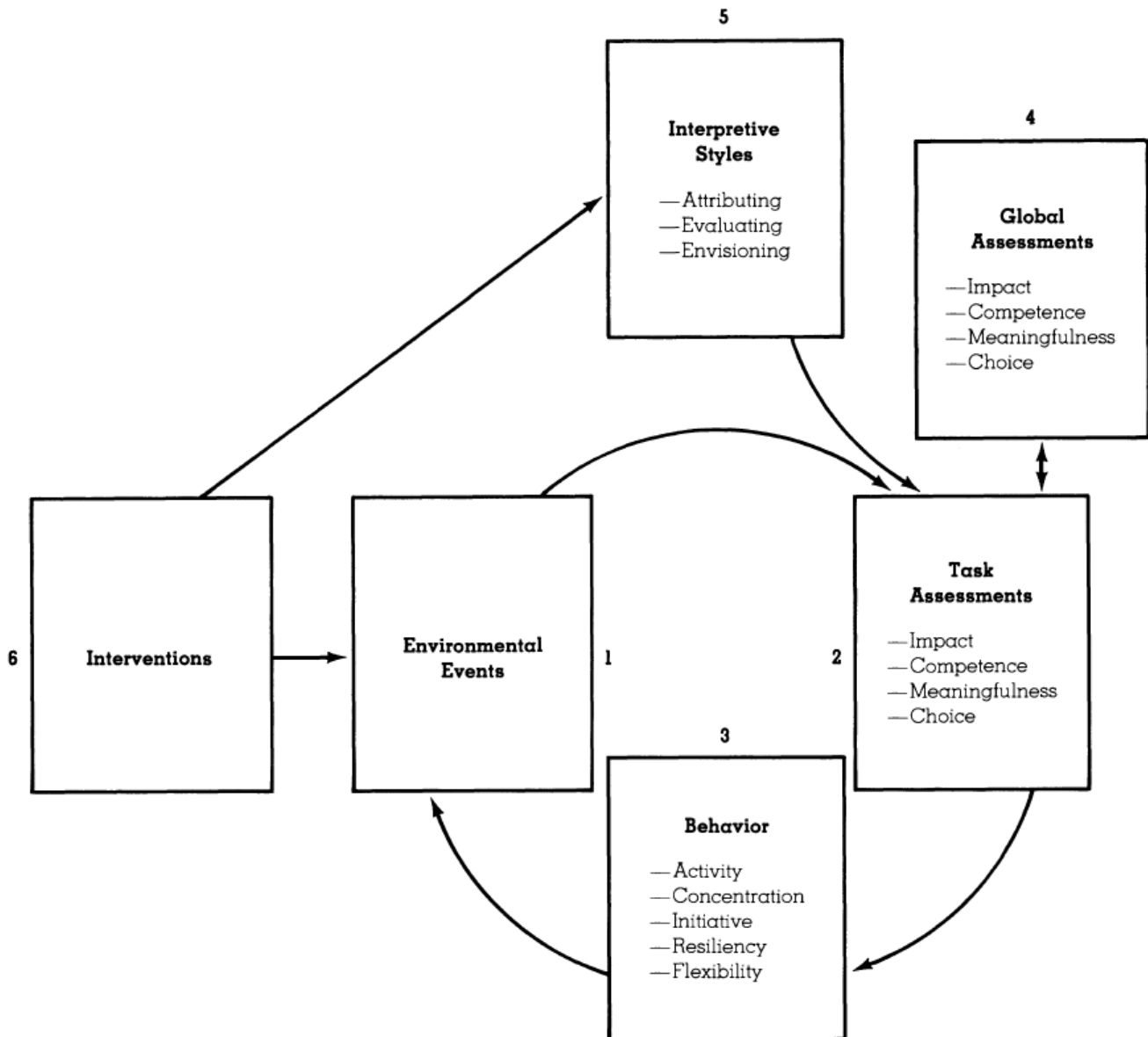


Figure 1.1 – Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) cognitive model of empowerment

At the heart of the model is a cycle of environmental events, task assessments and behaviour. Environmental events usually influence task assessments in terms of meaningfulness and choice; task assessments, in turn, modify a person’s present and future behaviour by providing key information; and behaviour influences environmental events through performance. Task assessments are not purely objective. Besides environmental events, two other elements play an important role in influencing task assessments, especially in terms of impact and competence. One of these elements is the general interpretation of reality that is based on the individual’s global assessments of impact, competence, meaningfulness and choice. The other element is represented by the interpretive styles, which indicate how the individual interprets events. The individual’s interpretative style consists of three subjective dimensions: attribution, which relates to

the interpretation of past events; evaluation, which relates to the interpretation of the present task; and envisioning, which relates to the interpretation of what might happen in the future. An individual's subjective evaluation of these three criteria will influence their decision to undertake the task and create positive or negative cycles, with a positive or negative impact on empowerment. The final element of this model is the interventions that support empowerment. These structural empowerment interventions can act on how an individual interprets their past, present and future experiences, and can also act on environmental events, identifying those to be proposed to each individual.

For the way the dynamics of psychological empowerment are analysed, the model of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) can be used to explain relations that may occur in the company unconsciously or involuntarily between line managers and their staff. It is therefore worth examining, and this dissertation does, whether line managers and their Generation Z employees are aware of this theoretical framework and have developed their own operational version of it, or whether this model interprets psychological empowerment but does not provide people in the company with guidance on how to support and maintain high levels of empowerment.

It is worth noting that the participants involved in this dissertation were not urged to use academic concepts they were not familiar with. Although Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model requires knowledge of specific terms, which have a precise meaning, during the interviews the participants involved in this dissertation shared their experiences of empowerment using a degree of formality and a linguistic register that the researcher respected and as far as possible echoed.

Impact indicates the degree to which a particular behaviour contributes to task completion and purpose achievement (Abramson *et al.*, 1978). Some behaviours have a greater impact than others and it is these that need to be identified and encouraged. Competence indicates the extent to which an individual can successfully complete the task based on the skills they possess and is a concept related to Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy prevents people from dealing with events that could help them develop specific skills and this incidentally contributes to low self-efficacy. Conversely, high self-efficacy leads to accepting new challenges where through commitment and resilience new skills are developed. Impact and competence can also be interpreted according to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964; Lawler, 1973) as

performance-outcome expectancy and effort-performance expectancy, respectively. Meaningfulness concerns the implicit value of the objective or purpose of the task. This value is subjective and depends on the individual's reference system (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Low levels of meaningfulness can result in detachment, apathy and what is often referred to as disengagement from work. Higher levels of meaningfulness create involvement, concentration and commitment (Kanter, 1968). Finally, choice is what indicates how responsible an individual feels for their actions or, as De Charms (1968) suggests, where that person places their locus of causality. Choice can be aligned with self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and therefore informs about the ability to take initiative, to be creative and resilient, and to self-regulate. If a person feels controlled by events, they may experience negative emotions, low self-esteem or stress.

The task assessments suggested by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) are considered critical success factors for task achievement even today. These subjective dimensions determined by the individual have been developed from the work of Bandura (1977 and 1986) and Deci (1975). Aligned with expectancy theory, they effectively explain reinforcement dynamics (Vroom, 1964; Lawler, 1973). A reinforcement dynamic occurs when a person believes that greater effort in the use of their competence is followed by a greater impact in the outcomes produced; this greater impact corresponds to a higher sense of meaningfulness that keeps the effort to perform the task high, and the initial effort also depends on how much the choice to begin and complete the task is perceived as free from external constraints.

This dissertation investigated how Generation Z employees monitor their task achievement. What meaning do they attribute to their work? Where does this meaningfulness come from? And what consequences does it have in terms of involvement, concentration and commitment? In addition, the dissertation assessed the skills required of line managers to facilitate task understanding and the creation of meaningfulness. What implications does the line manager who supports empowerment see for their own level of competence?

Behaviour in Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model is influenced by the specific task to be performed, but also by the level of concentration a person can achieve and the initiative, resiliency and flexibility they can demonstrate. When the behaviour is intrinsically motivated, the levels of meaningfulness and choice are also high. This

means that the behaviour is not dependent on the quality of supervision or the reward system and that the level of performance is generally higher, precisely because of the decision to put more effort into the performance and the meaning that the individual attaches to the performance. Better performance implies higher levels of impact and competence. Thus the cycle is positively reinforced.

Specific leadership styles shape task assessments. Transformational leadership (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; House, 1977) positively influences impact, competence and meaningfulness, but see the leadership section of this chapter for a more in-depth discussion of leadership styles and empowerment.

Research on employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) has shown that the style of line managers directly influences employee motivation and behaviour. This dissertation examined with Generation Z participants how the cognition about their tasks influences their performance, how their line manager influences this cognition and to what extent this cognition is linked to empowerment. The dissertation also considered whether line managers perceive their tasks as able to influence impact, competence, meaningfulness and choice, and how this might occur.

1.3.4 A multidimensional view of psychological empowerment

Spreitzer (1995) adopted the psychological perspective of empowerment, developing the four cognitions of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and proposing a multidimensional measure of empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) focused in particular on people's perceptions of their working environment so as to understand how these perceptions can help people experience their work as a motivating experience rather than a restrictive one.

Meaning is the value a person attaches to the goal or purpose of a task they are asked to perform. Its level is high when there is a fit between a person's job role and their values, beliefs and behaviours (Hackman and Oldham, 1980).

Competence, understood as self-efficacy by Conger and Kanungo (1988), is a person's belief in their ability to act with skill (Gist, 1987). This cognition is aligned with agency beliefs and effort-performance expectancy (Wood and Bandura, 1989a and 1989b; Bandura, 1990).

Self-determination refers to an individual's sense of having a choice in initiating and regulating their own behaviour and resulting actions (Deci *et al.*, 1989). This cognition can be seen as autonomy in making decisions about work methods, effort and pace.

Impact indicates how much a person can influence operational, administrative or strategic outcomes (Ashforth, 1989). However, it is not clear how Ashforth (1989) pictures the ability to influence strategic aspects since corporate strategy is usually entrusted to a small number of senior managers, specialists and external consultants. However, this cognition is negatively correlated with learned helplessness (Martinko and Gardner, 1982) and is influenced by the work context, unlike the internal locus of control, which is a personality trait and does not depend on the work context (Wolfle and Robertshaw, 1982).

The simultaneous presence of these four cognitions makes the experience of psychological empowerment stronger. Meaning, competence, self-determination and impact seem to be able to combine and reinforce one another, giving the person the sense that they can have a greater impact on their role and context. These may not be the only dimensions determining empowerment (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995), but others have not been found yet. This creates a highly interesting research opportunity regarding whether it is possible to prove that there are no other cognitions or the reverse.

Three clarifications are now in order. Empowerment is not like a personality trait: it does not last over time and is not independent of context. Moreover, empowerment is not a two-state variable but a continuous variable, as there are different levels of empowerment. Finally, the four dimensions mentioned are only valid in the professional context: Spreitzer (1995) says nothing about which dimensions can be analysed to create empowerment outside the work environment.

Spreitzer (1996) expanded on her earlier work (Spreitzer, 1995) by investigating the relationship between psychological empowerment and the characteristics of the social structure of the work unit in which a person operates and found a positive correlation between psychological empowerment and the following factors: a clear set of responsibilities where objectives, tasks, expectations and limits in decision authority are explicitly specified to the employee; a participative working environment in which people feel valued and receive support from colleagues and their superior; and a line

manager with a wide span of control. In addition, access to resources was found to be unrelated to empowerment. Spreitzer (1996) explained that having access to resources without knowing you can use them does not contribute to empowerment. This suggestion allowed for more clarity and detail when access to resources was investigated with the dissertation participants. Finally, it was found that larger work units offer more meaning to individuals and that individuals with a higher level of education feel more empowered (Spreitzer, 1996).

In the correlation identified by Spreitzer (1996) the characteristics of the social structure influence psychological empowerment and psychological empowerment influences the characteristics of the social structure, but the two forces are not necessarily of equal intensity and reciprocity does not necessarily occur simultaneously. Apart from situations in which companies undergoing strategic change must be managed, it is usually the context that influences people the most. However, to be rigorous, one cannot conclude that structural factors make individuals more empowered. Instead, it can be pointed out that individuals who communicate high levels of empowerment often report that their workplace presents the characteristics of the social structures indicated by Spreitzer (1996), while those who feel less empowered report work environments very different from those indicated by Spreitzer (1996).

These findings have important implications for managers and organisations that want highly empowered employees, as ambiguity in role definition can create stress and conflicting goals. Clarity of goals results in greater effectiveness at work and better performance (Locke *et al.*, 1981). Therefore, a person is more likely to feel empowered if their line manager and all other team members help clarify that person's role, if the line manager can encourage a more participative work climate by encouraging team members to network with the rest of the organisation and if the organisation can act on the structure by flattening the hierarchy and thus increase the line managers' span of control.

1.3.5 Further refinements to psychological empowerment

Empowerment opportunities tend to be in short supply when the employees' role is to perform tasks that are repetitive and boring, both in manufacturing and service companies, as the cognitive aspects of self-determination and impact themselves are limited. In contrast, employees in roles involving complex and varied tasks are more likely to develop all four cognitive aspects (Yukl and Becker, 2006). This dissertation

involved participants whose work is complex and varied. No one in the company works on an assembly line. The projects that are assigned often concern electronic devices and components for the biomedical sector. This also offers company employees the altruistic dimension of doing good for humanity.

Logan and Ganster (2007) believe that at the heart of any empowerment effort there should be an explicit move on the part of the line manager to increase the decision-making authority of their staff. This would increase the employee's perception of control, and thus their self-determination and impact. This result highlights that empowerment cannot occur without the line manager's direct support. Without support, employee attitudes would be destructive because employees need "to perceive that their direct supervisor would go out of their way to make their jobs easier and that they could rely on them when things 'got tough at work'" (Logan and Ganster, 2007: 1546). The role of the line manager in supporting the psychological empowerment of those reporting to them is crucial because only when the line manager is ready to defend the work of their staff is the decision-making authority accepted by those staff as a tool to do their job better and not seen as a pretext to be blamed by the company for everything that went wrong in a given working period (Logan and Ganster, 2007).

The four cognitions of empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995, 1996) were also explored by Wang and Lee (2009) to understand how these dimensions interact. The aim was to understand whether the cognitions have an additive effect or an interactive effect. An additive effect would imply the independence of each cognition from the other three, meaning that each cognition generates its own specific consequences, whereas an interactive effect would imply the possibility for the cognitions to mitigate or reinforce certain consequences in the presence of the other cognitions. Wang and Lee (2009) sought to examine which interactions would be most likely to create the best possible outcome for psychological empowerment, providing guidance to the individual, their line manager and the organisation. They conclude that there are interactive effects between psychological empowerment cognitions when the cognitions are used to analyse job satisfaction.

The decision to explore job satisfaction is justified by its link with organisational performance (Ng and Sorensen, 2008) and with motivation, employee turnover and organisational commitment (Judge, 1993; Martin and Bennett, 1996; Williams and

Anderson, 1991). Furthermore, Thomas and Tymon (1994) have shown that people who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to be empowered than people with a low level of job satisfaction. Taking Locke's (1976) widely accepted definition of job satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive state that is a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from a job and what one perceives it is offering" (Locke, 1976: 1300), this dissertation explored whether Generation Z employees experience high levels of job satisfaction and motivation, what influence the line manager has on these two factors and whether these factors are related to the dimensions of psychological empowerment.

Wang and Lee's (2009) findings reinforced a gestalt interpretation of the four cognitions. Specifically, choice has a weakly negative effect on job satisfaction when competence and impact are both at low or high levels, while it has a strongly positive effect when competence and impact are at opposite levels of the respective scales. Impact has no effect on job satisfaction when choice and competence are both low or high, while it has a positive effect when choice and competence are at opposite levels of the spectrum. The positive effect of meaning on job satisfaction is reinforced by high levels of choice and competence. The results of Wang and Lee (2009) also helped explain the concept of helplessness in that giving more choice leads to lower job satisfaction in a situation of low competence and low impact. On the other hand, giving more choice in a high-competence, high-impact situation remains detrimental, and this result has important implications for line managers because it is not enough to nurture each cognition to foster empowerment. It is necessary to find the right combination of the four cognitions, otherwise empowerment may have negative effects. If a high level of one cognition can reduce the positive effect of another cognition, there may be undesirable implications in terms of work-related stress and well-being (Karasek, 1979), but also in terms of job content (Warr, 1987). This result shows that empowerment can harm employees when the four cognitions are combined in an unconstructive way. The effect may be worse for some people than for others because individuals perceive situations differently and each person uses their stress management skills differently when deciding between preserving their own well-being and job satisfaction or preserving the four cognitions. Thus, according to Wang and Lee (2009), empowerment is not a simple iterative process as Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model seemed to suggest but depends on how people experience each work-related situation.

In this chapter, the potential negative effects of empowerment on well-being and work-related stress have been mentioned in the subsection on participative management. During the interviews, attention was paid to stress indicators that can be counterproductive to a motivating empowerment experience.

The work of Wang and Lee (2009) has useful implications for informing the actions of line managers. For example, if a line manager wants to increase an employee's opportunities for choice, they should increase competence when the level of impact is low or improve the perception of impact when competence is low. These guidelines highlight the need for training to assist line managers in creating the optimum conditions for success in promoting job satisfaction and empowerment. Line managers should also develop observational skills to detect when an employee is experiencing stressful situations or a prolonged reduction in well-being. Finally, it is worth noting that a high level of all four cognitions would potentially negatively affect job satisfaction, job performance, empowerment and other related dimensions. A recommendation that contributes to developing this deliberate approach to empowerment was offered by Wang and Lee (2009) when they wrote: "The way one dimension affects job outcomes is not constant and additive but may be enhanced or suppressed by the levels of other dimensions or the combination of other dimensions. Thus, empowerment theorists must focus on identifying optimal combinations that represent balanced or fit situations in different work contexts, which are essential to employee well-being and other job outcomes" (Wang and Lee, 2009: 290).

A relationship that has not yet been sufficiently explored in this chapter is that between empowerment and reward. Since empowerment is regarded as the motivational aspect of self-efficacy (Conger and Kanungo, 1988), the concept of self-efficacy can be included in this discussion. There are different perspectives on whether performance-related rewards influence self-efficacy. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), motivation has a positive effect on self-efficacy, irrespective of whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. According to cognitive appraisal theory (Deci, 1975), the influence of an inner drive when activated to develop skills has a more positive impact on self-efficacy than reward. Positive incentives would seem to promote interest when they do not reduce self-efficacy. Rewards for achieving expected results increase interest in the task. However, interest decreases when people are rewarded irrespective of

the level or quality of achievement (Boggiano and Ruble, 1979; Ross, 1975). As a recommendation to managers, feedback should be provided on the competence reached.

An individual's level of satisfaction increases when they have instruments to measure their performance (Locke *et al.*, 1970). When people have intermediate goals to focus on and tools to measure the achievement of these smaller, immediate goals, their level of intrinsic interest increases because they can evaluate their progress. Conversely, having larger, future-oriented goals, which are also more difficult to link to short-term performance and results, can lead to disappointment and reduced self-efficacy. In essence, self-efficacy increases when people can achieve intermediate goals that are aligned with future rewards. This aspect of proximal self-motivation was explored with the participants in the dissertation in relation to their experiences of empowerment. Deci (1975) and Ross (1975) considered reward as a factor influencing task completion and achievement of expected results. Thus, reward potentially affects the experience of empowerment. As a result, this dissertation investigated any direct or indirect link between empowerment and reward.

Dedicated to exploring specific aspects of psychological empowerment, this subsection of the chapter showed the variety and complexity of empowerment-related issues addressed in this dissertation. The participant interviews also covered these topics in order to understand the complexity of the work of line managers and their employees in the company under review. How empowered do Generation Z employees feel in relation to the four cognitions? What level of self-efficacy do they attribute to themselves? Which of the line managers' activities and behaviours influence their level of self-efficacy?

1.3.6 Measuring psychological empowerment

Tuuli and Rowlinson (2009) explored the relationship between psychological empowerment and job performance, looking at behaviours to be exhibited rather than the outcomes associated with those behaviours. At an earlier date, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Parker and Turner (2002) had reported on the benefits of psychological empowerment on performance, but the evidence presented was marginal and fragmentary with references only to direct benefits. The findings of Tuuli and Rowlinson (2009) show a more complex relationship than previously assumed because they indicate that psychological empowerment has not only direct benefits on performance but also indirect

benefits. Indeed, empowered people have intrinsic motivation, opportunity to perform and ability to perform that act as mediators to improve both task behaviours and contextual behaviours such as cooperation and teamwork. Furthermore, the positive effects of psychological empowerment on performance continue to be present when studied in organisations operating in different geographical areas of the world, although the greatest benefits are seen in the presence of cultures with low levels of power distance.

These findings have valuable implications for line managers because they show that psychological empowerment is the path to follow when performance improvements are sought, even if cooperation and true teamwork are lacking. Line managers should support the competence of their staff so as to benefit from the indirect effects of empowerment. Although it is not always possible to offer employees meaningful and therefore intrinsically motivating tasks, organisations should do their utmost to ensure that they do away with conditions that limit individual performance and foster helplessness by providing their employees with opportunities to perform. Furthermore, empowerment appears to be a useful managerial practice for performance improvements in multicultural organisational contexts, such as that of the company under review. This dissertation interviewed the participants to learn how they believe empowerment affects the job performance of Generation Z employees, in terms of results and behaviours.

By comparing empowered employees with those showing indicators of learned helplessness, it was found (Na-Nan and Sanamthong, 2020; Campbell and Martinko, 1998; Martinko and Gardner, 1982) that empowered employees do not transfer their ownership to a higher authority, because they feel they have control over tasks and therefore tend to make less negative statements than others, who for example may say “To tell you the truth, I don’t know of anything that I have experienced that’s been that great” (Campbell and Martinko, 1998: 190). Learned helplessness is defined as “a debilitating cognitive state in which individuals often possess the requisite skills and abilities to perform their jobs, but exhibit suboptimal performance because they attribute prior failures to causes which they cannot change, even though success is possible in the current environment” (Campbell and Martinko, 1998: 173). Campbell and Martinko (1998) found that empowered employees experience less boredom, less depression, more persistence and, unexpectedly, more anger than other employees. Anger is often referred to as a reaction to a specific external situation and is therefore useful in stimulating

proactive behaviour and empowerment. Thus, learned helplessness and empowerment are opposite ends of a continuum. Campbell and Martinko (1998) recommend further investigation of these two constructs in order to assist organisations in the process of designing and implementing interventions to support psychological empowerment. This dissertation investigates what Generation Z employees think when they do not feel empowered at all.

Dewettinck *et al.* (2003) found that only six per cent of the variance in employee performance can be attributed to empowerment. In contrast to this result, however, more recent studies have found that at least forty per cent of employee performance can be explained by empowering leadership behaviours (Hassan *et al.*, 2018). The role played as mediators on performance by intrinsic motivation, ability to perform and opportunity to perform had not previously been fully understood (Tuuli and Rowlinson, 2009). For example, Liu and Fang (2006) found that power-sharing behaviour significantly predicts and explains individual performance through extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, suggesting an indirect link between empowerment and job performance. Other researchers had also in the past conjectured an indirect link (Blumberg and Pringle, 1982; Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999; Boxall and Purcell, 2022).

Vroom (1964) considered job performance as a multiplicative function of motivation (desire to do the job) and ability (competence to do the job). Later Peters and O'Connor (1980) added opportunity to do the job as a third factor in the mathematical formula for performance. Ability, motivation and opportunity potentially represent the link between job performance and empowerment, as the cognitive aspects of psychological empowerment are linked to ability, motivation and opportunity. These three factors have implications for how line managers support employee empowerment as line managers can encourage ability development, create opportunities for employees and support employees' intrinsic motivation. This dissertation explored line managers' behaviours in terms of developing capabilities, supporting motivation and identifying opportunities for their employees to complete tasks that are appropriate for them.

Starting from Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) multidimensional conceptualisation of empowerment, the contribution of each of the four dimensions was examined to understand possible relationships with three work outcomes of empowerment, which are effectiveness, work satisfaction and job-related strain. Spreitzer

et al. (1997) found that meaning is positively related to job satisfaction, competence is related to effectiveness and protects people from job-related stress, self-determination is related to job satisfaction and impact is related to effectiveness. These findings highlight the importance of the multidimensional perspective of empowerment. An adequate conceptualisation of empowerment can only be achieved when all four dimensions of empowerment are considered because no single dimension can benefit all three work outcomes. In addition, Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) showed that self-determination had a minimal influence compared to the other dimensions and thus appeared to be less important than meaning, impact and competence. This could be due to an increased focus on teamwork and collaboration compared to individual work and autonomy.

The work of Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) suggests that managers should adopt a multidimensional perspective to obtain the maximum benefit from any empowerment activity. In the words of Liden and Tewksbury (1995), “a piecemeal approach to empowerment sends mixed signals throughout the organisation and runs a high risk of failing to accomplish the intended outcomes” (Liden and Tewksbury, 1995: 386). In this dissertation, great attention was paid to the four dimensions and in particular to how much space or freedom there is for meaning, impact and competence.

Del Val and Lloyd (2003) operationalised the concept of empowerment by creating an empowerment measurement scale that can be used to compare different organisations regarding the level of empowerment or to analyse and discover relationships between empowerment and other organisational variables. To do this Del Val and Lloyd (2003) started from the definition of empowerment, understood as “the involvement of employees in the decision-making process, inviting the members of the organisation to think strategically and to be personally responsible for the quality of their tasks, [...] favoring and rewarding employees for behaving always in a way they consider more suitable to satisfy customers and to improve the organisation’s functioning” (Del Val and Lloyd, 2003: 102). The measurement instrument created by Del Val and Lloyd (2003) has two components: ‘degree of extent’ and ‘dimensions’. The ‘degree of extent’ refers to the hierarchical level of the people involved in empowerment and for simplicity includes four levels: top manager, middle manager, supervisor and first-line worker. The second component has three dimensions. The first dimension is the formal or informal approach to empowerment. The more formal the norms that support empowerment, the more participative the management style (Cole *et al.*, 1993). In contrast, a more informal

approach to empowerment due to the good relationship between employees and their line managers does not guarantee that empowerment will be successful in the long term. The second dimension is the direct or indirect way in which people participate in decisions. Participation is direct when people represent themselves, while participation is indirect if they have to appoint someone who will take decisions on their behalf. Dachler and Wilpert (1978) state that empowerment is most effective when it involves the direct and immediate involvement of members of the organisation in the decision-making process. The third dimension is the degree of influence in the decision-making process, and this varies between two extremes: on the one hand, line managers who say that a decision has already been taken; on the other hand, line managers who delegate the decision-making process to their employees (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978); and in between an infinite variety of possible combinations. Based on the two components, Del Val and Lloyd (2003) designed a questionnaire that allowed them to obtain statistically significant results and to use the degree of extension and the three specific dimensions to distinguish the type of empowerment in organisations. The instrument developed has the characteristics of validity and reliability that make it a scale.

The implications of Del Val and Lloyd (2003) in this dissertation are numerous: the level of management involvement in empowerment processes was examined; it was indicated when employee participation was direct; the procedures and policies that help formalise empowerment were explained; and the degree of participation of Generation Z employees in decision-making was analysed, in keeping with the issues addressed.

King and Ehrhard (1997) also used a quantitative approach to measure empowerment, starting with a questionnaire to measure cohesion and consensus within an organisation based on three dimensions: loyalty, value congruence and affective commitment. The link between these dimensions and empowerment is justified by the following words: “When an individual reaches the affectively committed stage, s/he is truly empowered and is willing to make personal sacrifices, perform beyond normal expectations, work selflessly and contribute to the organisation’s overall effectiveness – for the good of the organisation” (King and Ehrhard, 1997: 139). This statement describes empowerment as the life force of the organisation. Essentially, empowerment is developed by socially indoctrinating individuals who believe in the norms and values of the organisation. The work of King and Ehrhard (1997) is an example of a structural

approach and therefore appears to be a far cry from the work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1996).

The questionnaire that King and Ehrhard (1997) designed and tested serves as an instrument to help managers and HR professionals assess how attractive their organisation is to an employee. The aim is to improve the level of attractiveness and make working conditions more satisfactory. Managers are encouraged to identify and pursue goals that require greater participation, involvement and commitment; maintain positive work attitudes; provide realistic communications that create expectations that will be met; and identify jobs that are varied, meaningful, can be done independently, make full use of employees' knowledge and skills, and for which employees can receive constructive feedback. The importance of King and Ehrhard's (1997) work to this dissertation lies in the recognition that achieving empowerment in an organisation can become a prescriptive and mechanistic process when aspects of psychological empowerment such as self-efficacy are ignored.

Known as EPOC, the Employee Direct Participation in Organisation Change project investigated the nature and extent of direct participation in organisational change in Europe at the beginning of the new millennium. Forms of direct participation included consultation, delegation or devolution of decision-making on work tasks, work organisation or working conditions. Ninety per cent of the survey's respondents revealed that all forms of direct participation had a positive effect on the economic performance of the organisation (Sisson, 2000). This reinforces the evidence on the positive effects of empowerment, since delegative participation in which managers give their employees greater discretion and responsibility in organising their own work seems to align with definitions of empowerment. The EPOC survey found that factors contributing to the success of direct participation included extensive consultation, qualifications and training, and the use of many forms of involvement (Sisson, 2000). Seventeen per cent of the respondents reported having forms of work organisation based on teamwork and group work, eight per cent relied on group delegation and twenty-five per cent indicated that they experienced work situations in which they benefited from individual delegation (Sisson, 2000). Although the EPOC project was completed more than twenty years ago and these percentages are low, there is no evidence of a dramatic change in the number of companies adopting empowerment practices in Europe. Most European companies are still drawn to Taylor's proposed concepts of work organisation (Olson, 2016; Delfanti

and Frey, 2021). Furthermore, it should be noted that the EPOC report highlights differences in the definitions of empowerment. Therefore, caution is needed as empowerment may in fact be delegation.

Edwards and Collinson (2002) recognised that there is a divergence between the empowerment practices that managers claim to want and those they actually wish to see applied. Their research in six different multi-sectoral organisations showed that managers valued participatory problem-solving. However, managers also showed little understanding of what the term ‘empowerment’ actually means since activities such as approving budgets and extraordinary expenses were not among the empowerment practices they hoped for. Edwards and Collinson (2002) found that managers were more comfortable with the idea of involvement and participation. Therefore, it is worth considering whether managers wish to create the conditions for successful empowerment. In the report, most managers wanted control systems, strict monitoring of performance and achievement of stated goals. The autonomy empowerment offered was not what managers were really looking for. This result underlines the need to be cautious when using the term ‘empowerment’. Precisely because Edwards and Collinson (2002) showed how line managers in their research wanted tight control and not empowerment, this dissertation explored what motivates line managers to create empowerment for their Generation Z employees, but only used the term ‘empowerment’ with participants who offered their interpretation of this concept.

The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS, 2014) is a useful source for data on management activity in the UK. The survey uses five items as a means of measuring the influence people can exert on their work: the pace at which they work, the choice of tasks to be performed, how to perform them, the order in which they are performed and the time in which tasks are started and finished. Overall, thirty-eight per cent of workers have a lot of influence over these five factors, which rises to sixty-four per cent for managers and senior managers, indicating that the higher up the organisation’s hierarchy people are, the more influence they have over the five factors. Seventy-one per cent of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to use their influence and fifty-eight per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of influence they had in their work. These results would seem to indicate high levels of empowerment activity, aligned with high levels of employee satisfaction. However, other WERS empowerment-measuring indicators would seem to contradict

these results by offering a more complex picture to analyse, as many dimensions can inform the concept of empowerment. The research participants involved in this dissertation were asked how they measure the success of empowerment and then to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages in a comparison with the influence indicators in WERS.

1.4 Leadership

A manager's role has changed since McGregor (1960) explained the idea of theory X and theory Y, and reflection on management and leadership has been about identifying elements that show points of contact and difference between the two concepts. The distinction between managers and leaders often led to managers being seen as people engaged in bureaucratic processes such as planning, organising and controlling, while leaders were seen as people who could create desire and motivation in others through non-coercive means (Kotter, 1996; Zaleznik, 1989). The quote from Nicholls (1987) sums up these approaches: "Management can get things done through others by the traditional activities of planning, organising, monitoring and controlling – without worrying too much about what goes on inside people's heads. Leadership, by contrast, is vitally concerned with what people are thinking and feeling and how they are to be linked to the environment, to the entity and to the job" (Nicholls, 1987: 21). On the other hand, Alvesson and Willmott (1992) acknowledged that many managers successfully combine leadership and management activities, showing the ability to focus on both task management and people engagement aspects and offering their organisations flexibility of approach.

There are many leadership theories. This section explores two theories prevalent in the literature since the 1980s: transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Both theories have much to offer in helping managers make sense of empowerment.

Burns (1978) wrote that leadership in organisations appeared in two ways: transactional or transformational. Transactional leadership is based on bureaucracy, authority and legitimacy in the organisation. Transactional leaders focus on task-oriented goals, work standards, task completion and employee compliance with company norms. Work performance tends to be managed using an approach based on rewards and punishments. In contrast, transformational leadership motivates employees by focusing on values and ideals. Transformational leaders embody the organisation's mission and

employees accept the leader's credibility. Burns (1978) stated that the two types of leader behaviour were mutually exclusive. The leader could be transformational or transactional. Over the years, the academic community has shown agreement with the idea that there are more than two approaches to leadership and an interest in a more thorough analysis of the differences between the two approaches.

Bass (1990) and Bass and Avolio (1994) expanded the understanding of transformational leadership by proposing a model with four dimensions identified as charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Charisma is a quality through which the leader conveys vision, sense of mission and pride to others, putting the needs of others before their own, sharing risk, communicating openly and transparently and receiving admiration, trust and respect in return. Inspiration offers others the opportunity to find meaning and purpose in their work and embrace new challenges, showing enthusiasm, optimism and commitment to the organisation's goals. Intellectual stimulation promotes innovation, creativity, problem-solving and new approaches to work performance. Individualised consideration is about personal attention, listening, and giving advice and feedback that the leader makes available to those around them.

Bass (1990) also proposed four dimensions in the analysis of transactional leadership, identifying them as contingent reward, active management by exception, passive management by exception and laissez-faire. Contingent reward implies rewarding efforts, achievements and performance. Active management by exception requires the manager to look for behaviour that does not conform to agreed rules and standards, taking corrective action whenever deviations are found, while passive management by exception requires the manager to take no action until non-compliance with rules and standards emerges on its own. Finally, laissez-faire consists of a manager avoiding making decisions, thus abdicating responsibility.

The characteristics Bass identified (1990) to analyse transformational and transactional leadership can be related to empowerment. In particular, there appears to be some alignment between psychological empowerment and transformational leadership in that the transformational leader can increase self-efficacy in those around them (Bandura, 1994) by providing feedback through individualised consideration, suggesting opportunities to develop skills through intellectual stimulation and promoting

commitment to goals through charisma and inspiration. These activities are also aligned with Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) block of interpretative styles of the individual in that the manager interprets past events by providing feedback, interprets the present task by providing opportunities to develop skills to perform that specific task, and interprets what might happen in the future by providing goals to strive for.

Transformational leaders can create a climate that encourages the development of the four cognitions of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). For example, line managers behave as transformational leaders when they explain to the employees the meaning and purpose of the task they are assigned, when they encourage the employees to develop their competence by providing feedback and learning opportunities, when they encourage the employees' self-determination by letting them work independently, and when they communicate the organisation's vision and mission to increase its impact.

The structural empowerment approach transforms the role of the line manager from a direct controller of resources (Matthews *et al.*, 2003) to a promoter of the development of control systems where their employees are the ones who create controls, define objectives and impose priorities (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). This requires line managers to develop skills that enable them to communicate effectively, give timely feedback, promote competence development in employees and support motivation (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021). This perspective appears to be contrary to the traditional idea that line managers need to visually supervise their staff (den Hartog *et al.*, 2004). With this approach, line managers create a climate of accountability in which work tasks are transferred to their employees and then trust that those employees will complete the tasks, potentially following a different path from the one that has always been adopted in the company, and still achieve the desired results. This idea was examined by Kirkman and Rosen (1999) who carried out research on empowerment using the team as the level of analysis and found that the leader's actions influence the employee team empowerment experience. Therefore, it must be ensured that team leaders receive adequate training to adopt the behaviours most suited to different circumstances, for example encouraging the team to solve its own problems and setting high expectations for the team. Furthermore, Chen *et al.* (2007) found that leadership climate is positively correlated with team empowerment.

This dissertation examined how line managers assess their level of ability to communicate effectively, give timely feedback, promote competence development in employees and support motivation. The result was compared to how employees rate these same skills in their line managers. This dissertation also explored whether the organisation supports the development of line managers' skills.

Following Bandura's (1982) work on self-efficacy, a line manager who is committed to supporting the empowerment process of one of their staff members can be seen as promoting the positive beliefs that the staff member develops about themselves and their own competencies, thereby raising personal efficacy expectations. An increase in self-efficacy leads people to be more committed, persistent and resilient in the face of organisational hurdles and challenges. This dissertation investigated specific activities that line managers perform that contribute positively or negatively to self-efficacy.

Block (1987) examined how the business environment can increase or decrease self-efficacy, considering how bureaucracy and authoritarian management styles promote dependency and insignificant goals. Other factors that may have a negative impact on self-efficacy include reward systems, job design, competitive pressures and organisational change (Nadler and Tushman, 1980; Kanter, 1979 and 1983; Tichy and Devanna, 1986). This dissertation investigated the context in which line managers operate to see if it can be considered constructive in promoting self-efficacy.

A crucial aspect of successful empowerment is partnership working. Rowlands (1998) stated "we need to move away from any notion of empowerment [...] as something that can be done 'to' people or 'for' people. Empowerment is important not as an instrumentalist notion or rhetorical device, but as an active tool which, if used thoughtfully, can be used to achieve change with justice" (Rowlands, 1998: 30). This implies moving away from hierarchies and working with a collaborative or partnership approach. How does the line manager achieve this in their role? Is it an achievable goal? Is it practical?

What behaviours of the leader are empowering? Arnold *et al.* (2000) found that five behaviours were empowering to the team: leading by example, showing commitment to their own work and the work of their team, identifying high standards; coaching, helping the team become more self-sufficient; participative decision-making, providing information to team members and enabling them to voice their ideas and opinions to

make decisions; informing, sharing all information and company policies; and showing concern and interacting with the team, spending time talking about what is bothering one or more team members, offering suggestions to improve the well-being of those people. These five behaviours show that the actions of a leader who supports the empowerment of their team are intended to give power to the team.

This dissertation explored which of the five behaviours line managers engage in, how often and under what circumstances. Arnold *et al.* (2000) do not indicate the time required for their five behaviours to lead to a successful empowerment experience, because their empowering leader behaviours were analysed in companies that claimed empowerment was already happening.

This dissertation investigated the existence of other behaviours a leader must exhibit to encourage empowerment in teams because it appears that the behaviours Arnold *et al.* (2000) looked for are essential for leaders who want to encourage their teams and undoubtedly are behaviours that show how committed the leader is to their role, but this does not necessarily lead to empowered teams. During their professional careers and like this researcher, readers may have encountered managers who display these same behaviours and yet their teams are not empowered in psychological terms, because those teams do not have the freedom to choose what work to do and what resources to use.

Starting from the consideration that hierarchical structures are flattening out and many working environments are designed for teamwork, Pearce and Sims (2002) carried out an analysis to discover whether the greatest effectiveness of a team occurs when the agent of influence is a vertical leader or a team member, thus distinguishing between vertical leadership and shared leadership. Pearce and Sims (2002) found that team effectiveness improves in the presence of shared leadership compared to vertical leadership. Thus, the concept of shared leadership, which has its roots in the work of Mary Parker Follett (1918), is potentially one of the most important antecedents in determining the effectiveness of empowered teams. Incorporating shared leadership into leadership and teamwork training programmes, therefore, seems to be a useful suggestion for companies that want to promote empowerment.

Pearce and Sims (2002) also considered five different leadership styles that can be applied in cases of vertical or shared leadership. The empowering style of leadership

provides the greatest effectiveness to the team. However, both the empowering and transformational styles are positively related to team effectiveness; the assertive and directive styles are negatively related to team effectiveness; and finally, the analysis cannot confirm that the transactional style is positively related to team effectiveness.

The behaviours that Pearce and Sims (2002) consider representative of the empowering leadership style include encouraging independent action, opportunity thinking, teamwork, self-development, self-reward and participative goal setting.

Pearce and Sims' (2002) analysis was based on autonomous teams working on highly complex tasks, identifying and solving problems; the teams were also part of the same organisation and were temporary teams, working on a project basis.

This dissertation did not look at temporary teams but at permanent working teams managing daily work activities. People have stable relationships over time. The company has a hierarchical structure, and the line manager is seen as a vertical leader. These differences were considered during the content analysis of the interviews.

In the relationship showing the importance of leader behaviours on team performance, knowledge-sharing plays an essential mediating role. Srivastava *et al.* (2006) defined knowledge-sharing as “team members sharing task-relevant ideas, information, and suggestions with each other” (Srivastava *et al.*, 2006: 1239). Knowledge-sharing occurs when leaders provide the team with more opportunities to share knowledge used to solve problems and make decisions. Along with knowledge-sharing, Srivastava *et al.* (2006) found that team efficacy was also a mediator in determining high levels of team performance, having defined team efficacy as “the belief of team members in their joint capability of executing certain behaviours necessary to attain a desired level of performance on specific tasks” (Bandura, 1997: 402).

This result highlights once again the relationship between structural and psychological empowerment, as structural empowerment is represented by the knowledge-sharing behaviours implemented by the leader regardless of whether they are a vertical or shared leader, whereas psychological empowerment is represented by the beliefs of team members in their joint capabilities. Team performance is better when both forms of empowerment are present.

This dissertation has examined structural and psychological empowerment, exploring how both line managers and their teams experience this construct. In particular, attention was paid to how the line manager's behaviour in the leadership role influences individual and team effectiveness and what mechanisms, approaches or structures the line manager uses to improve the effectiveness of their team. It is worth noting that empowerment as a concept based purely on power-sharing offers an incomplete view, whereas including the motivational view based on self-efficacy offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding empowerment.

Srivastava *et al.*'s (2006) research did not examine the organisational mechanisms that support empowering leadership, whereas this dissertation examined the usefulness of company processes such as performance management, career planning and development opportunities to support the experience of empowerment. Furthermore, the research by Srivastava *et al.* (2006) was conducted with management teams responsible for the work done by other people. In this dissertation, the participating teams are not management teams but worker teams. The Generation Z employees who were involved in this dissertation have an operational role, do not manage the work of others and are often at their first major work experience.

This dissertation examined how line managers promote empowerment and how Generation Z employees respond to their activities and behaviours. Becoming an empowering line manager is not immediate for those who have experienced transactional or directive leadership styles. It is, therefore, crucial to see whether line managers are coping with this change and how their employees are reacting to it.

1.5 Performance management

Performance management is often considered a method of creating better results in companies through “setting individual and team goals that are aligned to the strategic goals of the organisation, planning performance to achieve the goals, reviewing and assessing progress, and developing the knowledge, skills and abilities of people” (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020: 431). Implicitly, the idea of performance management encompasses both the reciprocity of benefit for the organisation and the employee and the active participation of all to achieve success. For example, Weiss and Hartle (1997) write that performance management is “a process for establishing a shared understanding about what is to be achieved and how it is to be achieved and an approach to managing

people that increases the probability of achieving success” (Weiss and Hartle, 1997: 199).

The three distinct phases of performance management are performance planning, supporting and reviewing (Taylor, 2013). Performance planning implies that the line manager and the employee agree on goals and expectations to be achieved within a certain period. Performance planning should be updated regularly to ensure that goals continue to be relevant and challenging (Torrington *et al.*, 2020). However, the goal-setting phase has been widely criticised by Ordóñez *et al.* (2011), because too many aspects can go wrong. For example, short-term goals may be counterproductive for the organisation compared to long-term goals. There is also the risk of setting goals that promote unethical behaviour or change the risk preferences in the decision-making process of employees and their managers. Line managers should therefore be aware of the potential risks associated with poor goal setting before embarking on this phase of the performance management process.

During the performance support phase, the line manager is seen as a coach who helps their employee to improve specific skills by providing learning opportunities, feedback and confidence, while also accepting the possibility of poor performance (Peters and O’Connor, 1980; Blumberg and Pringle, 1982). This approach seems to be aligned with the role of the line manager in the empowerment process in terms of reinforcement of the four cognitions (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990) because the line manager is called upon to help the employee build competencies, develop self-efficacy, use information that can improve the impact of the work performed and give meaning to that work. The line manager, therefore, has an active role in supporting performance as “managers guide employees through discussion and by constructive feedback [...], and oil the organisational wheels” (Torrington *et al.*, 2020: 240).

The final stage is the performance review, which involves measuring the employee’s performance against agreed goals and expectations. Performance usually receives a quantitative assessment (Taylor, 2013). Armstrong and Baron (2005) refined this approach by recommending that performance is managed throughout the year, moving from an episodic to a continuous approach. Aguinis *et al.* (2011) pointed out, however, that the performance appraisal system should remain practical, because it is unhelpful for a manager to be expected to complete formal appraisals too frequently,

rendering them of little benefit to the employee and the organisation, since appraisal is an activity that requires time, effort and energy.

Performance management has been found to support job satisfaction and employee recognition of their own performance (Harley *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, performance management is linked to self-determination (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990), self-efficacy (Deci, 1975) and meaning (Spreitzer, 2006). Armstrong and Baron (2005) reinforce this idea by writing that one of the benefits of performance management is that people can monitor their own performance and discuss with someone what they can do to improve it. This idea seems to be aligned with psychological empowerment, particularly the cognitions of self-determination and impact.

The purpose of this section has been to raise the reader's awareness of the potential impact of organisational processes on the empowerment experience. This dissertation has explored whether line managers and their Generation Z staff consider the performance management process a critical factor in shaping the empowerment experience.

1.6 Generation Z

Since the purpose of this dissertation is to move forward knowledge and practice on employee empowerment regarding a new generation of workers, it is worth understanding why the digital natives taking part contributed to the findings as Generation Z members rather than as people who are simply going through the stage of life in which they are expected to find their place in the world of work. It is also important to analyse the main critical issues of the research on generations.

1.6.1 Generations research: why it makes sense and how it works

At the heart of this dissertation is a commitment to understanding the empowerment experience of Generation Z employees and the role their line managers can play in creating empowerment.

Generational differences are perceived as real and as such they can generate stereotypes. In the business context, managers can reinforce some positive stereotypes because people often tend to identify themselves with the characteristics of their generation (Van Rossem, 2018).

Age is one of the key variables most commonly used to read attitudes and behaviours (Bell, 2021; O'Brien, 2020; Yang and Land, 2013). For example, age differences can be extensive and illuminating in distinguishing different attitudes and positions on issues concerning technology, foreign language proficiency, and open-mindedness towards diversity and minority rights (Leslie *et al.*, 2021; Scholz and Rennig, 2019; Grubb, 2016). Age identifies two important characteristics of a person: their place in the life cycle, which could correspond to that of a young adult, a middle-aged parent or a retiree, and their membership in a cohort of individuals born at a similar time (Morgan and Kunkel, 2015). Age as a discriminating variable allows researchers to employ an approach known as 'cohort analysis' to monitor a group of people over their lifetime (Bell, 2021; O'Brien, 2020; Yang and Land, 2013).

Age cohorts offer researchers a tool to analyse changes in views over time; they can provide a way of understanding how different educational experiences interact with the life cycle and the ageing process to shape people's worldviews (Morgan and Kunkel, 2015). While younger and older adults may differ in their views at any given time, age cohorts allow researchers to go further and examine how today's older adults felt about a given issue when they were young, as well as to describe how the trajectory of views might differ across age cohorts (Morgan and Kunkel, 2015).

Generations are a way of grouping age cohorts. A generation generally refers to groups of people born within a fifteen- or twenty-year span. Generation Z, currently the youngest adult generation, comprises people born roughly between 1996 and 2010 (McCrindle, 2022). Multiple successive age cohorts over a fifteen- to twenty-year period will necessarily include a diverse set of people, within which it is often possible to identify smaller but more homogeneous and significant subsets. Changes in political circumstances, sociocultural traditions and economic conditions over a period of fifteen to twenty years can lead to people within a cohort having different educational experiences. Understanding these differences within a cohort is an essential step in generational analysis.

The factors that determine generational differences can be complex, interact with each other and overlap. Researchers often think of three separate effects that can produce differences in attitudes and behaviour between groups of different ages: life cycle effects, also called 'age effects'; period effects; and cohort effects (Bell, 2021; Glenn, 1977).

When a life cycle effect is at play, the differences between the young and the old are largely due to their respective positions in the life cycle. For example, young people are much less likely than older people to vote and actively engage in politics. This may be because they are less informed about politics or feel they have less to lose and are therefore less involved in political or legislative debates. As people get older, they are more likely to vote and be politically engaged. Generation Z is less engaged in politics today than older generations, but so was Generation X in their youth (Fry, 2018). Today, Generation X is more likely to vote and participate in politics than younger generations (Fry, 2018).

Period effects occur when events and circumstances, for example wars, social movements, economic crises and scientific or technological innovations, have a simultaneous impact on everyone, regardless of age. Period effects are generally thought to have lasting implications for an entire population. An example of a period effect is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social and professional relationships and views on office, remote or hybrid work. The current historical moment coincides with a radical rethinking of working relationships between generations (Larsson and Teigland, 2020; ILO, 2020). People are questioning more than ever the purpose and meaning of what they do at work (Dhingra *et al.*, 2021; Dimitracopulos, 2020). Organisations should show employees that their work is linked to a just cause, bigger than the idea of generating profit, by helping employees to contribute (Anholt, 2020; Sinek, 2020).

Finally, there is the cohort effect. Differences between generations may be the by-product of particular historical circumstances that members of an age cohort experience. This may be because particular historical circumstances occur during a key point in the life cycle, such as adolescence and early adulthood when awareness of the world is heightened, and personal identities and value systems take shape. This is when a historical moment can have a much greater effect on the members of one generation than on those of other generations. For example, Generation Z is cosmopolitan. Members of this generation have never lived in a world where the internet did not exist. Therefore, global events have actively shaped their worldview. Generation Z does not accept or tolerate diversity, they expect it (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). In some cases, the cohort effect may be the result of a period effect that previous generations experienced and subsequent generations will not see. For example, the European single market became a

reality in 1993. Therefore, the common currency in the European Union is a fact of life for Generation Z.

Separating the effects of age, period and cohort can be difficult, because one variable always depends on the other two (Dinas and Stoker, 2014; Winship and Harding, 2008). As Yang and Land (2013) noted, “age effects represent aging-related developmental changes within individuals, whereas temporal trends across time periods reflect exogenous changes in social and epidemiologic conditions. And, cohort changes reflect the intersection of both as a result of differential accumulation of lifetime exposures to environmental conditions” (Yang and Land, 2013: 12).

Although using the generational lens is particularly effective for issues such as inclusion and diversity, there are no meaningful patterns based on generational differences that can explain all employment issues (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Opinions on career progression, for example, is an area where there are only modest generational differences, with the largest gaps in opinion observed with other variables, including gender, ethnicity and education (Benasso and Cuzzocrea, 2019). Concerning employee empowerment, it is worth asking whether there might be a generational shift in the desire to have empowerment at work and whether employee empowerment might be a much more widespread managerial tool than it is today, becoming a key topic in organisations, given that the composition of organisations is changing and employee empowerment has never disappeared from the academic literature (Huq, 2016b). Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate whether the advantages and disadvantages of employee empowerment are focused on a specific generation and whether they reflect the composition and educational experiences of a specific group, but not of all working generations in a broader sense, or whether employee empowerment reflects a fundamental change in the way all working generations want to move beyond traditional hierarchies. While these are some of the questions that cohort analysis using generations can answer, they are not part of this dissertation. Understanding whether empowerment is a managerial tool that works better for Generation Z than for previous generations and whether there is a generational shift in the desire to have empowerment at work is an area for future research.

This dissertation focused on the empowerment experience of line managers and their Generation Z employees and the role that line managers and the organisation under

study play in getting the best out of Generation Z employees. This subsection on the use of the generational lens has been useful in highlighting how important the broad concept of generation is compared to the narrower notion of life cycle, as well as clarifying some of the limitations of the dissertation and future areas of research.

1.6.2 Generations research: criticism

The use of generational labels has been repeatedly criticised because the labels are “imposed by survey researchers, journalists or marketing firms before the identities they are supposed to describe even exist” (Cohen, 2021: online). People struggle to recognise themselves as part of the generation that was created for them (Doherty *et al.*, 2015). Cohen’s open letter (2021), in which he expresses his disapproval of generational labels, has gained wide support from other academics and social scientists. Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard professor Louis Menand wrote in *The New Yorker* that there is no evidence to support that “differences within a generation are smaller than differences between generations” (Menand, 2021: online). The academic also noted that generational theories seem to require people born at the end of one generation and people born at the beginning of another generation to have different values, tastes and life experiences, or people born in the first and last year of a generation to have more in common with each other than with people born a couple of years before or after them.

These considerations are reasonable and, in terms of this dissertation, justify the decision to explore the empowerment experience of Generation Z employees without any claim to the generalisability of the results outside the workplace context identified here, although readers may see similarities with other organisational contexts with which they are familiar. However, the objections concerning generational research expressed by Menand (2021) and Cohen (2021) do not reduce its importance and the effort to study age, period and cohort effects. Menand’s (2021) position does not take into account that intragenerational differences have been extensively investigated. For Generation Z employees, for example, the recognition of intragenerational differences has led to the identification of three subgroups: those who value work-life balance; those who desire a comfortable working environment; and those who prioritise career advancement (Leslie *et al.*, 2021). Several studies have been conducted on intragenerational differences and intergenerational overlaps (Scholz and Rennig, 2019; Grubb, 2016). As for Cohen’s (2021) remarks, his observation would have been acceptable thirty years ago when little

was known about Generation Z, but today, the attitudes, behaviours and values of Generation Z have been identified and analysed (Leslie *et al.*, 2021) and have been used in this dissertation to offer a new perspective on the empowerment experience of participants belonging to this generation.

1.7 Conceptual framework

Structural and psychological approaches to empowerment offer two complementary perspectives that work together in harmony to represent a multilevel construct: structural empowerment focuses on managers and how they give power to their employees within companies, while psychological empowerment focuses on how employees develop commitment and motivation. There seems to be a dilemma when writing about employee empowerment because it is not always clear whether empowerment should be granted by the organisation or whether people should demand and achieve it. Here the analogy with the concept of freedom applies because empowerment, like freedom, can be a concession or a hard-won achievement (Carney and Getz, 2016). Where the analogy between empowerment and freedom seems less strong is in the knowledge that having empowerment and feeling empowered offers a more rewarding life in the company than when empowerment is lacking, because there are employees who do not want more responsibility and therefore do not want empowerment (Carney and Getz, 2016). “Empowerment exists in an organisation when lower-level employees feel that they are expected to exercise initiative in good faith on behalf of the mission even if it goes outside the bounds of their normal responsibilities; and if their initiative should lead to a mistake – even a serious one – they trust that they will not be arbitrarily penalised for having taken that initiative” (Appelbaum and Honeggar, 1998: 29). Being willing to take the initiative is, therefore, a necessary condition for employees to experience empowerment. On the part of the organisation and managers, however, there must be a desire and ability to support employees in understanding that taking the initiative is the way to help the company improve its organisational performance and that making mistakes is not a fault but part of the learning process (Logan and Ganster, 2007).

In the empowerment process, manager support cannot be taken for granted because empowerment challenges managers to relinquish some of the control they exert over their employees’ work and this may be experienced as a downsizing of the role

rather than a move towards a different role (Gallie *et al.*, 1998). On the other hand, some managers may interpret empowerment as a way of setting performance expectations, defining deadlines and selecting people to be involved in a task, thus retaining a large element of control, and calling what is actually delegation ‘empowerment’. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that the empowerment relationship is only possible when the task is intrinsically motivating, and they created a cognitive model to explain how psychological empowerment is associated with intrinsic task motivation. Appelbaum and Honeggar (1998) point out that empowerment is not a quick process that is observed immediately after executing a list of instructions, because time, effort and energy are needed to make it work.

It is not only managers but organisations too who are not always equipped to support empowerment. There are some structural factors that organisations need to focus on to create effective psychological empowerment without expecting that actions to change the organisational context will be sufficient to achieve immediate results. The combination of structural and psychological empowerment can be seen in the words of Siegall and Gardner (2000) when they write: “While one can change attitudes by first shaping behaviours, we believe that the true benefits of empowerment (however defined) will not be seen unless people first perceive themselves as being empowered. For example, if a person has the organisation’s permission to act autonomously but does not believe that she or he has the capability of acting effectively, then the autonomy will not result in improved outcomes for either the organisation or the person” (Siegall and Gardner, 2000: 705).

Regarding organisational factors that may influence an employee’s cognitions, Siegall and Gardner (2000) found that communication with a supervisor and general relations with the company are positively correlated with three of the four dimensions of psychological empowerment suggested by Spreitzer (1995): impact, self-determination and meaning. Teamwork is correlated with impact and meaning, while concern for performance is correlated with self-determination and meaning. Among the contextual factors considered by Siegall and Gardner (2000), none is related to the competence dimension, not because of problems due to the scale of measurement but rather because of the choice of contextual factors considered. An effective training programme, more opportunities to receive feedback on one’s work and selection procedures based on the

affinity between skills required by the company and possessed by the individual are some of the structural factors that Siegall and Gardner (2000) should have considered.

This dissertation adopted the theories of structural and psychological empowerment to investigate how line managers empower Generation Z employees in a Fortune 500 company. It was inspired by the writings of Appelbaum and Honegger (1998) on how line managers make empowerment work within their teams and how certain structural factors can support empowerment (Siegall and Gardner, 2000). A line manager may wish to have highly empowered employees, but the intention will not bring results unless the employee has the motivation, ability and opportunity to be highly empowered (Tuuli and Rowlinson, 2009).

Both psychological and structural empowerment have the same expected results in terms of improved employee performance, which in turn is linked to improved organisational effectiveness and customer satisfaction (Kanter, 1977; Conger and Kanungo, 1988).

Both approaches to empowerment can take place at the individual, team or organisational level (Bowen and Lawler, 1992).

Both approaches are based on power: the line manager passes power to the employee in structural empowerment and the employee feels a high level of self-efficacy in psychological empowerment. The sociological school of power focuses on the line manager sharing power through the act of 'doing' empowerment. In contrast, the psychological school focuses on the employee who feels 'being' empowered. The two approaches are linked because line managers and organisations can create structures and processes that lead to the act of empowerment (Kanter, 1979), but empowerment will fail if employees at a cognitive level do not feel empowered. Empowerment can therefore be analysed by recognising the duality of the concept of power, which can be interpreted as 'power over' or 'power with'. According to the 'power over' perspective, power is something that can be granted by one person to another. Weber (1947), Burke (1986) and Armstrong and Taylor (2020) are examples that show how this conception of power has been present in literature and organisations for years. However, there are also writers such as Conger and Kanungo (1988) who adopt the 'power with' perspective in which empowerment is thought of as a motivational construct where the role of the line

manager is to enhance the self-efficacy of their employees. Empowerment thus becomes a process to foster self-determination and not a concession of power.

Both approaches are based on the concept of commitment. Argyris (1998) pointed out two different types of commitment: external commitment in which the manager defines the task, the goal, the behaviour to be adopted during the performance and the importance of achieving the goal; and internal commitment in which the same parameters are defined by the person who oversees the performance. External commitment is aligned with an organisational culture of command and control where employees have little opportunity to make changes and improve processes. Internal engagement occurs when employees commit to work for personal reasons and is aligned to psychological empowerment. Analysing the reasons why many empowerment programmes fail, Argyris (1998) argues that organisations that promote empowerment programmes often create a lot of external commitment. This generates mixed messages because employees are told that they have freedom, but their freedom must be exercised in only one way, which results in employees not feeling psychologically empowered. Argyris (1998) encouraged organisations to accept that empowerment is not an end in itself but simply a means to improve performance. However, organisations should encourage internal employee engagement.

Both approaches are based on sharing organisational information with employees. Giving meaningful information to employees is a sign of trust (Heller, 1971) and a way of enabling effective decision-making (Kotter, 1996). Information shared with employees includes operational and financial results (Lawler *et al.*, 1995), business plans, objectives, future technologies and competitor data. This information enables employees to be informed, to appreciate the context of their work and to assess the consequences of their decisions.

Research gaps exist in the literature regarding how managers and their employees can make empowerment work (Huq, 2016a and 2016b; Pearson and Chatterjee, 1996). Over twenty years on, the words of Argyris (1998: 98-99) will still resonate in the minds of many readers: “[...] despite all the best efforts that have gone into fostering empowerment, it remains very much like the emperor’s new clothes: we praise it loudly in public and ask ourselves privately why we don’t see it. There has been no transformation in the workforce, and there has been no sweeping metamorphosis”

(Argyris, 1998: 98-99). Empowerment theory is considered difficult to implement, but this dissertation aims to be innovative in the theoretical framework it proposes because in doing so it hopes to shed new light on the understanding of empowerment and advance related management practices.

This dissertation was developed using the structural approach and the psychological approach to empowerment as a conceptual framework. An analysis has been made of the psychological and behavioural dimensions of line managers and their Generation Z employees in the empowerment relationship they currently create in their work units. Organisational factors that support this relationship were also considered. A study using both approaches adds a new perspective to the existing body of knowledge on the topic of empowerment. In the past, research has been conducted from one perspective or the other, ignoring the fact that it is the interaction between these two approaches that determines the essence of empowerment.

1.8 Summary of the chapter

The topic of empowerment is as fascinating as it is complex. In this chapter, issues related to empowerment have been presented that deserve attention in terms of the research questions. There is a call for clarity in the definition of employee empowerment and the dimensions that need to be considered depending on the level of analysis. Yukl and Becker (2006) write: “More clarity is also needed about the conditions that determine whether empowerment will be effective. [...] While much of the literature on the guidelines and facilitating conditions for effective empowerment [...] is based on common sense and practitioner insights, there is little systematic research to support them. We need more research on the effectiveness of specific empowerment behaviors and practices” (Yukl and Becker, 2006: 222).

The research gap suggested here by Yukl and Becker (2006) and also often pointed out by others over the years (Argyris, 1998; Huq, 2016a and 2016b) regarding how to implement empowerment in practice provides an authoritative justification for this dissertation.

This chapter began with a critical analysis of how work management systems and related managerial practices have evolved over time since the first industrial revolution. Clearly, over the years in Europe the participation of employees in decision-making

processes within their organisations has increased in parallel with improved working conditions, better knowledge and skills of employees and several other factors within and outside the organisation. The focus on intrinsic motivation as an element of job satisfaction is a key factor in this change. However, the principles of Taylorism have not disappeared but have evolved and adapted to new organisational contexts, leaving empowerment practices still low down on the list in companies (Huq, 2016b; Sisson, 2000).

The following section considered the foundations of empowerment, examining the influences of McGregor (1960) and Likert (1961) in encouraging more participatory approaches in organisations. Horizontal and vertical job enrichment offers employees the opportunity to diversify their activities and develop new skills. The creation of jobs that offer employees greater personal responsibility has helped to change the role of line managers by shifting their focus from management control to people development (Holtz and Zardet, 2022; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Other forms of employee participation were explored, including quality circles, high-commitment and high-involvement management. The concept of power in the workplace was also considered, discussing the challenge of how and to what extent people with power are willing to cede this power to others.

Structural empowerment and psychological empowerment were analysed in detail. Within an organisation, the structural perspective explains what empowerment means by 'doing' and the psychological perspective explains what empowered means by 'being'. Structural empowerment was examined in relation to the line manager and the organisation as power holders, while psychological empowerment was examined in relation to the employee as an individual with specific cognitive dimensions. To explain the psychological perspective, the concept of self-efficacy was introduced and two specific models of psychological empowerment, Spreitzer's (1995) and Thomas and Velthouse's (1990), were explored. Further insights were provided into the links between empowerment and other constructs used to answer the research questions in the organisation under review, providing an interpretation of how intrinsic motivation can be fostered by organisations and line managers through the enhancement of impact, meaningfulness, self-determination and competence. The variety of ways in which empowerment can be measured was explored, to assess how much employee participation in the measurement process is present or should be present. This area offers

many interesting insights into what line managers use as definitions and indicators of empowerment.

The influence of leadership on empowerment processes was examined regarding transactional and transformational leadership. Specific behaviours that a leader must exhibit to encourage the psychological empowerment of their staff were identified. These behaviours show that the actions of a leader who supports the empowerment of their staff are intended to give them power.

Some policies and procedures can be considered structural empowerment interventions. Those related to the definition and implementation of performance management systems were examined to understand how they create the conditions to support psychological empowerment.

Finally, attention was turned to Generation Z to better understand the reasons for focusing research efforts related to psychological empowerment on employees belonging to this generation. The topic of generation research was explored in depth, identifying the factors that determine generational differences and the specific events that distinguish Generation Z from other generations. The problems with generations research were explained, as well as why the concept of generation is more suitable than that of life cycle stage in the identification of participants in this dissertation.

This literature review highlighted why the combination of structural and psychological empowerment underpins this dissertation and why the notion of Generation Z is more suitable than the notion of life cycle stage in identifying participants. Table 1.2 below summarises how what was learned from the literature review is used to articulate the framework for this dissertation.

Line manager		Generation Z employee	
Psychological dimension	Behavioural dimension	Psychological dimension	Behavioural dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading by example • Coaching • Participative decision making • Informing • Showing concern and interacting with the team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking responsibility • Making decisions • Owning outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact • Competence • Meaning • Self-determination

Organisation			
People	Resources	Performance	Strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and selection • Learning and development • Employee engagement • Employee relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgeting • Resource allocation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal setting and performance planning • Performance monitoring, reviewing and developing (supporting) • Performance appraisal (assessing and rating) • Reward management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission, vision and values • Organisational information and updates • Organisation design and development

Table 1.2 – Learning from the literature review

In this dissertation, employee empowerment is defined as follows.

Employee empowerment is a three-dimensional construct that benefits the organisation, line managers and their employees. This construct is illustrated below in Figure 1.2.

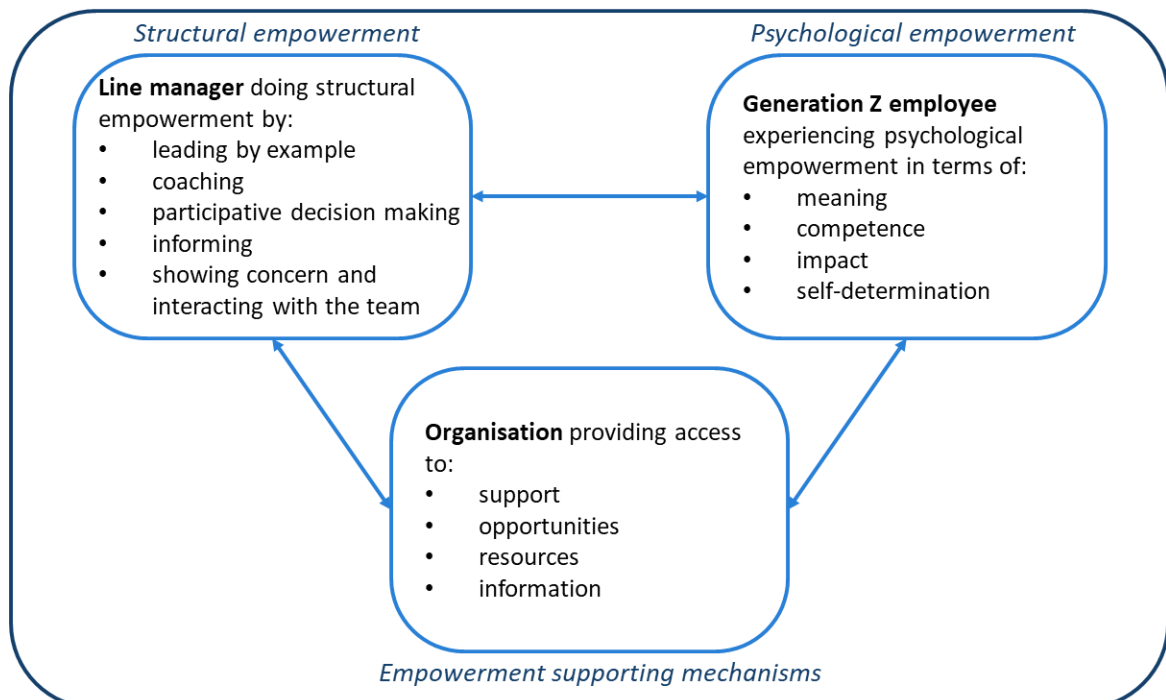


Figure 1.2 – Researcher’s interpretation of employee empowerment (conceptual framework)

Line managers are involved in carrying out activities to encourage their employees to have responsibility, competence and confidence to be able to successfully perform all tasks related to their role. Employees are expected to have, or progressively

develop, desire, motivation and confidence in their ability to take responsibility, shape their work role, take decisions and manage their workload in such a way that they excel in their role and add real value to the organisation. Organisational systems and processes should be available to and used by all members of the organisation. The employee can understand and influence the goals, objectives and strategy of the organisation and have access to mechanisms and tools that will help them to define and measure their contribution to organisational effectiveness and to work with their line manager to create their own development and career path within the organisation.

Empowerment is essentially a three-way collaboration that benefits employees, their line managers and the organisation and promotes success and sustainability. Employees have full responsibility for their role, line managers enable the development of full ownership of that role, and organisational systems support employees in being accountable for their own performance and organisational effectiveness, all in a context where the organisation's mission and vision are aligned with the plans and goals related to individuals, groups and departments.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

This chapter describes, justifies and analyses the methodological approach applied. Specific sections focus on philosophical fundamentals, factors motivating the dissertation and research questions. The chapter clarifies the key aspects of the research strategy and shows that research integrity is a principle that has inspired the researcher right from the design phase and not only in the implementation phase. The chapter continues with considerations of information sampling, collection and analysis techniques. Finally, there are specific sections on quality criteria, improvements obtained as a result of the piloting process and limitations of the dissertation.

This dissertation aims to explore the experience of empowerment from the perspective of line managers and their Generation Z employees. Underlying this dissertation are the following research questions:

- Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees?
- How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment?
- How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?

This dissertation uses a case study strategy to enable an in-depth understanding of the empowerment experience, taking into account the specific work context in which line managers and employees operate (Yin, 2018). Extensive and detailed information was obtained from primary sources through semi-structured interviews with line managers and their Generation Z staff. Additional information, especially related to the work context, was obtained from secondary sources through listening to videos available on the official YouTube channel of the organisation under study; through reading company policies on performance management, the use of social media at work and remote working; and through reading financial reports from recent years. The internal coherence of this research study can be appreciated through the application of the knowledge visualisation framework shown in Appendix A.

2.1 Philosophical underpinnings

The question of how the issue of empowerment in organisations can be analysed raises several philosophical questions. Some of these questions concern ontology: what is the nature of the social world that this dissertation has analysed and what is there to know about it? Other questions concern epistemology: how can people know about the social world analysed in this dissertation and what is the basis of this knowledge? Finally, further questions concern axiology: what influence did the researcher's values and those of the participants have on this dissertation? The answers to these questions, contained in the following subsections, will help the reader grasp the philosophical assumptions underlying this qualitative research.

2.1.1 Ontological assumptions

Ontology deals with the nature of reality and what there is to know about the world. The key ontological questions in this dissertation concern the existence of a social reality and the possibility of sharing this reality with others. Concerning these issues, the social sciences have been shaped by two general ontological stances: realism and idealism. Realism is based on the idea that there is an external reality that exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations. Thus, there is only one objective reality, but it does not necessarily coincide with the subjective reality that people construe by associating meaning and interpretation with objective reality. Idealism, on the other hand, states that reality is fundamentally mind-dependent: it is knowable only through the human mind and through the use of socially constructed meanings. Therefore, there is no reality independent of these meanings. Reality is subjective. Hence there are multiple subjective realities, one for each of the individuals observing that reality. Within these broad positions, however, it is possible to identify a range of more nuanced perspectives.

This dissertation takes an ontological stance based on the idea that reality is subjective: what research participants experience within their company in the dynamics of relationships with colleagues and other stakeholders depends on how they interpret their experiences and observations and the meaning they attribute to them. The researcher involved in this dissertation believes that this subjective reality of theirs can be understood, communicated, constructed and shared by the research participants. In addition to individual reflection, participants can use interactions with the researcher and

their social network to interpret and give meaning to activities and behaviours analysed during this dissertation.

How similar the social world and the physical world are in their way of existing and thus being investigated is another question that can be used to clarify the ontological position of this dissertation. Some believe that the social world is akin to the physical world and is governed by universal and causal laws. Others believe that the social world is fundamentally different because it is open to subjective interpretation.

This dissertation considers the physical world and the social world to be very different: any regularity identified by social investigation cannot be governed by immutable laws, because human beings can choose actions to take by considering several factors, including their prediction of the possible consequences of their decisions (Hughes and Sharrock, 2016; Patton, 2015; Giddens, 1984). Therefore, the researcher involved in this dissertation does not share the idea that there are or can be fixed laws governing the social world. The main implication of this assumption involves a belief in the constant evolution of what can be known about empowerment since the experience of empowerment depends on social interaction, which is an ongoing process. Therefore, knowledge about empowerment must be constantly revised and updated, for example by taking into account a new sociocultural, geographical and historical context, such as the one described in this dissertation.

2.1.2 Epistemological assumptions

Epistemology is concerned with how people know the world. In this dissertation, two key epistemological issues were identified.

The first question concerns how knowledge can be acquired. Some argue that knowledge should be developed through induction, a bottom-up approach that generates knowledge as it moves from observed experience to general, universal patterns. Others argue that knowledge should be developed through deduction, a top-down approach that generates knowledge as it moves from theoretical assumptions to experimental verification. Although qualitative research is often described as an inductive process, this is a somewhat misleading simplification. Blaikie (2021) argues that pure induction or pure deduction do not exist. For example, researchers using the inductive approach are unlikely to interpret their data with an open mind, because they are most likely

influenced by previous theories. Similarly, researchers using the deductive approach are unlikely to formulate a hypothesis that does not arise from observation.

Instead of moving from the particular to the general as in induction or from the general to the particular as in deduction, this dissertation uses an abductive approach, moving back and forth and thus combining induction and deduction. The conceptual framework shown in the introductory chapter and discussed in the literature review chapter is an example of the dissertation's combined approach. However, in developing a theoretical model, the inductive approach is preferred over the deductive approach in this research study. The researcher involved here remains critical of the use of the deductive approach in the social sciences, as the deductive approach is not concerned with understanding the human dynamics between the people who exhibit the variables to be correlated and therefore creates a tendency to construct a rigid methodology that does not allow for alternative explanations. This dissertation uses essentially an abductive approach because it generates knowledge in the transition between the particular and the general: information is collected to explore the empowerment relationship, identify themes and patterns to be included in the conceptual framework and then test the conceptual framework through a subsequent collection of information so as to update the existing theory on empowerment.

The second epistemological issue concerns the relationship between the researcher and the topic of his research. This researcher does not consider the topic to be empowerment as an objective reality, but the interpretation and meaning given to empowerment by line managers and their Generation Z employees in the company under study. The different empowerment-related opinions, narratives and stories the participants shared with the researcher are acceptable, legitimate and valid. All this knowledge highlights the different subjective realities of the participants and shows that their realities are linked to a specific organisational context. After openly acknowledging his inability to break away from his own values while using the information gathered, this researcher also actively reflected on how his own values were incorporated into this dissertation. In good faith, he believes he maintained neutral and non-judgemental behaviour when interacting with the research participants and other corporate stakeholders involved.

2.1.3 Axiological assumptions

Axiology refers to the role of values and ethics. The key axiological question in this dissertation relates to how positively the researcher views the impact his values and beliefs have on the empowerment analysis. For example, choosing one topic over another suggests that in the researcher's eyes the former topic is more important than the latter. This question is also related to the extent to which the participants' values are considered and represented in this dissertation.

This author believes that values are what guide all human action and that one inevitably integrates their values during the research process. On the other hand, the researcher considers it essential to have explicitly acknowledged and reflected on his own values while conducting his research project and writing this dissertation. Assuming that the researcher's way of behaving is inspired by the ethical principles of research and the way of acting is inspired by intellectual honesty, good faith and fairness, the question remains as to the degree to which empowerment is interpreted neutrally.

The research philosophy underlying this dissertation is a reflection of the values of the researcher who conducted it, as is the choice of topics to be included and any other aspect of the research project. For example, the main information-gathering technique used in this dissertation consisted of semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately ninety minutes, suggesting that the researcher considered the information gathered through personal interaction with participants to be more important than the opinions expressed through responses to an anonymous questionnaire.

The participants' values appear in this dissertation in the interview transcript extracts. These extracts were reported so as to support the researcher's interpretations and evaluations. By giving voice to the participants, the researcher addressed the issues of truth and accuracy, which play a critical role in the social sciences.

In this dissertation, the representation of a socially constructed reality is of greater value than the individual opinions of the participants. However, individual opinions were taken into account and included in this dissertation when the researcher deemed them essential to provide a complete picture of the subject matter.

2.1.4 Philosophical position

This dissertation is based on the idea that reality is socially constructed through culture and language. There are therefore multiple meanings, interpretations and realities. Knowledge arises from the exploration and understanding of narratives, stories, perceptions and interpretations. What contributes to knowledge is a new perspective and a better understanding of the empowerment experience. The research process is considered largely inductive in the sense that the researcher constructed meanings and interpretations based on those of the participants, but theory still informed the researcher's meanings and interpretations in the analysis phase. The researcher's values appear in the dissertation but are acknowledged and reflected upon in such a way that the researcher's interpretations still contribute to advancing knowledge and practice of empowerment. This research philosophy, which has not yet been classified in this dissertation according to terminology in the literature, can be thought of as interpretivism or constructivism (Bryman *et al.*, 2021; Saunders *et al.*, 2019; Silverman, 2018).

2.2 Research rationale

Exploring the empowerment experience of line managers and their Generation Z employees allows a comparison of executed and considered behaviours, reflections and critiques that can help understand the empowerment relationship, identifying behaviours and mechanisms that contribute to making this relational dynamic more effective. This is possible by using both structural and psychological approaches to employee empowerment.

Structural empowerment as defined by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Kanter (1977) places the focus on line managers who encourage empowerment by empowering their teams, involving their employees in decision-making and providing them with information and advice on planning their careers and personal development. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) pointed out that the organisational environment is an aspect of structural empowerment that influences the way people perceive their own empowerment. Psychological empowerment has been defined by Spreitzer (1995: 1444) as "a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role. By active orientation, I mean an orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context".

The models of structural and psychological empowerment discussed in detail in the literature review provide insights into how the empowerment experience can be improved by line managers and their organisations. However, there is a research gap that has not yet been filled. Pearson and Chatterjee (1996: 17) observe that “Overall, a great deal of interest has been shown in how empowerment works rather than how to make it work”. Years later, these words are still true and, if possible, have an even greater impact because since they were uttered a new generation of people has entered the world of work: Generation Z. Wang and Lee (2009: 290) recall that “empowerment theorists must focus on identifying optimal combinations that represent balanced or fit situations in different work contexts, which are essential to employee well-being and other job outcomes” and, more recently, Huq (2016a: 551) writes that “organisations may attempt to implement employee empowerment without a clear understanding of what it means, how to implement it or the complexity that surrounds it”. However, perhaps the reader recalls Argyris’ (1998) remark that many executives and CEOs are quick to publicly acknowledge the value of empowerment as an effective managerial tool but then privately complain they are unable to see any difference in their employees’ results compared to relational approaches where managers tell employees what to do.

This dissertation aims to explore the complexity of employee empowerment and its implementation, updating the theoretical knowledge and managerial practices related to it, in order to fill the research gap represented by many different voices that describe how complex the implementation phase of this managerial practice is. It was decided to focus on Generation Z because today Generation Z represents about thirty per cent of the total world population, according to The World Economic Forum (Koop, 2021), and will represent twenty-seven per cent of the global workforce by 2025 (Koop, 2021). In addition, the increasing and ever more frequent influence of macro-environmental changes on the world of work makes organisations places where human relations must be reinterpreted or reinvented (Marchington, 2021) and therefore it is worth starting with those such as Generation Z who still have an idealised view of work in companies or at least are free from strongly rooted preconceptions.

This dissertation also stems from the personal and professional curiosity of the researcher who conducted it, a curiosity based on the experience of a person who has worked for over five years on training and development issues as a business consultant in

close contact with line managers and their staff employed in the industrial automation sector.

2.3 Research questions

This dissertation focuses on the empowerment experience of eight line managers and their twenty-six Generation Z employees, all working in the Italian branch of a multinational organisation with headquarters in the United States. The line managers and their employees were interviewed to understand how they interpret and experience their empowerment relationship, identifying positive and negative aspects. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were given the opportunity to investigate their own experience of empowerment, reflecting on behaviours, attitudes, thoughts, activities and processes that can foster or inhibit this relational dynamic.

After identifying the research gap, Saunders *et al.* (2019) believe that research questions are the next step in achieving a clear and coherent research design. Underlying this dissertation are the following questions:

- Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees?
- How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment?
- How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?

These questions are not theoretical but relevant to the problem highlighted in the previous section where it was stressed that this dissertation aims to understand the empowerment experience in its entirety and depth, with a focus on Generation Z. The questions are simply formulated, avoiding repetition, ambiguous constructions and implicit evaluations of empowerment. From an a posteriori analysis, the researcher could see that these questions had the merit of providing useful information to effectively define the research problem and its solution. They were not purely descriptive questions because they prompted the researcher and participants to act.

The research questions were formulated in their final version after an iterative process of improvement that started with a pre-research phase. During the pre-research phase, several academic articles were analysed in order to verify the existence of a

research gap considered relevant by the academic and management community. In addition to the research gap, while working as a business consultant, the researcher developed the conviction that there is a considerable gap between the rhetoric about how well empowerment works and the difficulty of implementing this managerial practice. The improvement process also took place through discussion with the supervisory team and colleagues at the Magellan Research Centre who supported the researcher with advice, suggestions and feedback.

These questions reflect the conceptual framework presented in the literature review chapter where it was highlighted that empowerment in this dissertation is thought of as the interaction between three actors: the line manager who can ‘do’ empowerment through activities and behaviours, the Generation Z employee who can ‘be’ empowered and the organisation which can ‘do’ empowerment through the processes it promotes. The expression ‘doing’ empowerment is used to highlight the structural perspective, while the expression ‘being’ empowered is used to highlight the psychological perspective. The joint use of these two perspectives has been largely ignored in previous empowerment studies, but it is this joint use that offers more detail and fuller information about the empowerment experience.

Hancké (2009) reminds the readers that research questions guide every aspect of a research project and therefore must meet certain criteria. The criteria suggested by Hancké (2009) include relevance to real-world problems, pre-research or previous engagement with empirical material, simplicity and attention to a previously ignored aspect of the debate. By contrast, Mason (2018) encourages formulating questions that are coherent, transparent, relevant and open-ended enough to allow for exploratory inquiry: “They are vehicles that you will rely upon to move you from your broad research interest to your specific research focus and project, and therefore their importance cannot be over-stated” (Mason, 2018: 20). It appears to the researcher that these criteria have been largely met.

2.4 Methodological choice

This dissertation is a qualitative study that uses interviews as a method of data collection and, as a tool to support the analysis, a reflective diary in which comments are made to supplement the interpretation of the organisational context resulting from the

interviews, the reading of company policies and financial reports, and the viewing of the organisation's official YouTube channel.

A qualitative approach is often used to develop a new theory or to offer a new perspective on a theory that has already been widely studied (Eisenhardt, 1989). While research in the past has mainly used quantitative methods to explore the existence of employee empowerment, this dissertation used a qualitative research strategy to explore the role of the line manager in the empowerment relationship with the Generation Z employee and to fully understand the interaction between manager, employee and organisation.

This dissertation is based on a qualitative approach because no theory has yet been developed on activities and behaviours that enable line managers to support the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees. By adopting a qualitative approach, researchers show interest in meanings and perceptions rather than numerical data and focus more on depth than breadth of research (Richards, 2021). In this dissertation, a qualitative approach is aligned with the research objective of exploring the empowerment relationship between line managers and Generation Z employees.

The interpretivist philosophy underlying this dissertation is consistent with the decision to use qualitative research methods, following Denzin and Lincoln's (2017) theory on the relationship between interpretivist philosophy and qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are considered appropriate for exploring participants' experience of empowerment because they allow for the interpretation of subjective and socially constructed meanings.

The use of qualitative methods enabled the researcher to build a relationship with the participants based on trust, cooperation and deep understanding. Participants' needs were taken into account, for example regarding the length of interviews, topics covered and clarifications requested. In an empowerment study, putting participants in a situation in which they can be empowered is in line with the researcher's values. Moreover, participants contributed to the co-construction of meaning with the researcher (Saunders *et al.*, 2019) and this is a key aspect that distinguishes qualitative research from quantitative research, where research subjects are simply asked to provide data that the quantitative researcher will then interpret. Being open to the co-construction of meaning means accepting that this dissertation has addressed themes and patterns that could only

be explored through qualitative analysis techniques because they were not initially foreseen.

Mindful of the fact that personal biases are an inevitable feature of human beings (Kahnema, 2011), the relationship established during the interviews led the researcher to reflect on the feelings, thoughts and personal context in which each participant experienced empowerment. This gave him a better understanding of the hidden meaning behind the information shared and his own personal biases.

The qualitative research methods used in this dissertation are well suited to answering the proposed research questions because they require an articulated response. They are questions aimed at obtaining detail and fullness of understanding of empowerment through learning about the meaning participants gave to their opinions, perceptions, stories and experiences. The results of this dissertation present an articulated description of the empowerment experience, based mainly on what participants described during their interviews. The uniqueness of the participants' contributions and the intersecting themes are presented in all their complexity and richness of detail.

Finally, it is worth noting that the researcher was able to direct the interviews towards topics that he considered crucial for both the academic community and the community of business managers because in qualitative research the process of data collection and the process of data analysis go hand in hand. Similarly, in the logic of co-construction already indicated, the participants were able to do the same by contributing to the topics they considered crucial. Appendix F contains the research plan with an indication of the purpose that guided the various phases of this dissertation.

2.4.1 Research strategy

This dissertation uses a case study strategy whereby the case is the Italian branch of the organisation referred to in the title. In addition to the expedience of selecting this business as a case study, such as the willingness to collaborate, the multinational was selected because it represents a typical example of a company in which many managers and executives would recognise themselves: the organisational culture favours a democratic leadership style but empowerment does not happen spontaneously, despite favourable surrounding conditions.

The focus of this case study on the empowerment relationship emerged after the researcher identified the organisation and conducted a few interviews with people in key roles within the company, consistent with the philosophical assumptions of this dissertation and the approach to theory development. The company proved suitable for answering the research questions and fulfilling the exploratory purpose of this dissertation because the open-ended questions used as research questions and the open-ended questions used as an inquiry tool in the interviews proved effective in understanding empowerment and exploring any aspect related to it.

The case study strategy was used because it can investigate the interactions between empowerment and the environment in which the empowerment relationship originates and develops. The organisational context influences the experience of empowerment, but empowerment also acts on the context by creating, for example, a climate that is to a greater or lesser extent conducive to the development of the relationship and the emergence and development of similar relationships between the line manager and other employees. Saunders *et al.* (2019) confirm that case study strategy is used when the boundaries between the phenomenon to be studied and the context are not always clear. This is precisely what distinguishes case study strategy from other research strategies.

Other research strategies are not able to fully account for the interactions between empowerment and environment. In an experimental strategy, context-related variables are highly controlled because they are seen as a potential threat to the validity of the results. In a survey strategy, the context is considered but the ability to understand its impact is limited by the number of variables collected.

The constructivist grounded theory strategy is fully capable of explaining the link between empowerment and environment, but it is still not appropriate for the abductive approach chosen in this dissertation to generate theory (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher involved here worked in an abductive manner, identifying themes and patterns in the information collected and then placing these themes and patterns into a theoretical framework to correct, extend or develop the theory relating to different aspects of empowerment. In the constructivist grounded theory strategy, on the other hand, the theory can only emerge from the collected information. No connection to previous theories is accepted during coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

The narrative inquiry strategy is another interesting example to consider. This strategy can also capture the context successfully but was not adopted because empowerment is not such a clear-cut topic that participants can share a narrative in which all salient aspects are evident. Furthermore, the researcher involved in this dissertation preferred to use a research strategy with which he was more familiar. Finally, the disadvantages of the narrative inquiry strategy must also be considered, including the bias of the narrative or its imperfection due to a blurred distinction between fantasy and reality (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

This case study generated a rich and comprehensive description of the empowerment experiences through in-depth and intensive research that highlighted how and why to ‘do’ empowerment and ‘be’ empowered, the positive and negative effects of empowerment and the implications for the academic community and the business world. The themes addressed and their link with the research questions are reported in Table 2.1 below.

Themes that emerged from the research interviews	Research questions
Company policies as empowerment-supporting mechanisms	How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?
How performance is monitored and managed through empowerment	
Internal communication of company information	
How line managers interpret empowerment	Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees?
Why line managers use empowerment	
How line managers recognise empowerment	
What line managers do when they empower	
What Generation Z employees want from their career	How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment?
How Generation Z employees interpret empowerment	
What Generation Z employees do when they feel empowered	
How Generation Z employees monitor work progress	
How Generation Z employees experience line manager relationships	
How Generation Z employees experience the empowerment climate	

Table 2.1 – Research themes and their link with the research questions

The information gathered in this case study came from a variety of different sources, which allowed the author of this dissertation to understand the dynamics of the case. The primary sources of information are interviews with line managers and their Generation Z employees. Secondary sources are company videos, policies and financial

reports. A reflective diary containing the researcher’s comments on interview content and conducting style, observations on how to improve interaction with participants, notes on non-verbal communication aspects, evaluations of the secondary sources, and considerations on the researcher’s and participants’ values and biases was used as an analysis support tool, since the information collected does not speak for itself but has to be interpreted.

There is a paradox in the use of case studies: although they have been used for years in the business world, they are often contested (Flyvbjerg, 2011). The criticism stems from misunderstandings about their ability to produce reliable, generalisable knowledge that can be used as a theoretical contribution. However, the impact of these criticisms has dwindled over time since qualitative research has been recognised and accepted on a par with quantitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

2.4.2 Unit of analysis

The units of analysis are line managers, their staff members taken individually and teams reporting to the same line manager. This choice enables the comparisons shown below in Table 2.2.

Comparisons
A line manager with other line managers
A team member with members of their own team
A team member with members of other teams
A team with other teams

Table 2.2 – Case study comparisons

Line managers and their teams belong to different business areas. In particular, units of analysis from the design, production, product quality control, research and development, and human resources departments were considered.

2.4.3 Level of analysis

The comparisons shown in Table 2.2 allow for an individual and group level analysis of aspects of structural and psychological empowerment. The individual level includes considerations of behaviours and intentions; knowledge and skills; self-efficacy; beliefs, values and emotions; subjective norms; and perceived risks. The group level includes considerations on relationships with the other team members in terms of

communication, trust, understanding, agreement and power; leadership and peer influence; bounded normative influence; and empowerment climate.

2.4.4 Time horizon

This dissertation is cross-sectional. Although the time available would have allowed for longitudinal research, the interviews were conducted over four months between 2020 and 2021. This limited the possibility of tracking the empowerment relationship's evolution over time but made the amount of material available to the researcher more manageable and thus facilitated the process of coding and analysing the information. Despite this precaution, the amount of text to be analysed was large. However, this research experience enabled its author to develop research skills that will help him conduct further qualitative studies in the future, including longitudinal studies.

2.5 Research ethics

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the École Doctorale 486 Sciences Économiques et de Gestion de l'Université de Lyon in December 2019. Favourable ethical opinion had previously been expressed by the supervisory team supporting the author of this dissertation. The ethical principles under which this dissertation was conducted are set out in the code of ethics of the Magellan Research Centre to which the researcher belongs. Some specific ethical considerations are included in the following subsections.

2.5.1 Obtaining informed consent

Participants were provided with an information sheet, shown in Appendix D, detailing the objectives of the research, outlining the protocol for participation and explaining the processes involved in managing the information. Participants were informed about what participating in the research would entail so they could make an informed decision about their participation. They were provided with this information at three different points in time: when the HR manager invited colleagues to contact the researcher by email to arrange the date and time of the interview if they were interested; when the researcher replied to the emails attaching a participant consent form shown in Appendix E and asking for it to be returned signed; and finally verbally when the researcher offered to clarify any concerns before the interview began. All participants provided written informed consent.

2.5.2 Protecting confidentiality and anonymity

Participants were informed that the information they provided would be treated with confidentiality and privacy, as stated in the participant consent form and repeated verbally before the interview, and they were assured that it would not be shared with third parties unless necessary to protect their lives or those of others.

An HR manager asked the researcher if one of the line managers was better at doing empowerment than the others and suggested the name of the person. The researcher reminded them that he would share a preliminary version of the results with the company in aggregate form at the end of the interviews, as he was bound by the ethical principle of confidentiality and anonymity.

Anonymity was maintained by assigning a code to each line manager and employee to allow only recognition of the relationship between them, as shown in Table 2.3 below: for example, A1 is one of the two employees of line manager A. No information that could make a person or the company in which the participant works identifiable was given in a public document. The researcher deleted his database at the end of the dissertation.

Line manager	Generation Z employee
A	A1-A2
B	B1-B3
C	C1-C4
D	D1-D3
E	E1-E3
F	F1-F5
G	G1-G2
H	H1-H4

Table 2.3 – Participants’ anonymity notation approach

2.5.3 Minimising the risk of harm to participants

Talking about empowerment can involve touching on difficult experiences in participants’ personal and professional lives. It emerged in the literature review that a sense of frustration, helplessness, anger and even distress could be predicted. The information sheet provided the participants with information on what the interview

would involve, and the topics were clearly stated in advance. Before starting the interview, the participants were reminded of the confidentiality protocol and the right to withdraw. It was explained to each participant that if they decided to use their right to withdraw, all information related to their interview would be destroyed and not used in the dissertation. The research objectives were summarised, and the time allocated for the interview was established. The role of the researcher was explained. If participants requested it, guidance on learning and development paths related to employee empowerment was provided.

One of the participants talked about their mental health difficulties. When this happened, the person was offered space to talk, and the topic was explored carefully and respectfully in light of the research questions. The researcher verified that that person was receiving support or knew where to get it if they felt they needed it. The participant confirmed they were receiving support and the researcher had no reason to feel that the information should be shared with others since the impression conveyed was not one of danger to the participant or the people in their life.

Various participants gave positive feedback about the interview, appreciating the opportunity to take part in the dissertation and share their views. One participant followed up with an email to confirm the positive nature of the interview and wished to be updated on the publication of the final results. Other participants described the process as “an opportunity to talk about things we don’t usually talk about”, “useful” and “empowering”.

2.5.4 Maintaining an equal power balance

The researcher was aware of the risk of power imbalance that his role as a researcher and previous experience as a business consultant and university lecturer could generate, but also because of the connotations of the word ‘interview’. To foster a power balance, the researcher set about getting to know the participants before starting the interview and was affable, empathetic and an active listener, speaking in a friendly and calm tone. In addition, the researcher offered to share his analysis of the interviews and the company context in a meeting with all participants and other employees of the organisation interested in reflecting on the findings.

2.5.5 Avoiding conflicts of interest

An ethical dilemma that was considered before conducting the interviews concerned the potential temptation for the researcher to use his relationship with the participants to create new business opportunities for his own benefit, as the researcher had previously worked as an independent business consultant on leadership development and motivational support issues. Some of the participants or other company employees might have expressed a desire to discuss with the researcher projects, problems or issues that might represent interesting business opportunities. Therefore, before any company had been selected, the researcher decided that he would not consider any business proposals from the company under study until six months after the research had been concluded. Moreover, during the interviews, the researcher did his best to ask the participants only questions that fulfilled the purpose of the research. Finally, the researcher regularly took stock of his way of conducting the interviews to ensure that no commercial purpose lay behind it. Participants stated that the purpose of the interviews was clear and unequivocally directed at expanding their experience of empowerment, in line with the research objectives.

2.6 Sampling techniques

The decision to sample the participants for inclusion in this dissertation stems from the impracticality of interviewing all the line managers and their Generation Z staff at the company under study. The impracticality is due to the limited time available and the amount of information the interviews would have generated without any real benefit in terms of increased knowledge produced. It may seem counter-intuitive, but sampling rather than census can increase accuracy (Hancké, 2009) because with fewer participants, particularly when time is limited, greater attention can be paid to designing and piloting information collection tools and verifying the accuracy of the information collected. Moreover, the information collected can be more detailed. On the other hand, it is also true that an adequate number of participants must be chosen to fully answer the research questions: only a few participants is not enough, but too many is just a waste of resources (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

When sampling, Saunders *et al.* (2019) believe that it is important to define the target population clearly to ensure alignment with the research questions. This dissertation considers the target population to be all the line managers and their

Generation Z employees working in the Italian subsidiary of the multinational company indicated in the title. Line managers and their staff are the operational levels of the Italian subsidiary. To understand the structure of the subsidiary it needs to be considered that the line managers report to middle managers, who in turn report to the functional head, and functional heads report to the general manager. The multinational company declares on its website that it values its employees, believes in developing talent and offers people opportunities to develop and take on new responsibilities.

A non-probability sample was used to select research participants, as it was considered useful to choose participants based on a subjective assessment, in line with the exploratory nature of this dissertation. This constraint meant that the results could not be generalised to the population on a statistical basis but did not prevent analytical generalisability (Pretty, 1994). This means that the theory is generalisable, not the individual participants on which it is built.

The people to be interviewed were all those who met the selection criteria and who volunteered. The volunteering constraint was requested by the HR managers in the company under study. The selection criteria for becoming research participants were as follows:

- line managers had to have been in the role for at least two years and could only be included in the dissertation if at least two of their staff were participating; and
- employees had to have been in the role for at least one year and could only be included in the dissertation if they belonged to Generation Z.

The criteria required of managers and their staff regarding their length of service in the role were defined to give them all time to become familiar with the working environment, understand the requirements of their role and develop meaningful relationships with colleagues within their team and with other company colleagues. Making line manager participation dependent on that of at least two of their employees allowed the cross-comparison of the empowerment relationship within the same team, but also the comparison of experiences between employees reporting to the same line manager and between employees reporting to different managers. The purpose of the age criterion for employees was to have a homogeneous sample of employees with regard to the generation to which they belonged.

In qualitative research, sampling is often done to explore differences and heterogeneity (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In this dissertation, participants from different teams and functions were included in the sample so as to develop an understanding of various key aspects related to the empowerment experience.

There are no clear rules for establishing sample size in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The numbers depend on the sample selection technique (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). In this dissertation, employees are homogeneous by generation and fairly heterogeneous by team and function they belong to, while line managers are rather heterogeneous by team and function. Therefore, based on the guidelines provided by Saunders *et al.* (2019), the sample size which consists of eight managers and twenty-six employees is considered suitable. On the other hand, the main criterion for assessing whether the size is sufficient remains the ability to fully and thoroughly answer the research questions. In other words, the sample size used in this dissertation can be considered sufficient when saturation is reached. This implies that a low number of participants does not allow the research questions to be fully and thoroughly answered, even though the results found with the few participants available are still valid. In conclusion, in qualitative research, the understanding of a phenomenon, the in-depth examination of different key aspects and the validity of the results depend more on the ability to collect and analyse information than on sample size (Patton, 2015). This researcher believes that the sample chosen was sufficient to fully and thoroughly understand the empowerment experiences within the company under study, as argued in the section on the quality criteria adopted.

Demographic information about the sampled Generation Z employees is illustrated in Figure 2.1 below. Detailed information on each research participant is provided in Appendix H.

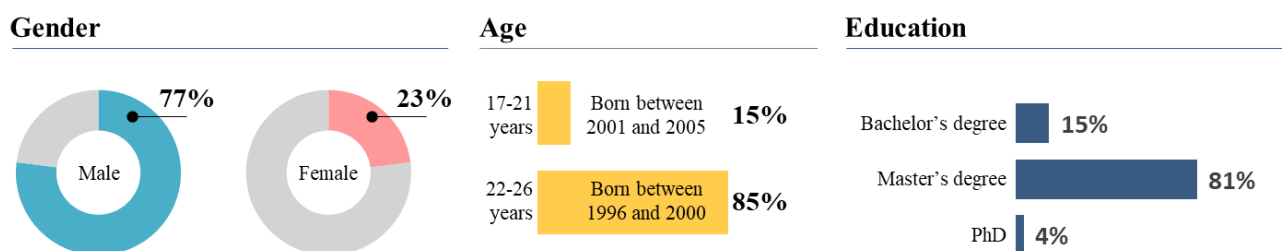


Figure 2.1 – Demographics of the Generation Z research participants

2.7 Collection techniques

This dissertation used interviews as a research tool to collect primary data. A reflective diary allowed the researcher to enrich the information gathered through the interviews with assessments of secondary sources such as company policies, financial reports and institutional videos.

Interviewing was chosen for its ability to explore points of interest and clarify meanings (Myers, 2020). This tool allowed valid, reliable and relevant information to be collected that would answer the research questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). In line with the philosophical stance presented at the beginning of this chapter, the research interview is thought of here as a tool through which the researcher can understand the subjective perspective of the participants regarding their empowerment relationships, the interpretation they give to these relationships, how they interact with others within behavioural and psychological empowerment dynamics and how they are affected by these dynamics. This approach to research interviewing considers the information gathered through the interview as socially constructed by the participant and the researcher. The approach, therefore, recognises the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher in order to assess how valid and reliable the findings can be considered (Myers, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews were used in this dissertation. This means that although the researcher had a plan, he remained ready and willing to diverge from it when changing the direction of the conversation could add useful information in answering the research questions. In addition to the interviews, a guide was prepared with comments for opening and closing the discussion, as well as the themes and questions to be covered.

The initial themes were decided following evaluations carried out during a pre-research period to develop the minimum amount of knowledge required to define the research project under investigation. Ongoing discussions with research participants, the supervisory team and colleagues at the Magellan Research Centre led to the evolution of the initial themes and the emergence of new ones, resulting, over the course of the thirty-four interviews, in the list shown in Table 2.1. The themes initially identified were very different from those developed at the end of the interviews and are shown for completeness in Table 2.4 on the following page.

Themes that emerged from pre-research
Collaboration
Motivation
Leadership style
Performance
Development

Table 2.4 – Research themes that emerged before the interviews (pre-research stage)

The comparison of the themes stated at the beginning and end of the information-gathering process through the interviews shows that this dissertation started inductively based on a thematic analysis guided by information gathered in the field, not in the library. The pre-research represented an exploratory and emergent stage in which unstructured interviews with university students belonging to Generation Z were employed.

In this dissertation, semi-structured interviews were used for three reasons. The main reason is related to the fact that the research themes had already been identified. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are often used when the interviewer does not have a second opportunity to interview someone and therefore it is crucial to establish and develop trusting relationships in a short time (Myers, 2020) while maintaining focus on the research topics. Finally, unstructured interviews would have had to be pre-arranged and therefore they would have lost the freshness and spontaneity typical of informal conversations, exactly what could be useful for the researcher to assess the respondent's preconceptions, beliefs and reflexive engagement most successfully. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were considered the best compromise because of their ability to maintain focus on the research questions, develop a relationship of trust and give as much space as possible to the interviewee.

The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis because it was felt that the empowerment experience relates to incidents that participants are more likely to share with someone who is not a work colleague. This led the researcher to exclude focus groups. However, internet-mediated interviews were inevitable. The interviews took place between 2020 and 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic led many companies to change the rules that regulated access to their premises, and this was also true for the company under study. Unlike face-to-face interviews, video conference interviews do not

allow the participant to be observed in their work context. However, the possibility to build rapport is almost the same (Myers, 2020). Some interviews were even conducted with participants online at home where they felt at ease and willing to converse openly. The use of technology required to conduct a video interview was not a problem for the participants (Tuttas, 2015), as this type of communication is commonplace for them. Each interview was recorded in a video format after obtaining written consent from the participants. This also made it possible to reflect on the non-verbal communication aspects of both the interviewer and the interviewee (Salmons, 2015).

The semi-structured interviews, conducted individually in video conferences, were the result of conscious decisions by the researcher and constraints imposed by the company, although they were not limiting. The information gathered through this method allowed for a full and detailed understanding of the empowerment experience of the participants and, through their own words, the working context in which the different empowerment episodes took place. Direct observation of the participants in their work context would probably not have added much more to the analysis of the interviews, since empowerment is a process that develops slowly over months and, above all, the psychological aspects are not visually evident. For this reason, a more effective tool for gathering information than observation would have been the qualitative research diary. Through this instrument, the researcher could have asked the participants to write diary entries about thoughts, emotions and experiences of empowerment. However, a qualitative research diary is often considered an intrusive or risky tool, which can negatively influence the quality, quantity and relevance of the information collected, due to fatigue, attrition or uncertainty related to the participant's decision of what to include (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

The lack of greater standardisation of semi-structured interviews raises questions about their effectiveness in producing valid and reliable results. Although the details about rigour in this dissertation have been dealt with later in this chapter, it is worth reflecting here on the biases associated with semi-structured interviews. Some biases affect the interviewer, the respondent and those who would like to participate in the research but choose not to because they do not like the instrument the researcher has chosen to collect information. The reflective diary was used to note down anything that could help the researcher recognise and mitigate these biases. For example, during the interviews the researcher paid attention to his own way of communicating, maintaining

an open manner, a friendly tone and a clear communicative register, and tried to mirror the interviewee's language, without losing his professional style, so as to establish trust; in interpreting the respondent's answers, the researcher questioned the extent to which these answers were biased towards the research or the researcher himself, triangulating the participants' answers whenever possible; and regarding those who did not participate in the dissertation because they did not want to be interviewed, the researcher considers this condition to be a methodological limitation. The contribution of those missing participants could be relevant, but this dissertation is unable to take advantage of it. Imagining the reasons for non-participation, the researcher believes that cultural differences may intervene that challenge some taken-for-granted assumptions. People who would like to participate but do not wish to be interviewed may find it unacceptable to discuss empowerment issues with an outsider or even unacceptable to discuss them publicly with anyone, whereas they may find it acceptable to complete an anonymous questionnaire.

The interviews were all conducted in Italian, as this is the first language for both the participants and the researcher. The use of the native language eliminated any language barriers. Furthermore, the researcher shares a professional background as an electrical engineer with many of the participants and this helped to reduce cultural barriers. Critical issues the researcher had to consider in his reflective diary were not primarily related to how to overcome cultural barriers but rather how to defamiliarise himself from the context in order to grasp what he was in danger of taking for granted (Bryman *et al.*, 2021). This awareness and attention to detail was the starting point for the reflections that increased the credibility and repeatability of the findings.

Another key aspect in the use of interviews concerns the balance of power between the parties. In this dissertation, the researcher was inspired by the principle of an open and honest dialogue to share ideas, experiences and emotions and co-construct meanings. To apply this principle, the researcher first sought to understand the interviewee and their world, and only then to be understood (Covey, 1989). During the interviews, the researcher used positive non-verbal language, asked probing questions and summarised key points to show interest and better understand the answers, offered feedback when requested and shared personal experiences to build trust and invite the interviewee to do the same. His behaviour can be defined as curious and analytical without being intrusive; friendly, helpful and empathetic; and professional.

The researcher is familiar with interviews as an information-gathering tool because in the past he worked as a business management consultant and therefore helped managers and executives to define their business problems and develop possible solutions. Although research interviews differ from interviews used in business management consulting because their purpose is different, non-verbal communication, active listening, silence management, involvement and note-taking skills are all elements that contribute to a successful interview regardless of its purpose (Salmons, 2015).

2.7.1 Key operational aspects

Before interviewing the participants, the researcher prepared the research topics, the questions related to each topic and the opening and closing comments; gathered information about the products and the organisation through its website, YouTube channel and financial reports of the last few years; and carefully read the company policies on performance management, the use of social media at work and remote working.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and recalled what was shared on the information sheet and participant consent form. In addition, he emphasised that the task of defining the boundaries, focus and outcomes of the conversation would be a shared process, built around an appreciation of whatever ideas both parties wanted to explore concerning the topics under study. As a way of putting the interviewee at ease, the first question often concerned their role in the company.

Questions relating to the research themes were asked clearly, linking them to the participants' real-life experiences. Sensitive questions were asked towards the end of the interview so that there was time to build trust. Only one interview was difficult to handle due to the shyness of the interviewee who gave very short answers. To prevent the participant from remembering the event negatively in the future, the researcher limited the questions and the length of the interview.

Appendix B shows the step-by-step process that led to the selection of the organisation under review and the participants in the dissertation.

The researcher provided clear indications of what was on the agenda and how to join the virtual room. Meetings were scheduled two weeks in advance and confirmed by

email a couple of days beforehand. Interviews lasted between seventy and ninety minutes to accommodate any unforeseen delays. No participants attended late.

Participants were assured that at the end of the meeting they would receive an email with a summary of the content. This is considered good practice for fostering trust and honesty, thus increasing the credibility of the findings (Tracy, 2020). The decision to send a summary rather than a transcript of the whole contents is justified by the propensity of certain participants to ask for some of their considerations to be omitted or rephrased, reducing the authenticity of the message (Tracy, 2020). Once the interview was completed, communication with the participant took place via their personal email address, rather than their company one, given the personal nature of the topics covered.

The video recordings of the interviews were kept only long enough to complete the transcripts, associate the identification code shown in Table 2.3 and write some essential comments in the reflective diary.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the researcher was able to build a relationship of trust with some research participants even before interviewing them. The researcher saw each opportunity for contact with the company as an occasion to generate trust in order to leave the people contacted with a positive impression that indirectly would spread to other people in the company. Some research participants were only willing to be involved in the dissertation after receiving reassurance from those who had already participated.

2.8 Analysis techniques

The information collected in this dissertation was analysed through thematic analysis. Unlike other analysis strategies such as grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, there is no prescriptive procedure that distinguishes thematic analysis from all other approaches, because searching for themes is a common activity of many analysis techniques (Bryman *et al.*, 2021). This is not to say that the analysis conducted in this dissertation was not rigorous. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to show how the main issues related to the chosen method of analysis were addressed.

There are several reasons for choosing thematic analysis. Firstly, thematic analysis is a flexible technique because it is not bound to a particular philosophical and methodological stance (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). For example, the interpretivist philosophy

behind this qualitative dissertation suggests that the voice of the participants should be included and valued in the analysis, and this is a demand that can be met by thematic analysis because the voice of the participants is present through direct quotations taken from their interviews. On the other hand, the philosophical and methodological stance of this dissertation encourages the researcher to interpret and elaborate on the meanings attached to the information gathered and, again, thematic analysis leaves room for the researcher to reflect on the content proposed. As a way of enhancing understanding of the issues examined, the researcher chose to reflect on previous theoretical studies, not only on the information collected, to see “further [...] by standing on the shoulders of giants”, to quote Newton (1675: 1). This led to the exclusion of completely inductive methods of analysis such as grounded theory.

The analysis method was chosen to identify recommendations related to activities and behaviours that can improve the empowerment experience. Thematic analysis facilitates the identification of these recommendations more effectively than methods focused on the use of language because thematic analysis places the focus on actions and processes, instead of on language, as a reflection of the meaning people give to their social reality (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, thematic analysis succeeds better than other methods of analysis in interpreting the answers the researcher wants to find through the research questions. This led to the exclusion of analysis methods focused on the use of language, such as discourse analysis in all its variants.

Due to the variety, complexity and quantity of information collected, the dissertation required a method of analysis involving data fragmentation, and this constraint again makes thematic analysis one of the possible options. Fragmentation through coding (descriptive codes) and reorganising the information into analytical categories (interpretive codes) are often considered necessary steps in qualitative research when the information collected is abundant and heterogeneous (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). In this dissertation, thirty-four interviews were undertaken, and a reflective diary of hundreds of pages was compiled. Thus, it is the characteristics of the information collected that determine the use of data fragmentation, while in narrative analysis, for example, data integrity is preserved.

Therefore, the decision to resort to thematic analysis is consistent with the philosophical and methodological stance presented in this chapter and with the constraints imposed by the characteristics of the information collected.

Although the method of analysis used in this dissertation is not prescriptively guided by a theoretical framework as in the case of grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, it nevertheless represents a structured, systematic and rigorous approach because it is based on fragmenting information through coding and reorganising it (Bryman *et al.*, 2021). These two steps made it possible to assess whether the analysis conducted explored the information collected using all sources and in particular all interviews or whether some sources and interviews determined most of the results. Therefore, coding helped increase the credibility of the results, decrease the effect of possible bias and encourage repeatability of the analysis by other researchers in collaboration with their participants.

Because thematic analysis is a flexible approach that accommodates different philosophical and methodological stances, there are different interpretations of what should be considered a theme: for some researchers, a theme is nothing more than a fragment of information, while for others, including the researcher involved in this dissertation, a theme is an area of substantial interest on which investigative efforts should be focused because that area has useful implications for answering the research questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This basic distinction is important in understanding the approach used by the researcher in conducting his thematic analysis.

In this dissertation, thematic analysis was used to encompass a large amount of different qualitative information, integrate this information and provide detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the proposed themes, developing and testing explanations and theories based on relationships or patterns within the various themes and identifying themes that could be considered essential for further developments in empowerment research.

2.8.1 Key operational aspects

The thematic analysis did not follow a linear process. The information was analysed as it was collected and recursively, often leading the researcher to modify the analysis carried out so far in the light of new codes and new themes that emerged as a

result of the new information collected. However, the analysis process went through four distinct phases.

Firstly, the researcher became familiar with the information collected by spending time transcribing interviews, watching institutional videos on the company's official YouTube channel and reading financial reports from recent years and policies on performance management, the use of social media at work and remote working. These activities generated comments in the reflective diary that took the analysis a step further.

Subsequently, the researcher coded the collected information so that similar meanings were coded in the same way and new meanings generated new codes. The codes created by the researcher were derived from the information collected in the field, not in the library. Empowerment literature did not contribute to the creation of the codes and to ensure this the researcher used the software package NVivo at this stage to classify and sort the codes. Following the guidance of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), codes of the same level were created so as to be suitable for answering the research questions, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, identified by a self-explanatory label and consistent with each other in terms of degree of abstraction.

At a further stage, the researcher linked the codes together in a hierarchy to recognise themes, patterns and relationships. As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), themes were identified by looking for topics that were repeated several times, linguistic expressions that indicated corporate culture, metaphors and analogies, the logical thread in the topics presented by participants in their interviews, similarities and differences when participants dealt with the same topic, any information that participants omitted in their answers and theoretical elements.

Finally, the researcher refined the themes and tested his propositions. As can be seen from Table 2.1, the themes identified are part of a coherent whole and provide a structured framework for developing the analysis and answering the research questions. The process that led to their determination required a constant reorganisation of codes within the different thematic areas as themes emerged and were consolidated. The propositions that emerged inductively from the interviews were tested by looking for negative cases that would push the researcher towards alternative explanations to those provided. The process was repeated until validation was achieved (Tracy, 2020).

As emerged from this brief description, the thematic analysis was conducted in a structured and systematic way since the researcher used an orderly and logical approach to analyse the information collected. However, it is undeniable that the analysis process saw the researcher going back and forth between information from the interviews and theoretical concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, and between descriptions and interpretations. Because of this, and because the researcher had to develop the necessary skills to make sense of all the information, the analysis took months to complete.

Yin (2018) suggests four strategies to make the analysis process effective. The first strategy is to start from the theoretical proposition that led to the identification of the case study. This means starting from the idea that the empowerment relationship can be a positive experience for the parties involved and therefore implies looking for examples where it is possible to identify behaviours and activities, but also comments and reflections, that confirm or deny this proposition. The second strategy consists of doing the opposite and therefore starting from what the interview participants say, coding every fragment of information because it could be a concept of potential interest, even when not strictly connected to the empowerment relationship. This strategy was considered risky because it could lead to a high level of detail on topics that are not relevant to the research questions. Therefore, the researcher decided to apply this second strategy with caution. The third strategy is to organise the case study as a descriptive framework. In this dissertation, only the first-level codes (descriptive codes) were identified using this third approach. Finally, the fourth strategy is to look for alternative explanations. As already noted, this was done to validate the propositions that emerged inductively from the interviews. Alternative explanations that can interpret an empowerment experience are not only related to possible alternative theories but also include possible researcher or participant bias as well as chance and implementation aspects that may have been overlooked.

Now that the process and analysis strategies have been explained, the analysis technique needs to be clarified. In this dissertation, pattern matching was used to increase credibility and generalisability. This technique consists of comparing a predicted theoretical pattern and an empirical pattern found by the researcher in the interviews. Pattern matching assumes that it is possible to interpret external reality through internal mental models (Yin, 2018). Theoretical patterns were formulated before starting to

collect information through interviews, based on both literature and the researcher's experience. Empirical patterns were identified in the behaviour and thoughts of line managers and their Generation Z employees, but also in the relational dynamics of a team with respect to others.

Pattern matching is an analysis technique consistent with the philosophical and methodological stance of this dissertation and is aligned with the abductive approach in theory development (Yin, 2018). Compared to grounded theory analysis, which cannot be employed for the use of theoretical propositions in analysis, pattern matching allows other researchers to understand the details of the analysis process conducted in this dissertation and therefore offers greater assurance of rigour (Yazan, 2015). The researcher celebrated the matching of theoretical and empirical patterns as a positive outcome, while he was prompted by the mismatching to identify alternative explanations which were then considered and discussed in the light of the research questions.

The quality of the analysis was ensured by using all the information collected, by considering the most plausible alternative explanations in the case of mismatch between theoretical and empirical propositions, by focusing on the key aspects of the case study according to the themes proposed in Table 2.1 and by the researcher's familiarity with the topic of empowerment as seen in the literature and in the course of his professional experience.

Without neglecting the multidimensional characteristics of coding (Ayache and Dumez, 2011), which means that different codes and different themes can be attributed to the same text, Appendix G presents the coding scheme.

2.9 Quality criteria

The features that represent the strength of this dissertation, such as the comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the empowerment relationship due to the proximity of the researcher to the participants, may also appear as a weakness due to alleged subjectivity and lack of rigour (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017; Morse *et al.*, 2002; Van Maanen, 1995). Therefore, the purpose of this section is to show what was undertaken in this dissertation to ensure high levels of rigour.

The criteria based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) are widely used in qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness (Sale and Brazil, 2004). Their widespread

use justifies their adoption in this dissertation as well. In Table 2.5 on the following page, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria are matched with the respective criteria used in quantitative research to fully appreciate their significance.

As suggested by Lincoln (1990), a fifth criterion was taken into account in this dissertation to highlight more clearly the distance with the positivistic principles reported in Table 2.5, the criterion of authenticity, for which there is no correspondence in quantitative research.

The principles of Lincoln and Guba (1985) shown in Table 2.5 and the principle of authenticity were applied in this dissertation not only because of their wide use in qualitative research but also because of their alignment with the epistemological underpinnings of this dissertation and the conceptual and analytical clarity they offer. The next subsections discuss how these five principles of quality were put into practice in this dissertation.

Quality criteria in qualitative research	Questions that underpin the principles of qualitative research	Quality criteria in quantitative research
Credibility (the authentic representation of experience)	Do participants feel that the findings represent their experience?	Internal validity
Confirmability (true findings free of biases)	Are the findings a product of participants’ responses and not the researcher’s biases, motivations, interests or perspectives?	Objectivity
Dependability (repeatability)	Would similar findings be produced if someone else undertook the research?	Reliability
Transferability (applicability or analytical generalisability)	Are the findings applicable in other contexts?	External validity (statistical generalisability)

Table 2.5 – Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) principles for evaluating trustworthiness

Even if the subjectivism typical of qualitative research becomes an element of discussion when quality criteria are made explicit (Sale and Brazil, 2004), it is still worth remembering that quality in qualitative research cannot be reduced to the simple application of methodological procedures, because qualitative research is flexible and creative and contemplates so many different possible situations that it is problematic to reduce quality to a box-ticking exercise (Morse *et al.*, 2002; Barbour, 2001).

In this dissertation, the application of quality criteria was subject to the researcher adhering to high ethical and moral standards in his relationship with research participants, other company stakeholders and the academic community represented by the supervisory team and the Magellan Research Centre. The strategies and actions that can be taken to increase the rigour of this dissertation have been the subject of ongoing reflection: not only what to do but how much to do. The researcher believes that trade-offs of time and resources are inevitable and that there is no easy solution. The unhelpful answer to the question of how much one should do is as much as possible. The reader should therefore consider that research integrity is an essential value for the researcher involved in this dissertation, although there is always room for improvement.

2.9.1 Credibility

Credibility is the degree of confidence in the research results. A high level of credibility means that the information collected has been correctly interpreted (Krefting, 1991).

In this dissertation, the research participants were carefully selected based on their heterogeneity to include possible variations in empowerment experiences, behaviours and practices and based on their homogeneity to ensure that the findings are plausible. The line managers and their employees who participated in the research come from different areas of the business. However, all participants belong to the same subsidiary and the employees all belong to Generation Z. A sampling of all possible participants appropriate for the research was considered, but not all these people decided to participate. The main reasons why some candidates asked not to be involved in this dissertation were fear that the information collected could be used against them, poor time management or lack of interest in the research project. To reduce such risks, the researcher provided all the information requested and showed flexibility in conducting the interviews according to the time available to the people he wished to include in the dissertation.

The reflective diary proved to be an essential tool for ensuring credibility. This tool helped the researcher to be honest and ethically mature because throughout the development of the dissertation it prompted reflection on research methods, philosophical and methodological stance, and limitations and biases. By the end, this document of hundreds of pages contained the researcher's comments on interview

content and conducting style, observations aimed at improving interaction with participants, notes on aspects of non-verbal communication, evaluations of secondary sources such as financial reports, company policies and institutional videos, and reflections on researcher and participant values and biases.

The willingness of both researcher and participants to engage in dialogue helped the researcher reflect on the information gathered and the interpretations offered. This prevented the researcher from confusing his own view of events with that of the research participants, showing how subjectivity can be disciplined. For example, participants were given the opportunity to recognise their own experiences in the researcher's analysis in a summary of their interview. They also had the chance to reflect with the researcher on how the interview was handled and thus recognise whether more weight was given to certain interpretations than to others.

The researcher developed a good relationship with the research participants and other company stakeholders by staying in touch with them through LinkedIn because the information gathered can be better understood if the participants' involvement is prolonged over time. However, to avoid the risk of going native (Baxter and Eyles, 1997) or suffering from friendship biases towards the organisation (White and Phillips, 2012) the researcher always liaised with other researchers on information sources, themes developed during the analysis, theories and research methods used in his dissertation. This approach helped the researcher to avoid jeopardising objectivity and analytical perspective.

Triangulation of sources, themes, theories and methods was helpful in cross-validating the analysis and results, increasing their plausibility. Negative experiences of empowerment were recounted to increase the sense of completeness of the analysis provided. Themes and patterns developed during the dissertation were compared with information gathered in the pre-research phase to ensure referential adequacy.

In this dissertation, the researcher used the participants' own words to triangulate sources. Participants' quotations were not specifically selected to show the researcher's message but instead were discussed with the participants and other researchers, contributing to the structural coherence of the analysis and the interpretation of the information gathered.

Table 2.6 below shows all the strategies and actions used in this dissertation to ensure a high level of credibility according to the stage of the case study.

Credibility		
Execution phase	Strategies to achieve the principle	Action undertaken
Design	Non-probabilistic sampling, heterogeneous by team and function and homogeneous by generation in the case of employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involved as many units of analysis as possible until validation was reached Included negative empowerment experiences
Data collection	Reflexivity (reflective diary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed the influence of the researcher's own background, perceptions and interests on the research process
	Disciplined subjectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitored the researcher's own influence on developing themes by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ keeping a reflective diary ✓ recording reflective notes during data collection and analysis (memoing) ✓ talking to another colleague doing a similar analysis and discussing emerging codes
	Prolonged engagement in the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified reappearing themes and patterns Built rapport and trust with the research participants and the other company stakeholders
Data analysis	Peer debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussed information and interpretations with colleagues at the Magellan Research Centre
	Triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-checked information and interpretations
	Negative experience review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised the researcher's assumption of employee empowerment as a positive experience until all the interviews collected could be explained
	Referential adequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verified themes and patterns through interpretation of information gathered in the pre-research phase
Writing up	Structural coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensured coherent structure of

		the storyline and no unexplained inconsistencies between the information and its interpretations
	Member checking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checked the information, analysis and interpretation with the research participants and other stakeholders
	Using participant quotations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checked the interpretations against verbatim accounts

Table 2.6 – Credibility of this dissertation

2.9.2 Confirmability

Confirmability is a measure of the extent to which the results of the dissertation can be confirmed by other researchers. A high level of confirmability means that the interpretations of the collected information are not a figment of the researcher's imagination but are neutral and free of personal bias (Baxter and Eyles, 1997).

The audit trail was used to increase the confirmability of this dissertation. The researcher produced documentation regarding the description, explanation and justification of the actions taken to select the organisation and participants. The researcher also provided documentation regarding any information related to the interviews and how the information given during the interviews was interpreted. The reflective diary was used as an orderly way of recording all relevant information for the audit trail. The decision to use a reflective diary as the sole supporting tool was based on the notion that audit trail material is intended to capture the thoughts, feelings, ideas and assumptions of the researcher to help understand the decisions made and the research process as a whole. The test for the researcher was to keep the collection of all supporting materials in an orderly manner to avoid confusion and time-wasting.

Documenting, recording and reporting how decisions were made is the first step in ensuring high levels of confirmability. However, the researcher believes that the most significant contribution to confirmability is always the monitoring of one's own ethics. Both credibility and confirmability require the researcher to act ethically, and this concerns not only aspects such as respect for confidentiality of information and informed consent but also respect for the participants' points of view.

Fragmenting information through coding, reorganisation and note sharing, working hypotheses, summaries, themes, patterns and interpretations is another strategy that contributes to increasing confirmability. The material produced demonstrated how codes, categories and themes emerged and how the information was consequently reduced to arrive at the main findings. The test for the researcher was to preserve the confidentiality of the participants' information during the discussion with other researchers.

Table 2.7 below shows all the strategies and actions used in this dissertation to ensure a high level of confirmability according to the stage of the case study.

Confirmability		
Execution phase	Strategies to achieve the principle	Action undertaken
Data collection	Audit trail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recorded the sequence of activities that influenced decisions about the choice of organisation and participants and decisions about interpretations of information gathered during the interviews
	Field notes, reports, journal, and notebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kept track of events and information related to the interviews Reflected on the researcher's thoughts, feelings and assumptions
Data analysis	Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applied ethics in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ interpreting information honestly ✓ applying respectful attitudes to research participants ✓ being reflexive of own personal biases
	Systematic coding and data reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showed how information was interpreted, reduced and how the main themes and patterns emerged as a result

Table 2.7 – Confirmability of this dissertation

2.9.3 Dependability

Dependability is a measure of how well the results of the dissertation can be repeated if the inquiry is replicated with similar participants in a similar context

(Sandelowski,1986; Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). A high level of dependability means that the inquiry processes have been scrupulously designed and implemented.

This dissertation documented the methods of collection and analysis, the information collected and the decisions made during the different stages of execution. The consistency that the researcher showed throughout the research process is what determines the dependability of this dissertation. The level of detail in the documentation provided allows other researchers to perform an audit check and, more importantly, to conduct a similar study.

Interview recordings and researcher notes, which include reflections on behaviours, activities and events, are examples of low-inference descriptors used in this dissertation to ensure dependability. These strategies, as well as triangulation of sources and methods, or comparison with other researchers, were useful in demonstrating agreement between information and its interpretation, as well as the plausibility of accounts and methods.

The involvement of other researchers helped the author of this dissertation to ensure greater objectivity and plausibility of the results, bringing clarity to the inquiry process and providing a good dependability check. Specifically, the peer review focused on how decisions were made about sampling, information collection and analysis methods. This strategy was supported by the coding and data reduction materials discussed concerning confirmability, which show how the codes were related to each other through a clear conceptual and structural order.

Table 2.8 below shows all the strategies and actions used in this dissertation to ensure a high level of dependability according to the stage of the case study.

Dependability		
Execution phase	Strategies to achieve the principle	Action undertaken
Data collection	Low-inference descriptors, recorded video interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checked the level of ‘agreement’ between the information and its interpretation through checking the participant quotations and the researcher’s notes
	Audit check	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Documented the methods of data gathering, analysis and interpretation to make them

		repeatable and auditable for another researcher to understand the decision trail, the process and the findings
	Triangulation and inquiry audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double-checked with other researchers the research process in terms of relevant decision-making along the way • Introduced alternative perspectives in data analysis before finalising the set of theoretical constructs
	Detailed description of methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated meticulous descriptions of methods including their purposes and limitations, matching them with the research questions.
Data analysis	A code-recode procedure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coded a few fragments of information and checked their coding a week later
Writing up	Peer examination with multiple researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double-checked with colleagues the research plan and its implementation

Table 2.8 – Dependability of this dissertation

2.9.4 Transferability

Transferability is a measure of the extent to which the results of the dissertation can be transferred to other contexts and participants but is not achieved through statistical reasoning (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). A high level of transferability is achieved when the descriptions and results of the research are sufficient to establish similarities with another context.

This dissertation provided detailed descriptions of the organisational context and interpretations that emerged from the interviews with participants. Care was taken to carry out a sampling that included different experiences of empowerment and at the same time could generate credible results. All the employees belonged to Generation Z and as such had shared demographics, as this is also considered a strategy that contributes to increasing transferability. It should be emphasised that the researcher exercised ethical responsibility in describing the results, leaving it to the readers to decide whether those results can be transferred to their context.

Table 2.9 below shows all the strategies and actions used in this dissertation to ensure a high level of transferability according to the stage of the case study.

Transferability		
Execution phase	Strategies to achieve the principle	Action undertaken
Design	Non-probabilistic sampling, heterogeneous by team and function and homogeneous by generation in the case of employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searched for as many different empowerment experiences as possible until new themes stopped emerging
Writing up	Detailed description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided detailed information about the research participants and contexts
	Comparison of sample to demographic information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compared the characteristics of the research participants against the demographic information available on Generation Z employees

Table 2.9 – Transferability of this dissertation

2.9.5 Authenticity

Authenticity is a measure of how much participants recognise that the research process can change as a result of their contribution and that they themselves can change as a result of the research process in which they have participated (Lincoln, 1990). A high level of authenticity is achieved when research participants and researcher learn to see problems from different perspectives and consequently negotiate the construction of truth.

In this dissertation, the whole investigation and understanding of the interpretations of the different experiences of empowerment was a process of learning, change and negotiation between the participants and the researcher and also a call to action. The researcher considered the participants' questions about how the interpretations would be formulated and responded not only through summaries of the interviews but also by explaining the preliminary findings and the method by which they were developed.

The principle of authenticity conforms to the researcher's philosophical stance and the idea of co-construction of meanings that underpin all qualitative research, but its

application in this dissertation brought out some critical issues that are worth highlighting.

Firstly, the learning process the dissertation triggered was more about the researcher than the research participants. Interviews with participants prompted the researcher to generate new ideas, engage with the supervisory team and other researchers at the Magellan Research Centre, disseminate preliminary findings and share the research project in its various stages with the academic community and the corporate world. For the research participants, however, the interview and the relationship with the researcher did not generate such a strong impact. Instead, it is the researcher who has experienced the greatest change.

Furthermore, the principle of authenticity promotes recognition of the diversity of values and meaning constructions but does not clarify how the researcher and participants can reach consensus or how disagreements should be addressed (Johnson and Rasulova, 2016). A participant's power relations with the researcher or other participants can be managed with different negotiation styles and it was not always easy for the researcher to identify win-win solutions, especially as time and resource constraints in completing the dissertation pressured the researcher into quicker, less collaborative solutions.

The researcher endeavoured to create an open learning space for all those involved in the research process as he returned a summary of their interviews to the individual participants, sharing comments on the highlights of the meeting and laying the foundations for a long-term relationship via LinkedIn, and organised an event during which the first results of the dissertation would be returned collectively. This meeting was also a useful opportunity to collect additional evaluations from the company's stakeholders. These additional moments of interaction were opportunities for learning and negotiating meanings, which allowed the research participants to reflect and question not only how impartially the different points of view were represented, but also how much better each interviewee could understand their own situation and the situation of their colleagues after participating in the research. After the preliminary results had been returned, the researcher provided the company with useful information, advice and recommendations for a better understanding of the actions needed to change the situation for the participants and the other employees in general. By doing so, the researcher

sought to make his knowledge and skills available to the company to support the empowerment process by taking an active role in the change.

The researcher took numerous steps to ensure authenticity. In order to reach all possible candidates, he asked the HR managers of the company under study to share with their colleagues and possible research participants information available online about his professional role and the purpose of this empowerment study. A wide variety of experiences on empowerment was collected. Interviewees' ideas about how to organise the coding of information were taken into account. The researcher complied with all company policies regarding access to and use of the information that came into his possession, demonstrating a willingness to embrace the company's values. The researcher sought the cooperation of the participants to understand the best way to present the different aspects of empowerment and when making recommendations he ensured that they represented the range of opinions and values shared. A few months after the interviews he consulted with the participants to see how the recommendations had been used and what had changed in the company.

Table 2.10 below shows all the strategies and actions used in this dissertation to ensure a high level of authenticity according to the stage of the case study.

Authenticity		
Execution phase	Strategies to achieve the principle	Action undertaken
Design	Non-probabilistic sampling, heterogeneous by team and function and homogeneous by generation in the case of employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewed a wide representation of people who have relevant empowerment experiences at work
	Enabling space for voice and negotiation of potential directions of the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included the views of the research participants on the research design • Identified hard-to-access respondents • Responded to the mechanisms of consensus building and negotiation by abiding by the company policies and regulations
Data collection and analysis	Making space for a wide group of research participants to participate in data collection and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drew out diverse views and empowerment experiences among the research participants • Negotiated the articulation of

		findings with the research participants
Dissemination and follow-up	Offering means through which research participants can be involved in making recommendations and taking follow-up actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensured that the research participants were engaged in recommending any changes to the way they were empowered • Ensured that any recommendations were responsive to the diversity of values and opinions of the research participants
Review	Revisiting research participants and other company stakeholders to assess what has changed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established how the evaluation was used • Examined what changes in understanding and action were achieved by the line managers and their Generation Z employees

Table 2.10 – Authenticity of this dissertation

2.9.6 Researcher’s skills and values

The quality of a case study is closely linked to the experience, training and skills of the researcher carrying out the different stages of the work. The interaction between the information collected and the possible research questions answered by that information generates a complexity that requires the researcher to use uncommon skills and values. The researcher is asked to make decisions involving both technical aspects and possible ethical dilemmas, such as managing confidentiality or unforeseen conflicts of interest. Moreover, only a good researcher can find unexpected opportunities where others see dead ends. The problem, however, as Yin (2018: 82) points out, is that “there are no tests for distinguishing those persons likely to become good case study researchers from those who are not” and thus many may consider trying their hand at this type of research without adequate preparation. On the other hand, even in the absence of tests, Yin (2018) points out that there are desirable attributes, such as the ability to listen, to ask effective questions and to adapt to different situations, as well as knowledge of the field of study, even when the research is exploratory, and a willingness to be guided by ethical principles in conducting one’s research.

The attributes outlined by Yin (2018) are in line with the professional experience as a business management consultant and university lecturer that the researcher involved

in this dissertation gained before starting his doctoral studies. On the other hand, the doctoral programme has helped the researcher refine specific aspects related to research, both in terms of content and methods. This programme has also helped the researcher to develop skills and values that have allowed him to complete the research project when initially this seemed very hard to achieve. The critical thinking skills and adaptability assimilated will accompany the researcher for the rest of his life.

Listening skills are based on empathy and acceptance and the researcher practised these regularly when listening to corporate clients and university students. In this dissertation, the researcher listened to the respondent to understand the words and emotions they conveyed, refraining from making unsolicited judgements and showing genuine interest. To help the participant not to lose the thread in their answers, the researcher retraced what they had discussed as the interview developed, summarising in his own words the key ideas shared by the participant, asking for confirmation so as not to misrepresent their meaning and asking for clarification when necessary. The researcher used silence to create space to accommodate the respondent's thoughts and offer the respondent an opportunity for reflection. Furthermore, the researcher recounted episodes of successful and failed empowerment by referring to his own professional experience to show openness to discussion but refrained from doing so repeatedly, letting the participant do most of the talking. The feedback from participants on the way the interview was conducted was positive. Some stressed that they felt welcomed, not judged, free to express their ideas, happy to talk about topics that are not often considered in the company, and empowered.

The ability to ask effective questions is linked to aspects of coaching that the researcher practised with clients and students when called upon to support their reasoning to develop in them personal awareness and self-accountability. Although the purposes of the questions used in coaching are different from those used in research, the common element is sensitivity in asking the questions. In this dissertation, the researcher asked questions to which the answers provided opened up new perspectives for further questions. The process of gathering information allowed for a thorough and original investigation. The questions proved interesting for the participants because they caught their attention and stimulated their desire to open up. Rather than looking for the right answer, the researcher focused on the right question, the one that awakened the respondent's curiosity. There was no anxiety or hurry on the part of the researcher when

trying to understand the answer as it was being expressed. In general, the questions asked had the merit of stimulating a meaningful conversation, making the respondent think and arousing their curiosity. Open-ended questions were preferred, aimed at investigating episodes of the respondent's professional life through the hows and whys. In addition, the scope of the question was chosen in order to broaden reflection and research, for example by asking for details on relations within one's own team and then moving on to consider relations with colleagues in one's own department and finally with all other company colleagues. Finally, questions were asked to challenge assumptions that managers and employees often take for granted, such as the urgency to get ahead or the belief that they are not free at work.

The ability to stay adaptive is a skill learned over the years as a result of the study and work experiences the researcher has had while dividing his time between Italy, England and France. In this dissertation, the researcher adapted the content of the research to the material the participants provided and the methods of collecting and analysing information to the constraints imposed by the company. The shift from the original idea based on a comparison of empowerment practices in two different companies required the researcher to maintain an unbiased perspective and ensure that the new study was coherently presented and documented. The challenge for the researcher was to combine adaptability and rigour since it is hard to plan and implement quality improvement strategies and actions well in advance when major changes are imposed on a research project. However, keeping an adaptive attitude led the researcher to complete this case study which has the merit of having explored the empowerment relationship of Generation Z employees and their line managers as never before.

The researcher's knowledge of empowerment issues was fleshed out during his doctoral studies, although his interest in this topic was sparked while reading the book *The Future of Management* by Hamel and Breen in 2007. While reading the book, the researcher reflected on his own working conditions as an employee of an Italian multinational company, starting to understand the potential of empowerment as a managerial practice able to offer the very thing that many employees do not always find in their work even today, and that is a reflection of themselves. However, besides personal curiosity, it is the research questions and key issues concerning empowerment that have helped the researcher to develop a solid understanding of the issues being researched and thus to consider the most crucial clues. This prior knowledge of the key

aspects of empowerment, such as implementation difficulties, is what enabled the researcher to grasp when a deviation in interviews was desirable, acceptable or a waste of time. Furthermore, this knowledge helped the researcher evaluate possible contradictions in the information collected and thus in decisions to investigate certain topics further.

A constant challenge for any researcher is to act ethically. It is not ethical behaviour, for example, to use a case study to prove a pre-established position, looking for evidence to support one's thesis and moving away from contrary evidence. This behaviour can sometimes be done unconsciously because while prior knowledge of the topic of study often helps to make a more effective analysis of the available information, it can also encourage confirmation bias. In this respect, the researcher found support, advice, food for thought and good examples to follow in his supervisory team and colleagues at the Magellan Research Centre. However, it is not always easy to pinpoint ethical behaviour. For example, obtaining relevant information to understand the empowerment experience by probing for unforeseen aspects is a goal that the researcher balanced against the need to manage the interviews without generating trauma for the interviewee and without controversial or conflicting viewpoints igniting potentially compromising discussions for subsequent interviews and continued collaboration with the company. In this dissertation, the researcher considered the extent to which he had to sacrifice the truth in order to leave the interviewees with a good impression and to be able to complete all the interviews. In general, acting ethically involves many other aspects, including avoiding plagiarism and falsification of information, being honest in sharing all aspects of one's work and producing the most accurate results possible. The ethical principles that inspired the researcher have been discussed more specifically in the section on research ethics.

These skills and value considerations have been provided to show the intellectual, personal, emotional and ethical qualities required of a researcher to best fulfil their role. They have also been provided to indicate to the reader the extent to which the author of this dissertation can be considered prepared and qualified to conduct this research study.

2.10 Findings from the research interview pilots

The piloting of the interview questions and information material developed to explain this dissertation involved both line managers and their Generation Z employees.

This activity provided ideas for improving the research process and initial insights into the issue of empowerment.

2.10.1 Learning about the research process

The questions used during the pilot interviews were too broad and this made it difficult to compare the details provided by different participants on the same topic. This consideration prompted the collection of information using the five categories that emerged from the pre-research and are shown in Table 2.4. In this way, the researcher ensured that collaboration, motivation, leadership style, performance and development were given due attention during the interview. The sharing of these thematic areas helped the researcher and the interviewees to maintain a logical thread in the questions and answers, managing the time available in the best way. While conducting the interviews, the researcher also made sure to remain open to new and unexpected information, leaving room for digression.

Before introducing the necessary adjustments to the interview structure, the researcher felt that even the first questions of the interview could help the participant open their mind to new ideas. However, from the piloting, the researcher found that these questions were too broad and did not provide much useful information for the dissertation because, asked at the beginning of the interview, they made the interviewee feel uncomfortable and potentially intimidated. The opening questions included the following examples:

- How do you manage your work relationships?
- How do you manage your job performance?

The answers were rather general, and they did not serve to create a relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, the researcher decided to switch to a different approach, feeling that it was not advisable to jump straight into the discussion with challenging questions. Instead, it was preferable to spend the initial minutes of each interview going over the aspects of the research process indicated in the preliminary information already in the interviewee's possession. It was also considered good practice to answer any further questions and queries, giving the participant time to focus on the interview and decide how and how much to contribute.

After the presentation of the research process and the explanation of how the interview would take place, the following questions were used to start the conversation:

- What is your role in this organisation? (for both line managers and employees)
- How would you define your leadership style? (for line managers)
- Do you know what is expected of you at work? (for employees)

These questions were more effective than the previous ones because they enabled the participant to reflect on their role without receiving the implicit and misleading message that the behaviours and thoughts shared with the interviewer would be used to the detriment of the interviewee. Allowing participants time to calmly process their answers to the initial questions proved useful in encouraging openness and trust, as well as being a rich source of information about the work context.

To support the interviews, an interview guide was prepared containing comments to open and close the discussion, topics to be covered and questions to be used to explore the most salient aspects. Participants in the piloting phase stimulated questions to be added to the interview guide concerning trust in the relationship with their supervisor or employee, the time the line manager devotes to the employee and the success criteria for empowerment.

The line managers were advised that ninety minutes was the ideal length of time for their interview. Any longer would probably have caused loss of concentration, distraction due to work commitments or fatigue. Ninety minutes was also the length of time chosen for the interview with their employees. Although the questions prepared for the employees were more numerous than those for the line managers, the answers were on average shorter. Therefore, the researcher decided to inform all participants that the interview would last ninety minutes.

The transcription of each interview took longer than expected. On average, every ten minutes of interview took one hour of work to transcribe. Although the transcription was initially carried out with voice recognition software tools, the researcher decided to listen to all interviews again to manually correct errors, add comments on content and context and become familiar with the material collected.

In order to improve transitions from one topic to another or to explore some salient aspects of a topic, it was useful to refer to the interview guide, especially during the first interviews. In the interview guide, the questions to be asked were organised by subject area. After completing the literature review and the pilot interviews, the questions suggested in the interview guide became very numerous. Therefore, the researcher decided case by case to use the questions that were most closely related to the interviewee's topics. This list includes the following questions:

- How do you know that an employee is doing a good job? (for line managers)
- How often do you ask your staff to report back to you on their progress towards their objectives? (for line managers)
- Do you trust your staff? How much? Why? (for line managers)
- What is the best way to balance encouragement and error correction? (for line managers)
- Tell me about the performance management system in use. How do you use it? Does it help you to work better? How would you improve it? (for line managers)
- How do you know if your team's goals are challenging but achievable? (for line managers)
- How do you know if those same objectives are important for your team? (for line managers)
- What are your goals at work? How do you plan to achieve them? (for employees)
- How do you know you are doing a good job? (for employees)
- At work, do you feel that your opinions count? (for employees)
- How do you control your work performance? (for employees)
- How would you rate your performance since your last meeting with your line manager? (for employees)
- Do you trust your line manager? How much? Why? (for employees)

- Name three things you have done well in the last three months. Why do you think they were successful? (for employees)

The piloting improved all stages of the information-gathering process. The communication material sent by email to the four pilot participants, two line managers and two employees, was fine-tuned to provide more detail on the research process. The interview schedule was revised in light of the time required to carry out the analysis of each transcript. Interviews were restructured for more effective management of subject areas and time. Handing back the interview summary was included as a further moment of interaction with the participant. Essentially, every possible interaction with the participant was conceived and sought as an opportunity to build a relationship of trust.

2.10.2 Learning about the empowerment experience

The pilot interviews revealed that contrary to what line managers believed, employees did not find much benefit in the use of performance appraisal. This outcome offered the researcher the opportunity to explore the organisational mechanisms and processes that support the empowerment experience. More specifically, the researcher decided to collect more information about participants' opinions, emotions and experiences associated with the performance management system and the performance appraisal step. Through specific questions on these aspects, the researcher discovered a clear distinction between line managers and employees. Line managers believed that the performance management approach offered employees clarity on performance expectations, regular updates on what they had done well and not so well, and a forum to talk individually about everything. However, employees reported a different experience in that the formal goal-setting process and monthly performance conversations did not adequately assist them in understanding what performance had been or was to be achieved. This was mainly due to changes in target priorities caused by external factors, such as constraints imposed by other departments or the client. However, other reasons are also related to the difficulty of employees to see alignment between individual and organisational objectives. This would seem to confirm the work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) who showed how organisational processes can actually leave employees powerless and unable to realise their potential. Consequently, the researcher decided that the organisational mechanisms and processes that support the empowerment experience needed to be explored, because they are aspects of structural empowerment

that can strengthen or weaken trust between line manager and employee, limiting the potential of employees when misinterpreted.

The employees involved in the piloting highlighted their line managers' abilities to listen, to give effective feedback and to ask questions that develop personal awareness and self-accountability. Faced with these initial encouraging findings, the researcher sensed that the two interviewees were referring to manager coaches capable of supporting empowerment by valuing their employees as "whole, thinking human beings" (Ripley and Ripley, 1992: 20). Based on these findings, therefore, the researcher decided to begin his exploration by considering the aspects of empowerment related to how a Generation Z employee experiences their line manager's leadership style and considering the aspects of how a line manager demonstrates active listening, giving effective feedback and asking the right questions.

The pilot interviews showed that the empowerment climate is a key factor (Seibert *et al.*, 2004) in supporting psychological empowerment because the two managers attributed high ratings to their work-unit performance and recognised that various employees are psychologically empowered within their work unit, and according to Seibert *et al.* (2004) high manager ratings are positively correlated with high levels of empowerment climate. Therefore, the researcher decided to examine with line managers and employees how the empowerment climate manifests itself, what advantages or disadvantages it generates and to what extent organisational mechanisms and processes support the empowerment climate.

The first employee talked about their own internal motivation, claiming that their line manager does not have a major impact in terms of motivation, thereby providing interesting indications to enrich the interpretation of Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model on this aspect. Consequently, the researcher added additional interview questions to ask the employees about what motivates them, how their line manager influences their motivation and how they evaluate their own performance against the level of motivation they attribute to themselves.

The second employee reported that they felt appreciated by their line manager, that they could influence their work by making changes to certain processes if necessary, and that they knew and shared the organisational goals. The information gathered during this pilot interview was linked to the work of Spreitzer (1996) regarding role ambiguity,

span of control, sociopolitical support and access to information, as these are aspects mentioned by the interviewee. Consequently, the researcher added further interview questions to be addressed to the line managers on the aforementioned managerial dimensions of empowerment.

From the pilot interviews, the researcher discovered the potential of semi-structured interviews to add richness to the empowerment experience. Although interviewing line managers and their Generation Z employees is the only tool used in this dissertation to gather information from primary sources, if used expertly this tool can be enough (Bryman *et al.*, 2021). The researcher particularly reflected on the idea that investigating structural and psychological empowerment provides a comprehensive picture, but the interviews must be able to gather the details of the participants' personal experiences in all their contradictions and nuances, otherwise the material gathered is not sufficiently relevant.

The first interviews following the piloting phase were carried out often using the questions in Appendix C.

2.11 Summary of the chapter

This chapter explained the philosophical stance of the researcher and justified the decisions that led to choosing certain research methods over others, showing the consistency in the choices made, the constraints imposed by the organisation and the process of improvement that ensured rigour in the different phases of the dissertation. Important ethical issues addressed in the dissertation were discussed in detail.

The philosophical position of the researcher is based on the idea that there are multiple subjective and socially constructed realities. Therefore, the experience of empowerment can be understood through the interpretation of these realities, bringing order to the multiplicity of perspectives that may sometimes even be at odds with each other. This dissertation proposes an explanation of these different perspectives within a unifying framework. The approach to theory development starts from information gathered from line managers who do empowerment and from employees who are empowered. Hence, it is not theoretical propositions that inspire the researcher in the formulation of empowerment theories but concrete experiences of those who participate in empowerment relationships. Previous research studies are, however, used during the

analysis phase, making the theory development approach quasi-inductive or abductive. This dissertation uses a qualitative research design in combination with a case study strategy. The aim is to explore the empowerment relationship between line managers and their Generation Z employees within a work context in which the organisation with its policies and procedures is also considered for the key role it plays in supporting or inhibiting the empowerment experience.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a research method to collect information from primary sources, while thematic analysis was carried out through pattern matching. The piloting of the interviews improved both the process and content aspects of the research.

Figure 2.2 on the following page outlines the research methodology of this dissertation.

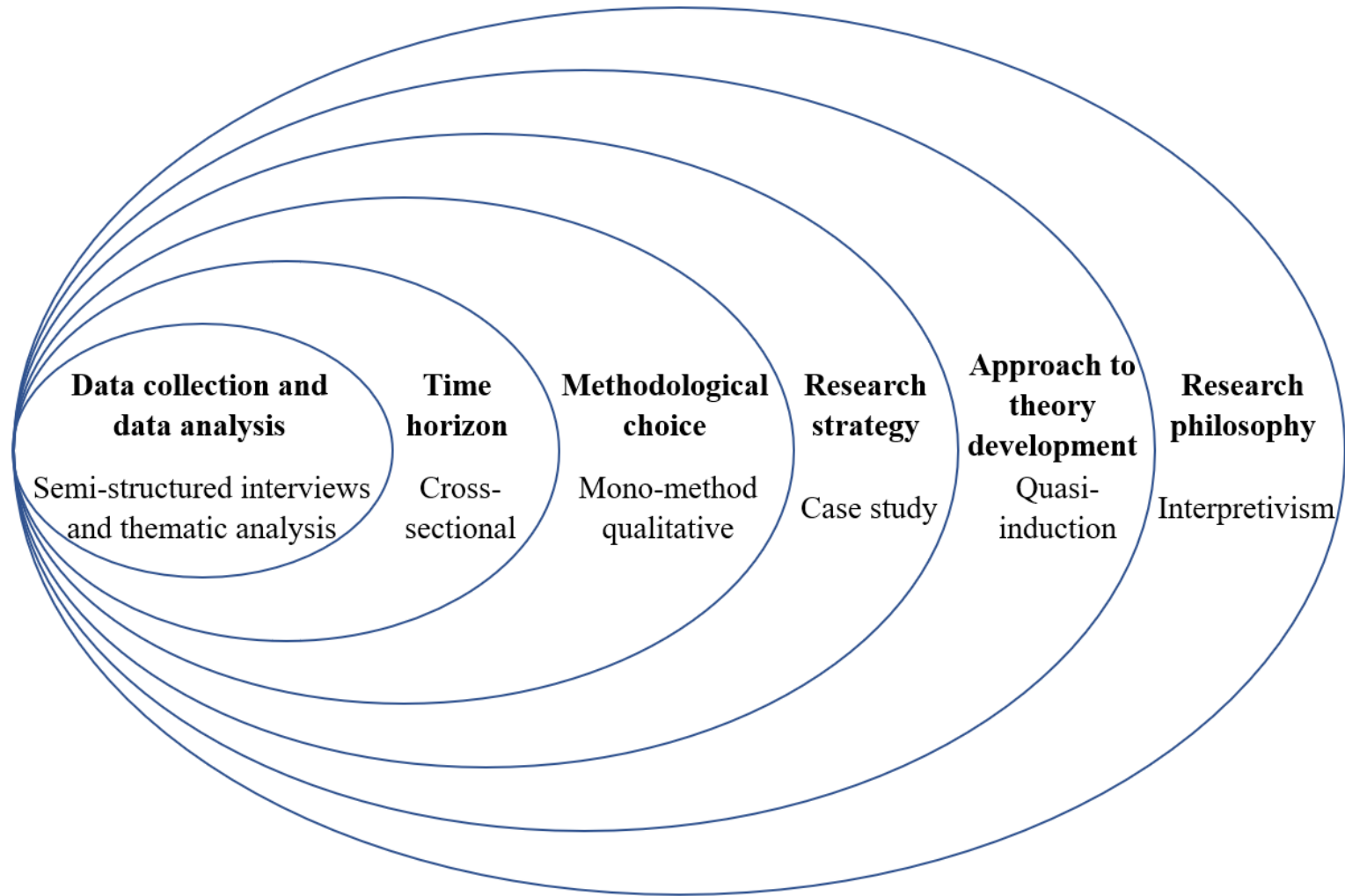


Figure 2.2 – Research methodology (based on Saunders *et al.*, 2019: 130)

Chapter 3 – Findings and discussion: structural perspective

This chapter analyses how line managers support the empowerment process of their Generation Z employees. Thoughts, actions and behaviours of line managers provide the structural perspective (Kanter, 1977), while employee meaning, impact, competence and choice provide the psychological perspective (Spreitzer, 1995; Conger and Kanungo, 1988). The structural perspective is also enriched by supporting mechanisms such as company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working, which are introduced at the beginning of this chapter to allow an easier understanding of the work environment under examination.

3.1 Company policies as empowerment-supporting mechanisms

Advantages and disadvantages of company policies and procedures are interpreted differently not only between line managers and their Generation Z employees within the same team but also within the line manager group and the employee group. According to the interviews, effective empowerment support through policies and procedures should take into account work-life balance, helping employees to become owners of their own results and time. Nevertheless, it is not individual policies and procedures that can achieve such an ambitious goal, but their combined use.

3.1.1 Performance management

The performance management approach can support or inhibit the employees' experience of psychological empowerment. The company under review has performance management policies and procedures that include annual performance targets, formal performance reviews every twelve months and guidelines to hold informal meetings to monitor employees' progress. The company identifies the line manager as the owner of the performance management process. Some phrases in the performance management policy that indicate this ownership are:

“The line manager agrees with each employee on individual goals to be achieved and reviews progress during the past twelve months both in formal meetings and on numerous other informal occasions. [...] The annual appraisal is the formal occasion

when the line manager provides feedback to each employee on their performance throughout the appraisal period.” (Company policy)

The policy is also confirmed by one employee who stated:

“You can expect your line manager to meet with you to define your priorities and then set your objectives. The agreed objectives will be the starting point for the final evaluation. Based on the initial objectives you can see if your performance is good, but it is not worth looking for simple objectives just to get good marks. Goals are for growth. Your manager will ask you to evaluate yourself and then give you their assessment. It’s a bit like going back to the marks your lecturers gave you at university. Those marks told you how much you had studied, and you knew there was room for improvement if they weren’t very good.” (C2)

The analogy of the employee still imagining themselves as a student at university receiving marks from their lecturer and interpreting them with a view to improvement may be a learning-centred experience for some employees, but others may feel overwhelmed by the assessment they receive, perhaps because they do not have such a positive memory of their own academic experience that they would want to see the same approach repeated in the company.

The approach to performance management at the company under review appears to be hierarchical. Line managers initiate the performance review process by determining when they should schedule individual meetings and by using the established method of asking the employee for a self-assessment before expressing their own opinions. In this context, employees contribute to the conversation by answering the questions they receive, following the process suggested by their line manager and confirming or disagreeing with their line manager’s assessment, although the line manager’s appraisal appears to carry more weight. In essence, it is not the employee who has ownership of the performance-review process.

A different approach might be that the employee arranges a meeting with their line manager in which the employee leads the discussion about their own performance. The logical pattern could be that employees ask their line manager for feedback before offering their self-assessment, inviting their line manager to act as a critical friend to measure and monitor their performance objectively. This alternative approach could

generate more personal awareness and self-accountability (Whitmore, 2017). Furthermore, by transferring ownership of the performance management process to employees, the factors proposed by Matthews *et al.* (2003) to support structural empowerment, including the ability of employees to define the goals to be achieved, future responsibilities to be fulfilled and activities to be undertaken for professional development, would have a greater impact on employee motivation (Huq, 2016b), contributing to a higher empowerment climate level (Seibert *et al.*, 2004).

The performance management approach at the company under review is, therefore, neither innovative nor original in the way it is used by line managers to support the empowerment experience. On the other hand, the company policy on performance management does not constrain line managers to carry out the evaluation process in a traditional way, establishing that they maintain ownership of the process. If they wanted to, line managers could independently decide to transfer ownership of the performance management process to their staff. However, it emerged from the interviews that line managers have been trained on how to manage all aspects of performance appraisal:

“We had a course where the basic aspects of performance appraisal were explained. We were taught some methods of giving feedback. I learned how important it is to give the employee space to express their point of view before I express my own. We saw the pitfalls associated with certain biases. We also simulated feedback in all its stages, from the planning of the meeting I do through Google Calendar to the conclusion of the meeting with the summary of the improvement actions the employee agrees to take. In the end, I realised that the evaluation process is really important, although the forms and all the various steps can sometimes seem exaggerated.” (C)

Line manager training on how to manage one-to-one meetings with their staff can be modified to support empowerment more effectively by suggesting to line managers that they transfer ownership of the process to their staff. This decision is consistent with what has been recommended by Matthews *et al.* (2003) and is more effective in supporting the empowerment climate studied by Seibert *et al.* (2004). The company policy on performance management could contain some advice to clarify the transfer of ownership.

As noted in this subsection, the relationship between line manager and employee is influenced by the performance management policy, but even more so by how the line

manager interprets their role concerning the employee's performance. The theme of the relationship dynamics related to performance monitoring and management will be discussed in the next section, but not before presenting how other company policies and procedures characterise the working context under examination.

3.1.2 Using social media at work

The company's policy on the use of social media at work is strict:

“The employee must refrain from using social media during working hours or on devices provided by [employer] unless the use is related to their role, authorised by their line manager and consistent with the company's equipment policy. The employee must not use [employer] email addresses to register on social networks, blogs or other online settings used for personal purposes.” (Company policy)

Employees are divided on this policy, even within the same team. Some feel it is right to distinguish between work and private life.

“In my opinion, it is right to limit the use of social media at work. It's not necessary in order to work well, and I don't want the lack of boundary between my personal and professional life to lead me to work long hours from home, with the excuse that only results count.” (A1)

Others, however, say that the distinction between devices for work and personal life is a nuisance because nobody goes around with two laptops and two smartphones when they could have only one. This person argues that they don't comply with the policy because the important thing is to do one's job well and not waste time.

“It's amazing how much I've learned from social media in my role. It is true that we have wiki pages in the company, but sometimes the most useful information is on external forums. Seeing as I can surf the internet freely, I don't see why I can't take a break every now and then and look at my Instagram profile or TikTok, especially when I'm using my laptop at home or carrying it around instead of my personal laptop. It would be a hassle to have two laptops or two smartphones. And then, if I want to, I can make up for the time spent on the internet. [...] It's the results that count and my line manager is happy with me. [...] I like a company that doesn't put constraints on what I do in the office and what I do for the company when I'm out and about.” (A2)

Psychological empowerment supports performance directly but also indirectly through intrinsic motivation, opportunity to perform and ability to perform (Tuuli and Rowlinson, 2009). Since the chance to work anywhere and at any time, mixing personal and work life, is an element that supports the empowerment of some of the employees interviewed, a possible recommendation for those wishing to write a policy on the use of social media at work is to respect the preferences of each employee. This means avoiding a focus on results leading to over-intensification of work accompanied by a reduction in personal well-being (Putnam *et al.*, 2014), but at the same time, it means allowing employees who have the motivation, opportunity and ability to perform extraordinarily well the freedom they desire. When employees feel compelled to break policies they do not agree with, this increases the gap between the behaviours that the company considers desirable and those that the company tolerates. However, mixed messages do not help empowerment (Argyris, 1998) and although it may be difficult to give power to employees with a formal measure such as a company policy, this is the way to go in order to have more motivated and productive staff (Hamel and Breen, 2007).

3.1.3 Remote working

Since 2017 there has been a company policy authorising remote working in the company under consideration, whereby remote working is considered a form of employment in which the employee is never physically present in the company. This form of employment was designed to allow managers to have a virtual personal assistant. During the months of isolation due to the pandemic, remote working was extended to all employees. After the lock-down, the company decided to authorise hybrid working, in which employer and employee agree on how many days a week the work is done on-site and remotely.

“In principle, any job role at [employer] can be considered for hybrid work. However, some activities can clearly only be carried out properly on-site, while others can be performed equally or even more effectively elsewhere, usually the employee’s home. [...] For a role to be considered for hybrid working for a period of time of at least six months, the employee must submit a request for flexible working to their line manager who will assess the request under [employer’s] flexible working arrangements policy. [...] The days of the week chosen to be worked remotely must be agreed with [employer].” (Company policy)

Respondents' opinions on hybrid working are divided. Some respondents say they want a separation of work and private life, claiming to be more productive at work. Others would like to be at work only when necessary, believing that they can work anywhere, at any time, without taking into account that not all roles in the company can be performed remotely with the same ease. For example, people employed in production can hardly ever work remotely. However, both line managers and employees appreciate hybrid work as opposed to work done only in person or only remotely.

“I am much more productive when I am in the office. The lack of separation between private and work life scares me.” (A)

“The ideal solution is hybrid work where you do what you want, come to work when you want and stay at home when you want. To code the devices I use at work, I don't need to be in the office. I only need to be there when I am testing whether the code I have written really works outside the simulation environment. Then coming to the office is really necessary. I mean, I want to be in the office when I have to be in the office, but I don't want to be in the office if I don't have to be there.” (A2)

“I really appreciate the opportunity to work from home sometimes. [...] I may well be more productive at home. My work-life balance has certainly improved. I save time on public transport. I can take more time for myself.” (B3)

“Working remotely allows me to hold more meetings and therefore to coordinate better with my colleagues and employees. Remote meetings are more effective because everyone respects the start and end times of the meeting much more, but sometimes you end up having meetings that could be resolved with an email.” (B)

The policy on working remotely in the company under consideration is not yet formulated in such a way as to allow working anywhere and at any time (Regus, 2017). On the one hand, this solution based on predefined days of in-person and remote work facilitates the way work is organised, but on the other hand it does not contribute to the psychological empowerment of each employee as much as it could (Global Workplace Analytics, 2021), because it does not adapt to the individual needs that Deci and Ryan (1985) link to self-determination and that Spreitzer (1995) links to choice.

3.2 How performance is monitored and managed through empowerment

This section contains an in-depth examination of how line managers interpret their role concerning monitoring and managing the performance of their Generation Z employees.

3.2.1 Formal performance management

Ownership of the performance management process is in the hands of line managers. All line managers interviewed stated that they follow the company's instructions concerning formal performance management processes. For them, this means agreeing on clear objectives, monitoring the performance of employees through individual meetings at regular intervals and evaluating job performance in qualitative and quantitative terms at the end of the year. The meetings are decided by the line managers. One line manager said:

“The performance of my employees is managed through annual numerical assessments. The score my employees get depends on how good they are at achieving their goals, how they behave at work and how they carry out the activities in their job description.” (B)

Other line managers explained the formal approach to performance management in much the same way, assuming that the initiative to activate the process comes from them and not from the employees. Three line managers interviewed used the personal pronoun ‘I’ when talking about their formal approach to employee performance management.

“I book the room for the meeting, I schedule the meeting on Google Calendar, I prepare my talk, I think about the objectives. Each employee is different from the others in terms of skills and attitude, but I try to propose the objectives in s.m.a.r.t. terms to each of them. I also think about the possible future workload that an employee might have.” (C)

An employee of this line manager shows he accepts that the ownership is in the hands of his line manager.

“My boss proposes the most important objectives for me, taking into account the needs of the company and what we have to do as a team. So far, I’ve always liked what I’ve done here so I haven’t had any problems accepting the proposed objectives. When I asked to go on an English course he said yes. When I asked to go to an electronics fair I was interested in he said yes. The project I am involved in is stimulating. Why should I be unhappy?” (C3)

These statements reveal the alignment between individual, team and organisational goals, in line with the concept of responsible autonomy introduced by Friedman (1977) and in line with what Armstrong and Taylor (2020) also consider to be the approach to minimise supervision. In addition to goal alignment, reciprocity of advantage is also apparent, as suggested by Weiss and Hartle (1997).

The other five line managers showed a more participative approach to goal setting, but in each case they are the ones who initiate the formal performance management process.

“As far as possible I try to propose the projects we are going to work on and let my staff choose what they think is best for them. [...] In truth, I admit that I advise them and direct their choices to where I want them to go, based on multiple factors. When I really don’t have room for manoeuvre, I have to impose myself by saying that it’s the only decision open to me.” (E)

These remarks give an insight into the trade-off the line manager is called upon to make when they wish to shift their focus from management control to people development (Holtz and Zardet, 2022; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Here the line manager cannot act solely as a manager coach interested in giving power to their employees (Ripley and Ripley, 1992), because they have their own goals to achieve and their own manager to whom they are accountable. All levels of the company should therefore be involved and committed to empowerment practices. Acting only at the lowest organisational level may undermine the support of line managers, who may hinder the implementation of empowerment practices because the change they introduce implies that they lose control over the work of their employees (Gallie *et al.*, 1998).

The line managers interviewed believe that the adoption of the formal performance management process leads to some important organisational benefits, but

that it must remain a practical and useful approach, in agreement with Aguinis *et al.* (2011). Although the forms associated with formal performance management are hard for some to digest, all line managers recognise that the wish to employ a formal approach to performance management is driven by the company's need to assess individual performance and link it to the reward system and organisational performance. Most line managers also recognise that aligning goals at the individual, team and organisational level (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020; Friedman, 1977) simplifies the supervision of employees. However, none of the line managers indicated the formal approach to performance management as a tool to support the empowerment of their employees, believing that it is their own management style that makes the difference.

“It’s not what’s written in a policy that motivates my staff, it’s the enthusiasm they show and which I support with my questions about how work is progressing, my advice and feedback while the project is underway, my congratulations and ‘thank yous’ [...] The performance management policy helps, so there is written documentation to distribute rewards fairly and to have some evidence of poor performance in case it is necessary to justify certain serious decisions.” (G)

3.2.2 Informal performance management

Line managers talked mostly about their informal performance management actions when asked to explain how they monitor and manage employee performance. Their actions mainly consist of giving advice, sharing experiences and asking questions to gauge how much autonomy to give an employee. Since autonomy is a prerequisite for empowerment (Block, 1987), by developing autonomy line managers encourage empowerment. In particular, line managers decide how much autonomy to grant after inviting their employees to reflect on strengths and areas for improvement in their performance. They ask questions such as:

“How are you doing with the project you’re working on? What do you need to complete it on time? What are you finding most difficult to do today? What about in the next few days? Do you need me to do anything for you?” (B)

Although empowerment comes through autonomy, autonomy is no guarantee of high performance. Providing access to information and resources that can enable the task to be performed faster and in more effective ways is an opportunity for line managers to

support better performance. Access to resources and information are structural empowerment actions that stimulate employees' self-determination (Deci *et al.*, 1989; Deci and Ryan, 1985) and competence (Bandura and Schunk, 1981).

Most line managers stated that they explain clearly to their employees what the expected level of performance is. Some line managers pointed out that they have an assertive style in emphasising that in case of disputes about performance level they have the last word and that they do this while the activity is in progress to stop employees from going down the wrong path.

"I am the most experienced in the field. It is normal for me to have the last word. [...] Sometimes I intervene to settle disputes between technicians who would like to approach the project differently. [...] Sometimes I take preventive action to stop my employees from wasting time on issues that I've come across before." (F)

This behaviour seems to be at odds with the dimensions of empowerment associated with self-determination and choice. The personal pronoun used is 'I'. Gone is the inclusive language used during the formal goal-setting process of the employees. On the other hand, the assertive style of this line manager does not stop one of his employees from taking the initiative. The employee quoted a popular saying:

"It is better to apologise than to ask permission. My manager appreciates my motivation and I think that's how you learn new things. If I am wrong, I am sure he'll let me know." (F2)

Line managers state that they monitor their employees' performance until the assigned task is completed. However, they do not continuously go into the details of the employees' work. They prefer to receive regular progress reports on the projects on which staff members are working and to assign a second, more experienced person to a team member if the latter is in difficulty or has just joined the team. None of the line managers said they leave an employee completely on their own without providing support or showing interest in the work assigned.

Line managers are aware that over-frequent monitoring can signal a lack of trust, while sporadic monitoring can be interpreted as disinterest, creating a sense of abandonment and powerlessness in employees (Abramson *et al.*, 1978).

Performance monitoring when employees are from Generation Z has a specific element of complexity related to the meaning given to the task and the time spent on it. For Generation Z employees the work must be stimulating and must be linked to a purpose that it makes sense to strive for, otherwise they would rather change jobs. The employees interviewed feel that it is not enough to have a stable, well-paid job if that job only serves to pay the bills.

In light of these attitudes, it is worth asking whether empowerment is taking place in the organisation under consideration, i.e. whether there is a transfer of power from the line manager to the employee or whether the line manager is simply monitoring the progress of a task, more or less effectively. One line manager's response shows that the focus is on both aspects:

“Of course, I want my employees to develop skills and become autonomous in performing many different tasks. I want to be able to trust them more and more, but it is undeniably important to me that the project progresses on time. I don't want to be a week away from the delivery date and find that we are a month behind.” (G)

This attitude signals a willingness to gradually transfer power and give confidence.

Line managers state that they give honest feedback when evaluating their staff's performance and behaviour. They hope that their honesty will be reciprocated whenever they ask staff to share difficulties and concerns about the performance of agreed tasks. Line managers aim to raise awareness of staff competence and thus support staff self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Gist, 1987).

“I think I have an open and honest dialogue with my employees. [...] If something is wrong, I seek a two-way dialogue and try to be specific in pointing out actions for improvement. I hope my honesty will be repaid in the same way. [...] I would like them to tell me where they feel they are struggling so that I can give them the right support. They generally do, because as soon as they come into the company, they're full of hopes and expectations that sometimes we can't fulfil.” (C)

One line manager pointed out that an employee seeking autonomy must accept both the consequences of success, such as incentives and bonuses, and the consequences of failure due to poor performance.

“My employees who work with greater freedom should be given both burdens and honours in the sense that if they do well we are all happy, but if they make mistakes they have to take responsibility. It is too easy just to take the honours. The problem is that many people want more autonomy but do not want the risk of suffering the negative consequences of mistakes. [...] The negative consequences depend on the seriousness of the mistakes. For example, an employee may not be involved in crucial projects, may not receive a bonus and, in an extreme scenario, could lose the chance of being offered a permanent position or a promotion. [...] Under these circumstances, far fewer employees venture into uncharted territory.” (F)

This reflection could be the response of a line manager struggling with employees who seek autonomy but are risk-averse (Ekman, 2012). An alternative explanation could imply the line manager’s veiled threat not to stray too far from the direction he has set, hinting at the possibility of the employee suffering negative consequences in the event of poor performance (Chen *et al.*, 2007). Appelbaum and Honeggar (1998) point out that empowerment does not occur when people feel unfairly penalised for taking the initiative. In the event of poor performance, a different, more empowering attitude might instead be to view the disappointing result as an opportunity for learning. Increasing employees’ self-determination without considering their level of competence signals that the line manager is not fulfilling their role in supporting empowerment.

Line managers state that they only intervene directly in their staff’s work when it is not possible to do otherwise. Support and collaboration remain the focus of their intervention.

“I’m happy when I can get my hands dirty again. It happens rarely, but sometimes there are serious delays and major shortcomings in the quality of the work done. In these cases, I make sure that my eagerness to solve the problem does not lead to any of my staff feeling discharged from their duty to contribute. I want them all to be involved. [...] I want to show that problems can be solved together and that everyone can contribute.” (A)

“When I go back to being a technician instead of the boss, everything seems easier, but I look for collaboration and support from the whole team rather than rushing to solve the problem alone, although it would sometimes be much more convenient.” (D)

A more confrontational attitude in terms of the direct intervention of the line manager was only reported once:

“I’m not a control freak, but I’m ready to confront an employee head-on if I think it’s the right thing to do. Otherwise, I offer help.” (H)

Most line managers report that younger employees, the ones this dissertation focuses on, appreciate individual performance-improvement conversations far more than colleagues from previous generations. Sometimes it is the employees themselves that ask for these conversations.

“I have had an employee who wanted to have a meeting with me to discuss his performance because he felt he needed to improve. I first reassured him by telling him I did not doubt that he would improve because he had the skills to do so. [...] Then I showed him some specific examples of what he should have done and did not do. [...] I made sure he understood the specific points I was talking about. I asked him if there were any reasons why he could not do what was expected of him and he replied that it was a difficult moment because his girlfriend had just left him. I tried to console him and when I realised that he did not want to elaborate I simply said I’d be there to listen at any time. [...] I’d offer him a shoulder to cry on, but above all technical support for the work to be done. At that point, he laughed. We arranged a new meeting. [...] He seemed satisfied with the outcome of our chat.” (A)

This description of the meeting illustrates some of the behaviours that Arnold *et al.* (2000) consider to be empowering. The line manager shows commitment to helping his employee improve the quality of their work, because he gives examples of what the person should have done and did not do. It also helps him to become more self-sufficient when he checks that the employee has identified areas for improvement. The trust that the two parties exchange is an important sign of empowerment. The line manager shows confidence in his employee’s ability to improve his performance and is willing to understand the employee’s concerns and difficulties so that he can remove any obstacles. Similarly, the employee shows confidence when proposing the meeting, because he wants to improve his own performance through the feedback received, and when he decides to share with his line manager information related to his personal life. However, the absence of behaviours indicating transfer of power leaves open the possibility that

employees do not feel empowered at all, despite the line manager's behaviour being empowering.

A different account of performance-improvement conversations indicates a stronger intention on the part of the line manager to grant their employee freedom regarding the way forward, responsibility for achievements and level of self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

“I think it is worth talking to your employee when their performance is not up to expectations. I don't want to get to the point where I say, 'Don't worry about it. I'll do it.' I don't think it's particularly empowering to take away a person's chance to improve. Not only does it take away that person's opportunity to do better, but it also sets a dangerous precedent concerning how performance will be managed in the future in my team. If I intervene before an employee has encountered any difficulties, I give them licence to think 'Well, I don't have to worry, because my boss will take care of it anyway.' Instead, I want my employees to try to cope on their own. Of course, if there are serious problems, I will provide the necessary support, but not before seeing them 'suffer', especially if the task was discussed in advance and they were happy to take it on.” (G)

This interpretation of the relationship between line manager and employee supports the development of psychological empowerment more than the previous testimony and reinforces the role of the line manager as an agent of structural empowerment.

When line managers were asked whether they use a different approach in managing performance with empowered versus non-empowered employees, the answers showed that line managers' involvement in providing support occurs more quickly if the employee is not empowered.

“If I have trusted someone, I expect them to carry out the task assigned to them with access to all the resources and information they need without having to ask my permission. People in my team who are not autonomous will see me involved much more directly and quickly than those who know how to operate on their own. [...] I observe and intervene more frequently when people with limited autonomy are in difficulty. [...] I solve the problem directly when it is a minor issue. Otherwise, I prefer young employees

to be supported by a more experienced colleague. I avoid interfering with employees who have shown in the past that they can manage on their own.” (C)

“I get involved in an employee’s problems much quicker when I know that person has no experience and comes to us directly after graduating.” (D)

In the process of evaluating their employees’ performance, intuition and direct observation are the informal approaches that line managers say they use most frequently, especially when the employee is not empowered. Other sources of information such as the employee’s self-assessment, the opinion of other team members and the opinion of other line managers in the department play a less important role. These external sources are not involved in the formal performance appraisal, which is based on the completion of forms that only require a comparison between line managers and employees. More complex types of performance appraisal, such as 360-degree feedback, are only for higher levels of the organisation. Moreover, within informal approaches to performance management, the sources used to assess employee performance serve to create a link to the reward system, to help the employee improve their performance in their current role and to be considered for possible promotion.

“I look at performance from results and behaviours. I rely mainly on intuition and direct observation, but also on the employee’s thoughts about their role and the work they’ve done. Before making any decisions about rewards and promotions, I talk to my colleagues in the department who have had the opportunity to observe the person at work. The opinion of peers also counts. If I’m going to reward someone, it has to be a decision that has a broad basis of consensus.” (H)

“I just need to see how [a staff member] moves around the department to be able to see what their performance will be like, especially if they haven’t been with us for long.” (F)

In conclusion, line managers predominantly talk about their informal performance management actions when asked how they monitor and manage employee performance. Their actions mainly consist of giving advice, sharing experiences, asking questions and giving feedback. Monitoring is done through the employee’s submission of a regularly updated progress report. An employee who shows little autonomy is paired with a more experienced colleague. The performance of Generation Z employees requires careful and

balanced monitoring, a combination of support and autonomy. The employees interviewed say they do not want to waste their time, particularly if that time is needed to learn a job that has little meaning to them. If these circumstances were to arise, they would be ready to hand in their notice. This is why individual performance-improvement conversations are very popular among Generation Z employees. In the context of informal approaches to performance management, the sources of information used by line managers to express their evaluations include intuition, direct observation, self-evaluation of employees and hetero-evaluation of other employees in the team and other line managers.

3.3 Internal communication of company information

Line managers state that they share operational, administrative and strategic company information with their employees. According to Kanter (1977) and Lawler (1986) doing so represents structural empowerment. Corporate information is shared during individual performance definition and review meetings, collective project update meetings, branch-wide top management presentations, the private internal network (intranet) and institutional emails from headquarters in the United States. The line managers feel that the information shared can help their employees better understand the context in which their company operates and the reasons that drive the company towards certain economic, financial and strategic decisions.

“I think younger employees find my initial presentation with news updates about the company useful before we start the actual project progress meeting we hold twice a month. I only select information for our team that I think will be of interest, such as expansion into new geographical areas or important appointments at the top. [...] I do this because I think my employees can feel proud to work for a group that is expanding.”
(A)

“Corporate information is provided through different channels: company emails, individual and group meetings, our internal corporate network [the intranet] and even official presentations by top management. [...] If you have time to search on our intranet, you can find everything, but then you no longer have time to work.” (E)

The reference to the possibility of finding all information on the internal corporate network could be a way to solicit impact and meaning aspects (Spreitzer, 1995)

of the employees or an excuse for the line manager to assume a more passive role regarding information sharing and communication with the team.

It is worth noting that employees do not have free access to all corporate information, such as detailed information on business performance and the company's economic and financial position compared to competitors, but as Dollins and Stemmler (2021) pointed out, the willingness to share information is essential to support empowerment although information is only shared if requested. In fact, not all employees have the skills to analyse that information and therefore it is more a matter of transparency and honesty between employer and employee.

Employees, regardless of the team they belong to, widely agree that formal corporate communication interventions, such as CEO videos or corporate-wide events that are reported on the intranet, do not affect their motivation, job satisfaction or work performance. For some, these communications can even be irritating, because they reveal a distance from everyday problems. It is hard to imagine, therefore, how these institutional communications can support empowerment.

“I attended an official event once because the new CEO had arrived at the plant in Japan where I'd been sent for a few months. Really, I couldn't see what his talk could add to my work. It felt like a distraction, to be honest. [...] My satisfaction comes from knowing that there will be a device on the market that I made and that if I go to the pharmacy, I can see it and I can tell everyone: 'I made that'. That really gives me satisfaction, not the words of a CEO I don't know.” (H3)

Employees seem far more interested in information presented informally by their line managers because the context makes it easier to discuss such updates with their colleagues within their own teams.

“It is our line manager who tells us every now and then what might be relevant for our work. We know that everything is available online or on the official social media channels, but I don't really follow them. I just get the news that we all discuss together at the bimonthly team meetings.” (C4)

Overall, line managers believe that corporate communications help their employees to learn more about the company's strategy and macroeconomic environment, to understand the company's expectations regarding organisational performance, and to

prioritise the projects to which top management is most committed. However, employees disagree strongly, because interviews with them did not flag up any organisational measures that help them transform high-level corporate information into information that has a positive effect on their job performance or psychological empowerment. This discrepancy could result from the inability of line managers to teach their employees how to interpret high-level information, an insufficient number of opportunities for informal discussion or the passive attitude of employees. An alternative explanation might be to recognise that corporate communication should be more effective in emphasising the impact of high-level organisational decisions on the work of the people employed in the Italian subsidiary.

3.4 How line managers interpret empowerment

Many line managers stated that an empowered person is aware that they can successfully complete a task that is only in their head. In particular, three line managers referred to employees who have the self-confidence and resources required to complete their tasks.

“In my opinion, empowerment is the feeling of knowing you have everything you need to do the task you have in mind: knowledge and skills, physical and mental resources, and power to decide how to do what you want to do. And then you do it. [...] In my team people display these characteristics to varying degrees.” (H)

This comment mirrors Gist’s (1987) views on competence and Bandura’s (1994) views on self-efficacy with regard to a person’s belief in their ability to complete the set task.

When exploring the issue of resources to make available to their employees, line managers distinguished different types, indicating physical resources such as work tools; information resources such as access to company databases and to the opinion of people key to the performance of the task or project; and budgeted financial resources.

Interpretation of the empowerment concept included the idea that line managers support empowerment when they show confidence in the decisions their staff will take.

“If my employees feel empowered, then they must feel that they can take decisions without having to ask my permission for everything. They are responsible for those

decisions and the results that follow because if they took a decision there must have been a good reason for it. And they also need to know that I will support their decision and their assessments. [...] To me, these are the kind of behaviours that make you realise that you have the instruments to take decisions and be responsible for your work without having to go to your boss every time to ask for permission.” (D)

These comments testify to a line manager’s attempt at structural empowerment as proposed by Matthews *et al.* (2003): they show a desire to transfer decision-making power while leaving the employee in control of the planning of certain activities. This is a bland approach compared to what Matthews *et al.* (2003) call for, because in reality, it is necessary to analyse the area in which employees have decision-making power and for how long this power is granted: is it a temporary power as in delegation or a permanent power as in a real act of empowerment (Leana, 1987)? These questions will be answered in the following sections of this chapter. Here the focus is on investigating the meaning attributed to the term ‘empowerment’ by line managers whose first language is Italian and who use the English word to define the concept owing to the lack of an equally powerful Italian word.

“I think there’s an analogy between being empowered and driving a car. To drive a car, you must practice and learn skills that will enable you to be on the road without endangering yourself or others. Then perhaps you get so good at it you go rallying. Similarly, to be empowered you must practise and develop skills to make sure you’re not dangerous to yourself or others. The hope is that once you are empowered you can race towards the company’s goals. [...] I mean skills that are not only related to safety in the workplace, but more to the ability to make decisions that can get the work moving forward quickly.” (F)

This analogy sets the scene for various considerations that deserve in-depth analysis. The employee should be aware of the skills they are developing and how these skills help them to do the work that has been established. The line manager should be able to recognise these same skills and should trust that the employee will use the skills they are developing to make the right decisions to get the job done. There are pitfalls at each stage of this reasoning, but it is worth emphasising again that the aspect of trust is probably the trickiest, because the employee may be under the impression that there is no risk of failure, since the line manager trusts them. But the risk of failure does exist. How

many car accidents occur on the road even though the people involved often claim to be good drivers? Similarly, there are numerous reasons why empowered people may make mistakes – never mind those who are not yet fully empowered (Baloff and Doherty, 1989). Therefore, both the line manager's and the employee's assessment of that employee's skills and the trust between the parties are critical success factors in the empowerment relationship (Burke, 1986) and should be calibrated in relation to each project.

Line managers were asked to reflect on how they transfer power to their staff. Some of them came up with a definition of structural empowerment that could be considered good management practice for experienced staff members. Essentially, the transfer of power is about giving a person freedom in how to complete a task and trusting that that person will succeed. If combined with a laissez-faire leadership style, this approach might indicate that empowerment is interpreted simply as a communicative process of letting employees know they are responsible for their performance and that within certain organisational boundaries they have the freedom to complete the task.

“Clearly the goal is to have employees who only need instructions on what is to be done. They get organised to carry out the task by themselves and I can forget about that side of the project because I know it will be carried out in the best possible way.”
(D)

“If I entrust a whole project to you, I don't check to see which tasks are in your job description and which aren't. I give you the whole thing. I don't expect you to only take technical decisions. I expect you to also take decisions concerning the relationship with other departments and customers.” (B)

As emerges from the interviewees' remarks, the line manager does not envisage any performance monitoring along the way. This makes it unsuitable for employees who are not yet fully empowered. Therefore, a line manager should calibrate skills and confidence in terms of each project until their employees are fully empowered.

To support empowerment, line managers state that it is important to recognise the skills of their team and help them develop new skills as well as the ones they already have. However, there is no agreement among line managers about the weight to give the development of core skills versus new skills.

There are line managers who believe that the tasks agreed on with their staff should focus on the skills typical of the role, as indicated in the job description. When the employee is unable to complete the task, the line manager should provide technical advice on the less clear aspects to develop the employee's skills for the role. It is up to the employee to define the pace and approach as part of an agreement with the line manager in which priorities and deadlines have already been decided. The limitations to empowerment in this scenario are mainly due to a lack of thought about the skills that may be required of the employee in their future role in the company. Other limitations are due to constraints in the transfer of power, for example the impossibility of accessing budget resources without authorisation or the impossibility of playing any decisive role in hiring new employees.

"I honestly believe that my efforts to support empowerment have to focus on the current role of my employees. I need them to be good today. I'll think about the future tomorrow." (E)

Other line managers state that role-related technical skills are not the only skills that need to be developed in a move to empower. Skills that can be transferred to future roles or technical skills that are not strictly related to the current role are also important because they increase confidence (Bandura, 1982) and encourage the employee to go beyond the limits of their current role.

"If I want to keep my younger employees motivated, I can't keep asking them if they want to do the same task, because they'll say no. I prefer to ask them to do different tasks and push the boundaries of their current role. If I don't get that chance and they tell me they don't want to keep doing the same task, I can insist and justify it by the fact that I've tried to give them learning opportunities whenever I have had the chance." (C)

However, this second stance is less common within the company under review. Furthermore, it seems that line managers prefer caution when it comes to supporting empowerment since they tend to arrange it so that their employees fulfil tasks that they have already shown themselves capable of completing. In short, whenever possible, the tasks are assigned to the most capable people, but this does not help develop new skills in a current role and makes the empowerment process slow.

In conclusion, empowerment may be an appropriate way of building a professional relationship with Generation Z employees, because it satisfies the employees' need to be constantly challenged and to perform tasks that are linked with their future professional role in the company. However, the process of empowerment with some line managers can be slow and unproductive for impatient and eager employees. Moreover, it appears from the interviews to take up to eighteen months for a line manager and employee to develop a relationship of full trust in which the transfer of power allows the employee to carry out their role without unwanted interference from the line manager. Until this level of trust is achieved, the line manager remains involved in the details of the activities carried out by their staff.

3.5 Why line managers use empowerment

Through empowerment, the company enables its employees to solve problems by making decisions on their own without having to ask permission from people at a higher hierarchical level (Parker and Turner, 2002) and allows employees to increase impact, choice, meaning and competence (Spreitzer, 1995).

There are several reasons why line managers support empowerment.

Line managers are aware that empowerment offers their employees the chance to develop a broad range of skills. This implies that within a team several people may be able to complete the required tasks.

“Empowerment gives more value to the team and the whole department because I can say: ‘H1 can take care of this project because H2 is currently busy on another project’. This means that H2 doesn’t have to divide his time between two different projects and slow down the completion of both. It also means that the client doesn’t have to wait for H2 to finish the work he’s doing now before he sees his own project realised. We call it functional flexibility.” (H)

Empowerment, therefore, facilitates functional flexibility and this improves the level of service offered. Depending on the workload of the various employees, the line manager can choose those who can carry out the client's request faster, because they are less encumbered by other work commitments. In the long term this improves the team's reputation.

Most line managers stated that increasing the level of competence of the team is an important reason to encourage empowerment and that this objective is considered when choosing the employee for a task. It is worth pointing out that individual competence is apparent not only in increased skills but also in increased focus and commitment to completing the task.

“No one else will be responsible if you have the last word, and that is why a person to whom I give ownership of a task will pay more attention and be more committed to it than a person who is only delegated to do it.” (B)

The line managers interviewed believe that being responsible for a job combined with the freedom to choose how to do it and the opportunity to receive feedback increase every employee’s competence but are particularly critical success factors for Generation Z employees. Empowerment is seen to be effective with Generation Z employees because it not only increases their competence and thus self-efficacy but also helps them to make sense of their role. By interpreting it proactively, they can see how their work contributes to organisational performance, developing a sense of belonging to the company in question and thus attracting, retaining and developing talent.

“I find that this generation has many more job opportunities at their fingertips and smartphones than previous generations. This drives my employees to ‘fall in love’ with many different companies while working here. It’s not easy for me to help my employees develop a sense of belonging to this company because in their minds there is always the comparison with a different company or a friend who works at Google. It wasn’t like that for my generation, or at least the choices were more limited. The so-called ‘war for talent’ is global and daily here. [...] What do I do in my own small way to win this war? I try to show why it’s good to work here, how everyone’s contribution helps to achieve important goals as a group and all that can be learned in this business environment.” (A)

Empowerment can help Generation Z employees develop competence and give meaning to their individual contributions by allowing them to reflect on the importance of these at team, department, organisation and society level (Dhingra *et al.*, 2021; Dimitracopulos, 2020).

In the model of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) there are specific relationships that show how the work context influences competence and how meaning influences behaviour. These relationships seem to be confirmed by the line managers interviewed.

“If you give your employees the chance to do more, they give you more. And every time you activate this mechanism their competence improves, and they achieve more.” (E)

“I once heard a story that illustrates very well what it means to give meaning to what you are doing. It is the story of a wanderer who walking in the desert meets three people doing the same job, but the first one says he’s breaking stones, the second one’s supporting his family and the third one’s building a cathedral. Here we have people with exactly the same approach and it’s true that it’s usually the youngest who are building the cathedral, and you can see that because they’re always eager to do it and they hardly ever say no if you explain to them why their contribution is important, why we’ve chosen them for the task and what they’ll learn from this experience.” (G)

Although the story of the wanderer in the desert is beginning to wear thin, it is useful to note a new indirect confirmation of the fact that empowerment can be considered a particularly effective managerial tool for building trusting working relationships with Generation Z employees, and in general an instrument capable of ensuring greater job satisfaction, commitment towards organisational goals and performance for all employees (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999).

Line managers were asked to reflect on the alternative paths their employees might follow in completing the agreed task. Since employees might choose alternative solutions to those adopted by their line managers, they might also make mistakes.

“My employees who work with greater freedom should be given both burdens and honours in the sense that if they do well we are all happy, but if they make mistakes they have to take responsibility. It is too easy just to take the honours. The problem is that many people want more autonomy but do not want the risk of suffering the negative consequences of mistakes. [...] The negative consequences depend on the seriousness of the mistakes. For example, an employee may not be involved in crucial projects, may not receive a bonus and, in an extreme scenario, could lose the chance of being offered a

permanent position or a promotion. [...] Under these circumstances, far fewer employees venture into uncharted territory.” (F)

These words do not necessarily indicate that the line manager is unwilling to accept their employees’ mistakes as part of the learning and development process, but that the mistakes should affect the employee. In doing so, however, the employee may be encouraged to try to hide their mistakes.

“Although it’s not easy, we often learn from our mistakes. My employees must be conscious that mistakes are part of the learning process. But you have to make mistakes early on so that the error does not have a devastating impact on the project. What I always say is that you must not be afraid of making mistakes, but you must learn from them so that you don’t make the same ones again and again.” (D)

If an employee has the freedom to make mistakes without suffering negative consequences, they will repay the trust they have received with conscientious behaviour; they will admit their mistakes more easily than if they were in a situation where they might suffer negative consequences for their mistakes; and they will treasure their mistakes together with their team, contributing to empowerment climate (Seibert *et al.*, 2004).

“If I had to explain to each employee every single action needed to get to the end of a project, in five years’ time I would still be here, and I still wouldn’t have come to the end of the list. I prefer to explain the client’s expectations in detail and the process in general terms, and then remind them of the deadlines. I ask if the information provided is enough to get started and then let everyone try to work it out for themselves. In the end, we only learn when we come across a few difficulties and make some mistakes.” (H)

This reflection introduces a second reason why line managers choose empowerment. It is not simply to increase the competence of employees and thus functional flexibility, but for short-term personal gain. Often line managers do not have much time to explain the details of the task or project they have decided on together, and therefore they leave their staff free to fend for themselves. In this last quote it seems that the transition from ‘power over’ to ‘power with’ is a concession by the line manager rather than a conquest by the employee. However, regardless of how the transition takes place, the management style characterised by ‘power with’ often leads to empowerment,

as Follett (1918) pointed out. That said, it is necessary to be reasonably certain the employee can successfully complete the proposed task.

Some employees may not be able to complete a task assigned by their line manager. For example, if their competence level is less than is required, a potential empowerment experience may turn into a failure with unpleasant consequences, especially for the employee, who may end up feeling abandoned. This ‘sink or swim’ approach to empowerment is risky because a line manager will not reinforce an employee’s self-efficacy by showing confidence in their abilities if the employee fails to complete the task. Dimensions such as self-confidence, self-efficacy and well-being are diminished by any failed attempt at empowerment (Bandura, 1982). Therefore, a line manager who is eager to accelerate the empowerment process does their employees more harm than good (Berti and Simpson, 2021), even though they will justify their decision by claiming that the employee will learn from their mistakes.

Some line managers stated that they support the empowerment of their employees in order to be able to present the task as an interesting challenge even when it is in reality purely administrative. When a line manager assigns or agrees on a task, the motivational aspect associated with taking charge and visualising how the task will be carried out becomes important for the employee if that employee decides how to make the task challenging. Line managers are often most willing to transfer ownership of processes to their staff on administrative tasks. On the other hand, the preference for tasks such as these makes it difficult to show employees the strategic impact of their work, as Ashforth (1989) suggested doing in order to increase the impact dimension of psychological empowerment.

“When I ask a member of staff for advice on how they would complete a task, I can see whether the activity would be stimulating for them. Sometimes the enthusiasm of my younger employees is palpable even if we’re talking about administrative tasks or tasks with low added value, such as entering data in a database because the process hasn’t been automated yet. [...] Sometimes they decide how to make such a mechanical job interesting. Once G1 completed a very long task in one day because he had decided to use the task as a test to evaluate his attention to detail. Another time, G1 automated the process, which may have taken longer than entering the data manually but showed me that he had learned new aspects of Visual Basic programming.” (G)

The personal convenience of line managers also emerged as a justification for doing empowerment in a more pronounced way.

“Doing empowerment makes my life easier. [...] I get rid of some of the things cluttering my desk. [...] Honestly, there are more worthy reasons, but this shouldn’t be underestimated, should it?” (C)

The personal convenience of being able to take care of more strategically relevant aspects for one’s team is a common element in the explanations of line managers who realise that they cannot do everything themselves and see empowerment as a way of increasing team performance. The line manager is not so much concerned with the elements that can give meaning to the employee’s work. They let the employee find their own motivation. Here, rather, the line manager seems to be concerned with keeping their authority by ensuring that employees work responsibly with as little supervision as possible, according to Friedman’s idea of responsible autonomy (1977). This attitude is probably not enough to create empowerment, although the line manager interviewed uses the word ‘empowerment’.

There are also altruistic reasons for line managers to empower. According to some line managers, giving responsibility to their staff is the right thing to do, because it feels spontaneous and is part of their natural way of dealing with others.

“I think it’s in my nature. It’s just the way I do things.” (A)

Since not all spontaneous and natural behaviours are necessarily good (Clegg *et al.*, 2006), this dissertation took a careful look at line managers’ beliefs about their own management style. Empowerment is generally considered the most effective way to bring out the best in people. The explanation given by line managers comes from their previous professional experiences. When they were the same age as their employees, the line managers interviewed found themselves suffering their supervisor’s authority to the extent that they did not want to repeat the same model now. In short, it seems that the line managers in the dissertation had more bad examples to avoid than good teachers to follow, and this is what drove them to become more empowering managers.

“The relationship with my boss in the old job? [...] He wasn’t good with people. [...] His way of doing things wasn’t the best way to bring out the best in people. If you try to control everything others do, and you put constraints on them and say no all the time,

don't expect to be loved or understood when it is you who is wrong. At most, you are feared for as long as you have power, but then you are nothing. [...] I certainly don't behave like that with my employees. I believe there is great potential in each of them and I am certainly not jealous if they do their job well. I don't feel threatened when they do a good job and I hope that one day one of them will be ready to take over from me. [...] That person I told you about earlier would crush you instead for fear that you might overshadow him or step into his shoes.” (B)

In conclusion, empowerment is encouraged for several reasons, to which line managers have often linked the dimensions of psychological empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995) and studied in their interactions by Wang and Lee (2009). Through structural empowerment actions, line managers can increase the individual competence of their employees and thus improve the functional flexibility of the team. This has positive implications in terms of enhancing the quality of the work performed, increasing productivity and in the long term improving the reputation of the team and the line manager. Furthermore, empowerment allows the line manager in the short term to be freed from activities, often administrative, that occupy their desk. Through an empowering approach, even these activities can become stimulating learning opportunities for employees. Finally, there are altruistic reasons for empowerment. Line managers recognise that this approach brings out the best in people. Their belief stems more from bad examples than good teachers. Having experienced the negative effects of hierarchical power, they do not want to repeat the same pattern now they are in a position of authority.

3.6 How line managers recognise empowerment

The transfer of power from line manager to employee in an empowerment relationship is accompanied by the transformation of the line manager's role from resource controller to people developer. In this new role the line manager helps their staff to identify goals and priorities and to create mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating their own performance (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007).

“As soon as a new employee joins the team, I bring in a more experienced colleague as part of the induction process. Obviously, no one can work autonomously at first, but I've seen various people grow, so I'm generally confident in my ability to guide someone from total dependence to total independence, which is actually interdependence

here because we work together. [...] To evaluate progress I observe the person directly in the field, in particular their familiarity with the work tools. I ask them questions to figure out if they have an idea of the time the various activities require and if they keep track of the progress of the job. I also ask them questions to determine whether they pay attention to the quality of the work they do and to the work their colleagues do. I listen to what they say to gauge how they address their colleagues and whether they help their colleagues coordinate their work. I also ask others to give an evaluation so that the person doesn't fall victim to my biases." (G)

As indicated in this account, there are several actions a line manager takes to evaluate the degree of empowerment of a staff member: essentially, a line manager observes and solicits the self-assessment of the staff member and the hetero-evaluation of other line managers through questions aimed at understanding the aspects of the work of which the staff member shows ownership. Not only the performance itself but also the employee's evaluation of their own performance signals the degree of empowerment and possible improvements the employee can achieve.

"I like to delegate and show that I have confidence in what an employee will do, but sometimes I have to pay more attention to the coaching and mentoring aspects and invest more time in these activities because otherwise the task is not interpreted as empowering, indeed some may think the task is beyond their abilities." (G)

In this second quote, it is the line manager who shows awareness of the fact that empowerment has to take place gradually because otherwise it might have negative implications for the employee in terms of stress. The line manager interviewed related this to the need for a change in coaching and mentoring activities. Many other line managers, instead, spoke of their support activities as being a constant in the lives of their employees from the beginning of the relationship until the moment when employees become fully empowered. Finally, it should be noted that the words 'empowerment' and 'delegation' are used interchangeably, and this seems to indicate in the line manager a certain confusion between the two practices (Leana, 1987) or an unwillingness to transfer power permanently (Gallie *et al.*, 1998).

As indicators of the degree of empowerment of a staff member, line managers have recognised elements such as performance level, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, which can be related to the work outcomes indicated by Spreitzer *et al.*

(1997). The difference, however, is that the indicators of Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) provide information on the degree of empowerment in relation to the individual task, while those considered by the line managers in this dissertation indicate the level of empowerment in relation to the position held in the organisation and in relation to the various tasks performed so far.

“What signals to me that there is empowerment is the level of performance, employee satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. These key performance indicators or KPIs may well vary, but they are like stock market indices when the economy is growing: they show a positive trend in the presence of empowerment.” (B)

The structural approach alone is not sufficient to empower people. Therefore, as a further indicator of empowerment, sometimes taken for granted, it is necessary to consider whether the employee has the motivation to be empowered. Only if this is so can there be any progression in the process of psychological empowerment.

“The main thing is to know whether the employee wants to be empowered and there is no better way to know this than to ask him or her.” (D)

The empowerment process can hardly be fruitful if an employee does not express willingness or any wish to be empowered. Therefore, in general, this indicator should be the first to be taken into consideration by line managers. However, for the Generation Z employees interviewed, it does not seem to be a significant indicator, since all of them stated that they wanted empowered professional relationships. However, it should be noted that the employees interviewed offer useful insights into interpreting the experience of empowerment in their work context and in similar contexts, but they are not statistically representative of the entire Generation Z.

“Sometimes empowerment doesn’t work simply because you focus on the wrong person. You can empower someone, but if that person doesn’t want to be empowered and always prefers to come back to you for final approval their understanding of empowerment is going to be completely different from someone who badly wants that empowerment. [...] Working with those who want to be empowered can be difficult but working with those who don’t want to be empowered is even more difficult.” (H)

All line managers agree that their assessment of the degree of empowerment of an employee cannot be separated from the employee’s level of competence. In particular,

skills to successfully complete the task, other technical skills not related to the task but the role, and transferable skills are taken into account.

“When I think I’ve identified the right person to carry out a task, I talk to them and explain what skills they’ll be able to develop, including both technical skills and transferable skills such as problem-solving and leadership. I ask them what they think of my proposal and whether they’d be happy to carry out the task. [...] Then I talk about the key aspects and delivery time. If I sense the person is reticent, I ask why and respond to any concerns or doubts, hoping to get them fired up.” (F)

The remarks show how assessing competence and motivation to be empowered is accompanied by a desire to help the employee visualise the moment when they will successfully complete the task (Maddux, 1995). The line manager’s words thus highlight how coaching is empowering behaviour (Arnold *et al.*, 2000). When the focus is on people development, the role of line managers is to support personal awareness and self-accountability (Whitmore, 2017), which are the pillars of any coaching theory (Stober and Grant, 2006).

Line managers show that they are ready to discuss the indicators they use to detect the degree of empowerment of their staff, but none of the line managers has reflected on the indicators that signal their own capacity for empowerment. It would appear unnecessary for line managers to learn to be empowering if the behaviours identified by Arnold *et al.* (2000) or other effective empowerment behaviours were common and established practice in the work context under review. This is not the case, however. There is a complete lack of awareness among the line managers interviewed about the necessity to learn and develop certain behaviours for empowerment. This is not to say that the line managers do not show empowering behaviours, but they are unable to carry out a complete and in-depth reflection on the empowering behaviours they are good at or where there is room for improvement. There is a lack of training for line managers on how to be effective in building and developing an empowering relationship.

At present all line managers interviewed consider themselves fully capable of empowerment. However, this is unrealistic, as demonstrated by the example of a line manager who was surprised when an employee had interpreted empowerment in their own way, as it should be in such a relationship.

“One day I found out that the task I had given to AI had actually been carried out in part by one of their colleagues, so I wondered: ‘Weren’t you supposed to develop the skills we had discussed together?’ It was a surprise, but not a problem, although I would’ve liked to have known about this initiative in advance.” (A)

The surprise at the employee’s initiative shows that empowerment is not a natural and spontaneous process, where unexpected solutions are accepted by default. However, the line manager shows that they have reflected on the fact that the task was completed, probably in a timesaving and error-free manner, so that even if the designated employee had not developed the agreed competencies, they had certainly developed other competencies which the employee considered more important. So, in the end, the line manager accepted the result as a successful example of empowerment. This is an example of self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The choice of how to perform the agreed task may also involve a colleague or total delegation to other people (Spreitzer, 1995). Adequate training could show line managers how to increase the empowerment climate (Seibert *et al.*, 2004) rather than falling victim to it.

Line managers explained that the duration of the empowerment relationship influences their level of confidence in a staff member’s ability to complete a task. The longer the line manager and employee have worked together, the higher the line manager’s level of confidence will be in the quality of the employee’s performance.

“My staff often work in different areas of our design centre and are sometimes working remotely. I can’t always check what they are doing in person. Of course, I have to trust them, but I trust them to do a good job because I have known them for over a year, and I know what kind of people they are. [...] In any case, before the final delivery, we always have at least one meeting to discuss any critical issues.” (E)

Another line manager stated that it takes eighteen months for line manager and employee to reach a complete relationship of trust.

“If all goes well, at the end of the eighteen months the employee will be fully autonomous, and I won’t be interfering in their work anymore.” (C)

When defining the role of the line manager in an empowerment relationship, the duration of the relationship is an important indicator. Eighteen months is acceptable compared to the twelve years an employee spends on average with the same employer in

Italy (Buchholz, 2020), although this tenure will decrease in the future partly due to the changing labour market but also because staying with the same employer all one's life is a much less attractive prospect for Generation Z employees than for those of previous generations (Seemiller and Grace, 2019). A decrease in the importance given to job security is contrasted by increased importance in the need to feel valued by the organisation and by one's line manager (De Smet *et al.*, 2021).

When an employee is left to choose how to perform a task, the line manager gets the chance to learn alternative ways of performing the job. Line manager learning is a further indicator of empowerment. Although not indicated by many, line manager learning could be a key aspect to consider in showing the line manager the benefits of an empowering relationship.

“When the learner outperforms the master then the master has to step aside. [...] One day I realised that an employee of mine had become really good at programming in C++. [...] His solutions are often better than mine, no matter how good a programmer I consider myself to be. Now I not only give him carte blanche, but I study his solutions to keep up to date and make sure they are applied to all our machines as standard.” (E)

In conclusion, several indicators indicate the existence of empowerment. The degree of empowerment and the ability to improve in the empowerment process depend both on the level of performance and on the employee's balanced judgements of their own performance. The line manager also considers the level of job satisfaction and organisational commitment of the employee to be good indicators. In the case of the employees participating in this dissertation, the wish to be empowered is not a significant indicator because all respondents want this to happen but, in general, this variable should be considered before establishing an empowering relationship. Other significant indicators are the competence of the employee because as their competence increases, so does the sense of self-determination, and thus generally their experience of psychological empowerment improves; the duration of the relationship between line manager and employee because as the length of the relationship increases, so does the competence of the employee and so does the confidence of the line manager in their own ability to judge the employee's performance; and the learning of the line manager because the process of empowerment is at a highly advanced stage when it is the line manager who learns from the employee. Here learning is intended in a technical sense: no line manager highlighted

the need to reflect on their own empowerment skills. Finally, it should be noted that in this section not a word has been said about the line manager's trust in the employee because in reality line managers adopt this word as a synonym for empowerment and therefore it is not particularly useful to include it in the list of indicators if other dimensions are needed to explain the level of trust.

3.7 What line managers do when they empower

The aim of this section is to understand the limits to the freedom of action granted to employees. As anticipated in the section of this chapter on interpreting the line managers' understanding of the concept of empowerment, line managers' efforts to empower are mainly focused on the employee's present role and not on any future role in the company. Some constraints in the transfer of power to the employee have already been identified. These constraints include not being able to access budget resources without authorisation and not being able to have a major influence on decisions to hire new colleagues. However, there are other areas in which employees have freedom of action. In examining these areas, the psychological aspects of the transfer of power were considered, both in relation to the line manager and the employee.

The power that the employee perceives to have lies at the heart of the empowerment process. This power is expressed according to Menon (2001) through perceived control (Conger and Kanungo, 1988), perceived competence (Wood and Bandura, 1989a) and goal internalisation (Burke, 1986). The line managers interviewed state that they increase their employees' perceived control by listening to them and conveying the feeling that the power to influence business processes is also in their hands if they so wish; to increase the sense of competence line managers believe they assign tasks that employees have the power to handle; and finally to support goal internalisation line managers ensure they present the goal in such a way as to make it meaningful to the employee and support their inner drive, which is a different form of power from the previous ones and serves to help the employee complete the task with enthusiasm. In reality, however, no line manager provided detailed examples of how they act on the meaning dimension of the psychological empowerment of their employees. Only two people made some vague reference to the meaning dimension: the line manager who expressed the hope of enthusing his employees when agreeing on a task and the line manager who told the story of breaking stones, supporting the family and building a

cathedral. It should therefore be pointed out that the line managers interviewed left it up to their employees to find the meaning dimension in their work and to create alignment at a higher level with the team, department, organisation and society (Dhingra *et al.*, 2021; Dimitracopulos, 2020).

“When I think I’ve identified the right person to carry out a task, I talk to them and explain what skills they’ll be able to develop, including both technical skills and transferable skills such as problem-solving and leadership. I ask them what they think of my proposal and whether they’d be happy to carry out the task. [...] Then I talk about the key aspects and delivery time. If I sense the person is reticent, I ask why and respond to any concerns or doubts, hoping to get them fired up.” (F)

“I once heard a story that illustrates very well what it means to give meaning to what you are doing. It is the story of a wanderer who walking in the desert meets three people doing the same job, but the first one says he’s breaking stones, the second one’s supporting his family and the third one’s building a cathedral. Here we have people with exactly the same approach and it’s true that it’s usually the youngest who are building the cathedral, and you can see that because they’re always eager to do it and they hardly ever say no if you explain to them why their contribution is important, why we’ve chosen them for the task and what they’ll learn from this experience.” (G)

Line managers consider giving responsibility to their employees a crucial part of the empowerment process. One line manager stated that to make quite clear the area in which his staff have responsibility, he wants them to be the ones to sign off the part of the company form that certifies compliance of the work they have done. The line manager still remains ultimately responsible for all the team’s projects but in this way he formally clarifies their duties and responsibilities, and intentionally promotes their engagement in company procedures. The authority granted includes managing petty cash, agreeing with colleagues to finish a project on time through overtime, and requesting material from other departments needed to complete the job. On the other hand, employee authority does not extend to budgeting for work for which they have not received authorisation or deciding who to choose as a future colleague in their team. Furthermore, employees are not allowed to buy new equipment to finish a job or to decide on longer timescales for completing a project.

“I let the employee who has carried out the actions required by the compliance form sign the part of the document related to the work they’ve done. Even though I am ultimately responsible for the project, I believe that having my employees’ signatures on an official document makes them aware of what they’re responsible for without any misunderstanding. If they sign, I trust their work. [...] If they don’t sign, we sit around a table to find out what’s wrong. [...] Then they know, for example, that they can manage overtime when needed, deal with office expenses through petty cash or urge other departments to work with us to avoid bottlenecks or unnecessary delays.” (C)

In addition to clarifying how power is transferred and in which areas, these comments contain structural empowerment measures that show how line managers support the perceived control of their staff (Kanter, 1983; Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Other measures suggested by the line managers interviewed concern the employees’ participation in selection processes, although they do not have the last word, or their presence at meetings usually only attended by their line managers, where key results are announced to more senior colleagues. These activities are not intended for employees with low empowerment levels. The aim is to extend the area of influence of these employees and to create opportunities to further increase the trust of employees in their line managers and vice versa.

Trust in the employee who decides to complete a task by adopting an alternative solution to the one the line manager would have taken is the basis of the psychological empowerment process. This trust arises as a result of the line manager’s decision to relinquish control over how the job is done.

“I trust people who deserve trust. My way of performing a task does not necessarily reflect theirs, but once we have discussed expectations of the outcome, any differences in the process are irrelevant. The important thing is to arrive at the agreed result.” (A)

Several line managers saw motivating their staff and clearly communicating expectations about the work to be performed and the power available to staff as an important part of their role. These structural interventions seem to promote self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and are therefore important in an empowerment relationship.

“A good team consists of people with different abilities. I need to know the strengths and areas for improvement of each of my staff to bring out the best in them in terms of performance. And the only way I know is to talk to them, figure out what motivates them and use their skills in a way that is consistent with their preferences and abilities. [...] Obviously, I provide guidelines on the performance expectations we need to reach in this team and the freedoms we can allow ourselves.” (G)

It is worth pointing out here that not all line managers simply provide guidelines on how to do the job. Many offer suggestions on how they themselves would do the job. Moreover, there are sometimes detailed procedures that need to be followed step by step, so the leeway to deviate from the outlined path is minimal. There is thus a doubt that within certain teams the scope for feeling empowered is only created when the assigned task is not limited to the simple execution of a procedure but comprises an adequate number of sufficiently meaningful activities to leave the employee with impact and choice in how to carry them out (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990).

“We do quality control here. Procedures are documented and must be followed to the letter. When a new employee joins the team, they learn to carry out the individual procedures. The more autonomous they become, the more complex the tasks I entrust to them, and these require not only executing many different procedures but also updating them following international and European directives [...], training less experienced employees, defining new control procedures and organising work within our team together with other employees.” (D)

Although the procedures required for quality control make certain tasks rather prescriptive, it seems that this line manager has chosen to adopt a leadership style characterised by behaviours that Pearce and Sims (2002) would consider empowering, such as encouraging independent action, opportunity thinking and teamwork. As the job lends itself to being rather regimented and impersonal, this line manager should ensure that they also adopt other behaviours that Pearce and Sims (2002) would consider empowering: for example, they should promote self-development, self-reward and participative goal setting.

Many line managers stated that another important aspect of their role is to indicate the direction their team should take in order to be aligned with organisational goals. Team goals are usually closer to the employees' professional goals than to the

organisation's goals, and when communicated effectively by line managers they help to create a space in which employees can feel empowered.

“When our branch manager said he wanted to increase turnover by fifty per cent from one year to the next, I had to explain to my staff what such an ambitious target meant to us in terms of the number of projects and clients to prioritise. I wanted to make it clear to everyone which projects and clients they should be paying the most attention to because they are considered strategic for our subsidiary. [...] Sharing information of this kind immediately leads people to direct their preferences towards projects that pose a greater or lesser degree of risk, depending on how much they want to be exposed to recognition and criticism.” (B)

The space to feel empowered thus arises from structural empowerment measures such as information sharing (Arnold *et al.*, 2000) and the translation of organisational goals into team goals (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020). Line managers acknowledge that their leadership style can influence their employees' empowerment experience, but only one person also referred to personality traits.

“Having a sizeable ego can be a problem if your purpose at work is to make your employees feel like key players. You may have trouble letting go of power. Unfortunately, I met someone who had an oversized ego and acted like a dictator at work. [...] Sometimes it just takes a little bit of kindness.” (F)

Optimism is another personality trait that this line manager reported as important.

“I am tired of colleagues who never smile, just because they have to show that they work so hard and are full of worries. I want colleagues who can smile. Long live the people who see the glass half full. It's the optimists who can instil hope and confidence in others. Pessimists may be right, but they just don't know how to dream.” (F)

Through optimism, a line manager can convey confidence in their employees' ability to achieve excellent performance, thus increasing their self-efficacy.

In conclusion, line managers transfer power to their employees to enable them to complete tasks related to their current role. The transferred power allows employees to organise work within the team, manage petty cash, decide whether to work overtime to meet delivery deadlines, intervene in selection decisions but without being decisive, and

make presentations in front of senior colleagues. Employees are not allowed to decide independently when to deliver work, purchase equipment or budget expenditure without authorisation. Within this space, empowerment takes place through activities that increase mutual trust between line manager and employee. Employee empowerment is also affected by the information the line manager shares, such as the direction in which the team is moving in order to remain aligned with the organisation. Finally, the line manager's personality traits may play a role in widening or narrowing the space within which the empowerment experience takes place.

3.8 Summary of findings from interviews with line managers

In the company under investigation, line managers have ownership of the employees' performance management process. For line managers, this means the responsibility for agreeing clear objectives that employees are committed to achieving, monitoring the performance of employees through individual meetings at regular intervals and evaluating the job performance of employees in qualitative and quantitative terms at the end of the year. The fact that the ownership of the performance management process is not in the hands of the employees seems to be a missed opportunity for structural empowerment.

Line managers believe that their informal approaches to performance management are more effective than the formal approach expected by the company. Their actions mainly consist of giving advice, sharing experiences, giving feedback and asking questions to find out how much autonomy and trust to give an employee. Line managers are aware that there needs to be a balance between giving autonomy and providing support. This is critical for the employees who took part in this dissertation because work has to be stimulating and linked to a purpose that makes sense to them, otherwise they are prepared to leave their current job even if there is no equally rewarding alternative.

Line managers consider that the internal communication of company information helps their employees understand company strategy and the market context in which the company operates. This information should help to make the employees' work more meaningful, but the interviews did not reveal any organisational measures that help employees to transform high-level corporate information into information that has a

positive effect on their psychological empowerment. What is important is the line manager's job at translating organisational goals into team goals.

Empowerment can be a suitable approach to building a professional relationship with Generation Z employees because it satisfies the employees' need to be constantly challenged. However, the empowerment process with some line managers can be slow. It appears to take up to eighteen months for a line manager and an employee to develop a relationship of full trust in which the transfer of power allows the employee to carry out their role without unwanted interference from the line manager.

Empowerment is encouraged for several reasons. Through structural empowerment actions, line managers can increase the individual competence of their employees and thus improve the functional flexibility of the team. This has positive implications in terms of enhancing the quality of the work performed, increasing productivity and in the long term improving the reputation of the team and the line manager. In addition, empowerment allows the line manager in the short term to get what are often administrative activities done that take up their time. By adopting an empowering approach even these activities can become stimulating learning opportunities for employees. Finally, there are altruistic reasons for empowerment – line managers recognise that it is the ideal way to bring out the best in people.

Several indicators point to the existence of empowerment. The degree of empowerment and the ability to improve in the empowerment process depend both on the employee's level of performance and on balanced judgements about their own performance. The line manager also considers the level of job satisfaction and organisational commitment of the employee to be good indicators. In the case of the employees participating in this dissertation, the desire to be empowered is not a significant indicator because all respondents want such a relationship but, in general, this variable should be considered before establishing an empowering relationship. Other significant indicators are the competence of the employee because as the competence increases, so does the sense of self-determination and thus the overall experience of psychological empowerment of the employee improves; the duration of the relationship between line manager and employee because as the length of the relationship increases, so does the competence of the employee and likewise the confidence of the line manager in their own ability to judge the employee's performance; and the learning of the line

manager because the process of empowerment is at a highly advanced stage when it is the line manager who learns from the employee. Here learning is intended in a technical sense: no line manager signalled the need to reflect on their own empowerment skills.

Line managers transfer power to their staff to enable them to complete tasks related to their current role. The transferred power allows employees to organise work within the team, manage petty cash, decide whether to work overtime to meet delivery times, intervene in some way in recruitment decisions but without being decisive, and make presentations in front of senior colleagues. Employees are not allowed to make their own decisions on when to deliver work, purchase equipment or budget expenditure without authorisation. Within this space, empowerment takes place through activities that increase mutual trust between line manager and employee. Employee empowerment is also affected by the information the line manager shares, such as that which explains the direction the team is moving in to stay in step with the organisation. Finally, the line manager's personality traits may play a role in widening or narrowing the range of action within which the empowerment experience takes place.

3.9 Summary of the chapter

This chapter analysed how line managers support the empowerment process of their Generation Z employees, showing the structural measures that can be implemented by line managers. Company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working, in addition to internal communication, were taken into account as organisational elements that can enhance the empowerment climate and thus reinforce the line managers' actions.

The policies analysed show that the formal approach to performance management is useful when setting objectives, but it is through one-to-one discussions that empowerment can grow because it is then that feedback can be provided promptly; there is also room to improve empowerment support by allowing employees to use social media at work and by extending opportunities for hybrid working, for example working from anywhere in the world at any time.

Chapter 4 – Findings and discussion: psychological perspective

After having examined the empowerment-supporting mechanisms of some corporate policies and the structural empowerment actions of line managers, this chapter will look at the psychological empowerment experience of Generation Z employees.

Psychological empowerment in the work environment is expressed through the sense of control a person exerts over their work and experiences through their perceptions of the surrounding reality and relationships with others. Spreitzer (1995: 1444) defines psychological empowerment as “a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role. By active orientation, I mean orientation in which an individual wishes and feels able to shape his or her work role and context.”

Based on the interviews conducted with the employees who participated in this dissertation, psychological empowerment occurs when an employee believes that they have the necessary skills (competence); results (impact); a connection to the organisation’s purpose (meaning); and the freedom to decide what to do, how to complete the work and when to work (self-determination). This condition is fostered by structural empowerment actions that the line manager can perform, thus playing an active role in the employee’s psychological empowerment experience, for example transferring power permanently, building a relationship of trust, encouraging performance improvement through balancing support and autonomy and identifying possible career paths in the organisation for the employee. Of course, as often pointed out, there are limits to the freedom a line manager can or wants to grant and these limits depend on the structure of the organisation, the context in which the organisation operates and, above all, the approach chosen by the line manager in managing the relationship with each of their employees. In any case, here the question is to identify whether, with all the limitations of the case, the employees within the organisation under examination experience some form of psychological empowerment.

The experience of psychological empowerment of the employees who participated in this dissertation is in many cases limited to the organisation examined here, given the lack of any significant previous professional experience due to the young

age of the employees. Therefore, before proceeding to examine the psychological empowerment experience of the employees interviewed, it is worth considering their worldview and career expectations.

4.1 What Generation Z employees want from their career

Rapid technological progress has led to the development of tools, systems and resources that are so innovative as to be changing the way people approach their work and private lives. For some of these people, keeping up with the technological changes of the last twenty years may have been challenging, but not for Generation Z, who are considered the first generation of digital natives. The term ‘digital native’ emphasises that there has never been a world without the internet for members of this generation. For the digital natives, technological changes have simply been part of the journey of discovery that everyone experiences growing up. On the other hand, the concept of employee empowerment was developed before the internet became available to the businesses and citizens of the planet. It is, therefore, worthwhile updating knowledge and skills on the topic of employee empowerment and addressing the generation of those who grew up in a globalised world where smartphones, tablets, social media and apps have always been part of everyday life. This section presents the future landscape of work and the career expectations of the employees interviewed.

4.1.1 Future landscape of work

Just as the switchboard operators at the beginning of the last century would never have imagined a world of smartphones, it is hard to imagine the jobs of the future today. However, the interviews with the employees who participated in this dissertation revealed some aspects that may help understand if not the jobs, then at least the skills required in the future.

“When I was looking for a job as an engineer, I hoped to find it before my technical knowledge got too old.” (E2)

Although it is easier to imagine a ten-year-old pupil with a job they will have in their forties that is completely unknown today, researchers at the University of Milan (Bartezzaghi *et al.*, 2019) are convinced that Generation Z members will also have a job that does not exist today. What Generation Z students have studied will not be strictly related to their future careers. It is hard to make predictions about the jobs that will exist

in thirty years' time, but some themes can be identified. For example, the jobs of the future will require some form of creativity (Fal, 2017).

“With all these technological innovations I expect to deal with new things all the time and leave all the repetitive tasks to the machines, and it will be my responsibility to program the machines that will do this.” (F4)

The employee interviewed does not specify what he will create or whether there will be an actual demand for creativity in the world of work, but he believes that the act of creating something will in some way be part of his professional future. Furthermore, he is convinced that he can use technology to his advantage, as he and his colleagues do today when he saves information digitally instead of keeping everything on paper. This will bring new ways of optimising work processes and at the same time introduce new risks.

It will not be a surprise to see an increase in automation in many industries, because companies will not be willing to pay people to do jobs that can be automated when the automated work will cost less than people's work and be of equal or higher quality (Deloitte Insights, 2019). Some participants in the dissertation believe that specific tasks related to their current job could be automated now or in the near future. No one says that their job in its entirety could already be replaced by a machine, but respondents point out that some jobs could become obsolete for humans as technology introduces new ways of working.

“We may not have humanoid robots cleaning our houses as we see in the cartoons, but we already have devices that decide to clean when it's dirty and recharge themselves. [...] In my work I will need creativity, empathy and above all the ability to use artificial intelligence.” (C4)

It is impossible to know how these ideas will translate into future occupations, but line managers can prepare Generation Z to develop the skills needed to work in organisational and social contexts that are rapidly changing and generating new occupations (Bayern, 2019). In addition to specific technical skills, Generation Z employees will need to develop career-critical soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving, which have also been crucial for previous generations (NACE, 2018).

The university qualifications most sought after by Italian recruiters in 2019 were those related to business, engineering and IT (Almalaurea, 2020). Both engineering and computer science degrees are related to technological advancement, while business degrees serve to operate the companies that develop, use and sell these technologies. As many activities will continue to be automated, the professions that will attract Generation Z members are likely to be those that are less prone to easy automation, and which can guarantee high wages, career advancement and low sensitivity to economic crises. These professions will continue to be linked to the most sought-after degrees because studying for a job that will be obsolete in a few years hardly seems like a good investment for the employees interviewed.

4.1.2 Generation Z career expectations

If line managers learn to interpret the career expectations of Generation Z employees, they can make the processes of induction, professional development and role ownership easier for these employees. The employees interviewed highlighted several aspects related to career expectations.

About a third of employees mentioned enjoyment as an essential aspect of their career. Employees emphasised how important it is for them to do a job they love every day and said they were afraid of not having fun at work. This may seem paradoxical in a labour market where young people are pushed to accept any offer for fear of not achieving financial security (Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Although the employees interviewed have jobs that provide them with high salaries compared to many peers, they stated that they would be willing to take jobs with lower pay if these jobs offered them greater happiness.

“What is really important for me is that I’m happy and that I enjoy what I do. I don’t want to be one of those people who dread going to work because they know they’ll be unhappy all the time. I don’t even care that much about the salary, as long as it’s enough to live on. I just need to be happy.” (B1)

Almost half of the employees stated that contributing to a good cause with their work is the most important aspect of their career. Many employees interviewed believe that it is important to help those who are in need and therefore want their work to mean something to someone somewhere in the world. Several employees talked about the

applications of their work in the biomedical sector, while others referred to their contribution to making the world a better place through their company's social responsibility initiatives. Not only do employees want to make an individual difference with their work, but they also state that it is important for their career to contribute to social change. Other studies also confirm that a company's impact on society influences members of Generation Z when they are deciding whether to work for that company (Stillman and Stillman, 2017).

"I want to make a difference. Don't get me wrong, it would be great to be able to travel, earn a lot of money and become famous, but none of that really matters if my work doesn't make a difference to anyone." (E1)

One aspect that should not be confused with the search for enjoyable work is the desire to have a job that is also fulfilling. The desire for fulfilment is certainly present in workers of different generations but appears in higher percentages in Generation Z (Di Nardo, 2018; Monster, 2016). Some employees saw their fulfilment in the chance to pursue their passions. Others indicated a greater purpose than the idea of making money. When employees were asked what having a fulfilling life meant to them, three quarters related the thought to that of a fulfilling job.

"The most important aspect of my job is the opportunity it gives me to do something I love, not just pay the bills." (D3)

"A fulfilling life is a life of job satisfaction, related to what I love doing. [...] Making a difference in a positive way for the people I care about is also fulfilling." (A2)

This is a generation that wants to go home from work feeling they have contributed something good to the world. If an employee doesn't feel internal fulfilment, their line manager should find a way to connect the role the employee was hired for to a larger, more meaningful purpose the company is striving for.

Because employees want a job that is fun and fulfilling, some may think they are willing to settle for a modest salary as long as they have the opportunity to work all day to change the world. Although this might be a realistic prospect for some, the employees interviewed take their financial stability seriously. It is probably not high on their list of priorities, however, because they already have a permanent contract in the company under review. This is an aspect in which the interviewees show that they are not

representative of the entire Generation Z. However, a stable future and a competitive salary with the possibility of rapid increases are among the career expectations of the employees who participated in this dissertation.

“I’d like to have a life where I didn’t have to worry unduly in case of unforeseen expenses. A life without debt... being able to go on holiday... and a decent pension.” (G1)

“To earn a lot of money and be happy is what I would like. I’d like my abilities to be recognised at all times. For the moment I can’t complain, but I’d like to make sure I have a salary that grows fast as my role becomes more important here.” (H3)

When employees interviewed describe their income and their expectations of their own financial stability, they do not talk about accumulating abundant wealth through their work. They have expectations that can sometimes appear modest and even when they highlight their desire to receive a fast-growing salary, they do not fail to stress the importance of being happy. This is an indicator of their unwillingness to sacrifice happiness for a high salary.

Another important aspect for Generation Z people is the opportunity to grow, both in terms of career progression and professional development (Dimock, 2019). The interviewees even seem more interested in professional growth than in making money. A line manager could attract and retain Generation Z employees by helping them recognise a possible career path for them within the organisation, showing the knowledge and skills they will acquire in a lifelong learning path (Leslie *et al.*, 2021). This turned out to be very important for the interviewees.

“The most important thing in my professional life is to have a job that keeps me thinking, keeps the wheels of my brain turning, day in and day out.” (H1)

Many Generation Z employees fear being trapped in a job that does not offer enough opportunities to learn and develop new skills. Online learning solutions do not appear to be an attractive option for the employees interviewed, because the content is not sufficiently customised and it is not motivating enough for them to be in front of a screen when they can be interacting with colleagues and trainers in a real work context.

Generation Z employees do not want to be bored at work, because they are not willing to waste time at a stage in their lives when they consider it crucial to gain new

experiences, aware that they have many more opportunities than previous generations. Perhaps this is why they are more concerned about making the right choice for their future and why their tolerance of what they consider to be a waste of time seems somewhat low.

“The most important thing for me is to do work that stimulates my brain. [...] I can’t stand being bored, which is when I have to sit on my hands because there’s downtime outside my control.” (E1)

“I’m thinking of leaving this company. [...] I’ve been here just over a year. [...] I’m in quality control so there is no room for alternative or creative methods. I’m not really interested in growing in this role because there’s not much room to do new things. [...] Once you have learned the process, it will be the same for at least a year. [...] I’m not interested in a job that just pays the bills, especially at my age.” (D3)

“I’m never bored. The thing I like most is that every day is different.” (H4)

“I can’t stand wasting time at my age because time is too important now. For my father, a year is a relatively short time. For me it’s a very long time.” (H3)

Participants also mentioned success as an aspect. Although a small minority, some of them are worried about not being able to fulfil their ambitions. Instead, all are committed to their personal success.

“I don’t care about money. I care about working hard and demonstrating my worth and merit.” (A1)

The open-mindedness and diversity of the social circles of those belonging to Generation Z also provide the employees interviewed with an incentive to seek out such diversity in their own workplace. The respondents believe that differences make their company stronger and state that the level of diversity in their company influenced their decision to take the job.

“We have to be careful to look at people in their complexity and diversity. We are not just the ones our bosses can delegate a list of tasks to that they don’t do. [...] Each of us has superpowers that can be useful, even if they sometimes seem very specific and uncommon.” (F1)

It emerges from this that the respondent is aware of the value of diversity. A broad representation of people working together does not necessarily identify a working environment that promotes diversity. There needs to be an inclusive corporate culture that values everyone's differences, regardless of experience, education, worldview or other unique factors. Therefore, it is not surprising that Generation Z employees consider fairness and non-discrimination in the workplace more important than high pay or a company's reputation (Steele Flippin, 2017).

"I really appreciate the opportunity to work from home sometimes. [...] I may well be more productive at home. My work-life balance has certainly improved. I save time on public transport. I can take more time for myself." (B3)

More and more companies in the last decade have made it possible to work both in person and remotely (Chokshi, 2017), and certainly the COVID-19 pandemic has increased this trend. Some employees interviewed said that working remotely not only avoids spreading the virus but also saves them time and travel costs. Others said they are more productive when they are not in the office or simply like to stay in their pyjamas. Whatever the reason, working remotely seems to be an attractive prospect for Generation Z employees, but the preference is for hybrid work rather than entirely remote or entirely in person. Employees prefer to be in person when it is useful to meet with colleagues and line managers, but not when they have to sit at a computer and work on projects they could do from the comfort of their homes or anywhere else.

"I like a company that doesn't put constraints on what I do in the office and what I do for the company when I'm out and about." (A2)

Being able to work flexibly is another demand that emerged from the interviews with employees. For some of them, work is only really flexible if they can do it when they want, for example early in the morning or late in the evening or throughout the day with occasional breaks for other activities related to their personal life. This means that staying in touch with colleagues and line managers throughout the day is normal for Generation Z employees and it is easy for them to respond even if they are not working at the time or if it is midnight. This implies increasingly blurred boundaries between work and private life and is in line with Generation Z's concept of work-life balance. The meaning that Generation Z attaches to this concept is different from that of previous generations for whom it could mean working from eight in the morning to five in the

afternoon with a one-hour break for lunch (Seemiller and Grace, 2016). The employees interviewed stated that for them, work-life balance means valuing time both when it is used for work and when it is used for fun, but there are no time constraints to respect.

In conclusion, the employees interviewed expressed high expectations of enjoyable and fulfilling work. They want to be able to contribute to changing the world with their work. They feel satisfaction in knowing that someone will benefit from their contribution because they work in the biomedical sector and also because of their organisation's corporate social responsibility initiatives. Success, money and financial stability are important, but the employees interviewed are not willing to sacrifice their happiness for a career with no meaning. Personal growth matters more than salary. Diversity is an internalised value. Hybrid and flexible work is an attractive option. Work-life balance is understood as quality time for work and personal life, without fixed schedules defining boundaries between the two. Based on these expectations, the next sections analyse how employees experience the empowerment relationship with their line manager.

4.2 How Generation Z employees interpret empowerment

Employees' interpretation of the concept of empowerment often focuses on the four dimensions of psychological empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995). Impact comes into play when employees describe their influence on the work they do, usually without going so far as to make connections with strategic organisational level activities but explaining the fit between their behaviour and the requirements of the role. Competence and self-determination are the dimensions the employee refers to when they say they can make decisions. Meaning is often linked to the career expectations outlined in the previous section and is therefore placed in terms of an enjoyable and fulfilling job.

“For me, being empowered means complying with the job description, making my own decisions and being consistent with what has been decided, but also making changes if necessary, without having to tell my boss or others and without worrying about what my boss thinks.” (F5)

“I feel empowered when I meet the expectations that others have of my role. Being empowered does not mean doing what you want or working alone. You are free, but there are boundaries to respect which depend on the structure, the boss, the company

policies... It is a bit like the freedom that Italian citizens have: they are free, but they have to respect the laws of the nation. [...] You are free and within that freedom, you have to construct your role in relation to that of others.” (D2)

These accounts are representative of two different approaches to psychological empowerment. On the one hand, some employees emphasise their decision-making freedom and autonomy (Deci *et al.*, 1989; Gist, 1987). Therefore, they are rather reluctant to involve the line manager in their work, preferring to fend for themselves whenever possible. In essence, these employees mostly like the freedom to do things themselves. On the other hand, other employees prefer to work within the limits of their decision-making autonomy, emphasising that the motivation, skills and meaning of their work must be built within the boundaries set by their role. For these employees, autonomy does not necessarily mean working alone. These people like to solve problems by leveraging their own and others' competence. Therefore, allowing employees to work alone is not always the way to achieve a high level of psychological empowerment. When an employee is left alone, they may feel disempowered even if their level of competence is not low, and this is an aspect that deserves further investigation in relation to what is suggested by Wang and Lee (2009).

“I have to sign a document certifying the testing of the devices we design and assemble here. There is a testing protocol to follow. Although the protocol is always the same, the problems I encounter in testing are often different, so I have to use my problem solving and analytical skills to get the job done. Sometimes I set myself tight deadlines to motivate myself to finish the job without wasting time, which complicates my life, but my satisfaction lies in always finding a way to get to the end. It isn't a problem if I sometimes ask others, including my boss, for help. I am not in competition with anyone. We are all in the same boat solving problems that at least initially seem impossible. [...] My work is important to me because nothing could come out of the department without my contribution.” (D1)

“My line manager lets me do it. He doesn't challenge what I do. For example, he doesn't ask, 'Why did you do this?' or 'Why didn't you do that?' He doesn't tell me how to distribute my workload and I really like that, because I prefer to organise my own activities. If I make a mistake I learn. [...] I think my line manager has found the right

way of helping me understand how my work can meet the needs of the company and how I can make a difference.” (H2)

As is evident from these two accounts, the different ways of interpreting empowerment lead to distinct dimensions of psychological empowerment. For some employees, the preference is on the autonomy to decide their own workload and the priority to give to their activities, while for others it is on problem-solving, sometimes with the help of colleagues and the line manager. In both situations, empowerment is the result of an individual and unique relationship arising out of an implicit or explicit agreement between line manager and employee.

In conclusion, the interpretation of the concept of empowerment varies between two perspectives that can be presented as the ‘freedom to do it alone’ and the ‘freedom to do it with others’. These two different interpretations of empowerment lead to distinct psychological dimensions. For employees who are oriented towards ‘the freedom to do it alone’, self-determination is of great importance, because these people especially like to decide how to manage their own activities. For employees who are oriented towards ‘freedom to do it with others’, competence is more important, because these employees mainly like to solve problems, even with the help of colleagues and their line manager, without necessarily caring whether they decide alone or with others.

4.3 What Generation Z employees do when they feel empowered

The trust of the line manager is a frequent theme in interviews with employees. In an empowering relationship, the employee interprets the line manager’s non-intervention as an act of trust in them. No one in the company under review feels left behind. Trust is often described by employees as the freedom to make decisions and to have the unconditional support of their line manager.

“He trusts me. He trusts that I will do the best I can with what I have at my disposal, which then means being able to rely on my colleagues and the equipment in the department.” (B2)

“He has never said to me ‘I trust you’ but he doesn’t have to. He lets me do my job. If I have problems I can call him, but I don’t want to disturb him when I can do without him.” (F3)

From the accounts given, it seems that employees perceive their working environment as a space in which they can make decisions on their own and with the help of others, use their skills effectively, employ the necessary equipment and repay the trust they have received from their line manager with commitment. The concept of trust in the company under review is aligned with both 'freedom to do it alone' and 'freedom to do it with others' where these expressions are to be interpreted as indicated in the previous section. Thus, trust appears to be linked to the dimensions of self-determination and competence. However, the concept of trust is communicated implicitly because employees stated that their line managers offer trust through their actions and attitudes rather than through their words. Giving freedom of action is an act interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

Employees are aware that there are limits to their freedom of action. Their authority includes the opportunity to manage petty cash, to agree with colleagues to finish a project on time through overtime and to request material from other departments to complete the work. On the other hand, the authority of employees does not allow them to budget for work for which they have not received authorisation or to decide who to select as a future colleague in their team. In addition, employees are not allowed to buy new equipment to complete work or to decide on a longer timeframe for completing a project.

Most line managers and their staff agree that empowerment requires both tangible resources such as equipment available in their own and other departments and intangible resources such as self-confidence, motivation, skills, freedom to act and power to make decisions.

Employees stated that they feel empowered because they have a certain degree of freedom to perform tasks related to their role. They are rarely asked to perform additional activities that go beyond the scope of their role. Decision-making aspects over which employees feel they have control include changes to processes that do not affect the budget, changes to the order in which tasks are carried out as long as deadlines are met, asking for help from more experienced colleagues at the same or a higher level, and being able to sign off on official documents relating to the progress of processes. As observed by Logan and Ganster (2007), self-determination and impact increase as the perception of control by employees increases.

“I feel empowered when I can make decisions that affect my project... decisions that can influence the realisation of the project, respecting all the deadlines already decided and the budget. This doesn't mean that everyone above me will agree with my decisions, but I have the freedom to present them and give reasons for them. Accepting my decisions is often easier than rejecting them, because I am convincing and because they are not really big decisions. In any case, those above me only decide the direction in which the project should go after hearing my proposals.” (G2)

“My line manager once told me ‘If you think it's the right thing to do, do it. It might be the wrong way, but we'll judge that later.’ I don't make decisions that involve expenses for the company or changes in the long term. Those decisions are up to my line manager. Mine are short-term decisions and are usually approved.” (E3)

Employees seem to be aware that the empowerment experience is limited by the boundaries of their current role. None of them refers to episodes that involve asking their line manager to empower them on tasks outside their current role, in anticipation of a possible new role in the company or even just to try something new. Therefore, empowerment within the boundaries of the role appears to provide sufficient opportunities for job satisfaction. The current role likely offers opportunities for improvement that are considered relevant and engage employees sufficiently.

“My job satisfaction grows weekly because with each passing week I feel I have a greater impact on the results we need to achieve as a team.” (F2)

This employee suggests that impact as a psychological dimension of empowerment is related to job satisfaction. However, in contrast to Ashforth (1989), it does not seem to be strategic activities that determine impact in this company. Only operational and administrative activities are involved here. These are the only activities through which all employees can experience psychological empowerment because more strategic activities such as product development and strategic customer relationship management remain the prerogative of their line managers.

“Personally, I feel empowered in my work because when I go to my boss, he tells me that I don't have to ask him for confirmation, that I am fully authorised to proceed, even though in reality there is no company policy authorising me and my job description is not that specific, so sometimes I think: ‘Are you sure it's up to you to do this? Better

ask.’ But every time I ask for confirmation, his answer is always the same. ‘Do it yourself. You know what you are doing is right. Your way of thinking is correct. I am happy if you proceed as you have decided.’ So, yes, I am empowered to the extent that I can call clients and talk to them about technical aspects. But I don’t develop new products. That’s up to my boss.” (C3)

The dimensions of perceived control, perceived competence and goal internalisation (Menon, 2001) were explored in the employees’ accounts, similar to the process used for their line managers. The accounts gathered describe how the perceived control of an employee passes through the ‘freedom to do it alone’ and to be decisive in completing a project by managing different tasks and customising work processes. The perception of competence, on the other hand, is mainly related to the ability to solve problems and help others, in line with the interpretation of empowerment as ‘freedom to do it with others’. Goal internalisation is not given much space by the employees in their stories, but when it is mentioned, it does not seem that the goal is meaningful because of the way it was presented by their line manager. Employees feel that it is they, each on their own, who are looking for some connection on how challenging goals (Bennis and Nanus, 1985) can help them to make a difference at the level of the team, department, organisation and society.

The type and magnitude of decisions are the criteria that limit the power exercised by an employee. In general, however, employees seem to appreciate that the most important decisions, particularly strategic ones, are taken by their line managers. These decisions include approving budgeted expenses, any disputes with other managers over resource allocation and office politics. It is, however, the possibility to express one’s own point of view that enables employees to experience psychological empowerment because their behaviour is part of a participatory decision-making process, and this is one of the empowering behaviours indicated by Arnold *et al.* (2000), even if the final decision is left up to the line manager.

As noted previously, the power the employee perceives themselves to have is at the basis of the empowerment process, and it is precisely here that Argyris’ (1998) objections about the difficulty of implementing empowerment mechanisms may be less relevant than originally thought. A Generation Z employee can experience psychological

empowerment even in the case of a partial transfer of power. Indeed, sometimes a partial transfer of power is the appropriate level of power to be transferred.

“I feel empowered when I can make decisions that affect my project... decisions that can influence the realisation of the project, respecting all the deadlines already decided and the budget. This doesn't mean that everyone above me will agree with my decisions, but I have the freedom to present them and give reasons for them. Accepting my decisions is often easier than rejecting them, because I am convincing and because they are not really big decisions. In any case, those above me only decide the direction in which the project should go after hearing my proposals.” (G2)

These words reveal an element of confusion. The employee refers to the feeling of being empowered, but at the same time states that he has to ask permission from others who will take the final decision. Therefore, beyond the words used, it is more of a delegation than a permanent transfer of power. The employee is called upon to make suggestions and recommendations but not to take decisions, even if the confidence shown in his own communication skills and proposals suggests a laissez-faire leadership style on the part of his superiors. In this example, the employee is recognised as having expert power, but the final decision seems to lie with the person with legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959). In this company, the figure with legitimate power is the line manager and other managers in a higher hierarchical position than the employee. When legitimate power is combined with a laissez-faire style of leadership, the psychological empowerment of Generation Z employees seems to pass through activities that are, to all intents and purposes, delegations.

In general, there seem to be considerable limits to the transfer of power in the company under consideration, because managers retain control of the most important business decisions. However, even with a limited transfer of power, a sense of psychological empowerment is still possible for the Generation Z employees. In the account given, the empowered employee shows confidence in his own performance and awareness of how much his role has an impact on the organisation (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997).

Another employee said his line manager would potentially support different decisions from those some in his team would take, but when it is finished, he likes to

review the task to assess not only the performance but also what lessons were learned from that episode.

“There are people among us who benefit from more freedom of action than others. I think this is normal. It depends on experience. However, I don’t think G would be too bothered if I chose to carry out a task in a different way from how he would, and look... even if I knew the way G would carry out the task and chose a different solution it wouldn’t be a problem for G. But, in the end, he would hold me to account and try to show me why he was right... because the fact is he’s usually right.” (G1)

The words of this employee confirm the assumption of a laissez-faire leadership style suggested in the previous account. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the empowerment relationship between a line manager and their employees is unique to each employee and different from any other empowerment relationship. This result opens up the issue of justice enactment (Diehl *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, fairness and justice are needed within the team, but on the other hand, the uniqueness of the line manager’s approach to supporting each employee’s empowerment experience must be preserved. Rowlands (1998) believes that fairness and justice can only be guaranteed by moving away from a hierarchical structure and embracing a collaborative approach. In the teams analysed, there is no lack of collaboration, and the informal leadership of employees is often shared (Pearce and Sims, 2002), especially if the employees occupy the same role.

In conclusion, when employees feel empowered, they are confident in their abilities and aware of their impact on the organisation. They do not experience feelings of abandonment. They appreciate the trust their line manager puts in them. Trust is often described by employees as the freedom to make decisions and to have the unconditional support of their line manager. The freedom to make decisions has two different connotations: it can be the freedom to do it without help from anyone else or the freedom to do it with others. In the first case the dimension of psychological empowerment to be solicited is that of self-determination; in the second case it is that of competence. The empowerment relationship between line manager and employee is unique and focuses on the employee’s current role. The line manager must be careful to ensure fairness in the way they treat their staff, given the uniqueness of each empowerment relationship in which they are involved. Delegation can also enhance the feeling of psychological empowerment for Generation Z employees. The tasks used to increase empowerment

often require operational decisions, because strategic decisions remain in the hands of line managers. However, even the mere possibility of expressing one's own point of view on strategic issues promotes the psychological empowerment of employees, because it is in line with a participative decision-making process.

4.4 How Generation Z employees monitor work progress

In the organisation under consideration are systems and processes that can be accessed for feedback on the performance of the project team, such as Gantt charts. Available to employees and their line managers, these systems and processes represent a structural empowerment measure. It is also true that an empowered employee usually monitors their own performance and work progress until the completion of the task or project in which they are involved. This self-monitoring activity seems to increase personal awareness and self-accountability regarding task completion, quality control and communication with the internal client who will take over the process at the next step or with the final client.

Self-monitoring could be encouraged by the line manager by stimulating self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985) through controlling work progress, quality and communication with internal clients and the end client on technical aspects.

“Personally, I feel empowered in my work because when I go to my boss, he tells me that I don't have to ask him for confirmation, that I am fully authorised to proceed, even though in reality there is no company policy authorising me and my job description is not that specific, so sometimes I think: ‘Are you sure it's up to you to do this? Better ask.’ But every time I ask for confirmation, his answer is always the same. ‘Do it yourself. You know what you are doing is right. Your way of thinking is correct. I am happy if you proceed as you have decided.’ So, yes, I am empowered to the extent that I can call clients and talk to them about technical aspects. But I don't develop new products. That's up to my boss.” (C3)

This employee and other colleagues in the same team indicated a change in the relationship with their line manager. The change was associated with a transition from low levels of empowerment where employees ask for permission to adopt certain solutions to high levels of empowerment where they make decisions independently. It is hard to pinpoint precisely the smallest discernible change in empowerment, but

employees who self-monitor their progress report that in the first eighteen months of employment their perception of empowerment improves every month.

“What I really like is the trust I receive from my boss. He is not someone who is on your back all the time. He lets me get on with it. He isn’t anxious about meeting deadlines. Unlike others, he doesn’t say to me, ‘Do this!’ or ‘Have you done that?’ And I appreciate that approach, because I have my independence, so to speak. Since I arrived, about a year and a half ago, I have seen an improvement in my skills and autonomy. [...] I can see myself improving month by month.” (B3)

Employees stated that they monitor their progress at work in different ways. Some referred to work performance by saying that they divide the overall workload by the number of days available to set a daily target to be achieved. Other employees interpreted the question as thinking about monitoring their own skills and therefore indicating annual learning objectives that they set themselves that are not always shared with their line manager during annual performance management meetings. Finally, employees who do not monitor their own work were also interviewed. To know if they are on track, they rely on their own experience, skills and tools related to teamwork monitoring alone.

“To know how much I’ll have to work, I estimate my overall workload and divide it by the number of days I have available. This gives me an idea of how much on average I have to do each day. So I can see if I am ahead or behind schedule and inform my boss and colleagues where I’m at. [...] I like having the situation under control. I think I like to show others that even when something can go wrong, I’ve done everything I can to catch up.” (H3)

“Every year during the Christmas holidays there comes a particular day when I stick a Post-it on the wardrobe door. On the Post-it, I write down three goals that I’d like to achieve in the coming year. Not all of them are work goals. [...] I don’t always share work goals with my line manager because I don’t think I should also share what I want to do later on in my career. But working daily to achieve my goals gives meaning to my days here in the company, makes me achieve better results and fills me with satisfaction.” (H4)

“I just use the Gantt chart, because there’s no point being the best in the class if it’s the teamwork that counts. This doesn’t mean that I back down and don’t do enough for the group. On the contrary, I’m happy to give my all, but because I work with others it makes little sense to put individual performance ahead of team performance.” (C1)

These employees indicated different motivations for doing their work. However, all three responses reveal elements that suggest we are dealing with people who feel empowered and are satisfied with their job, committed to achieving the company’s objectives and capable of excellent performance, as suggested by Hamel and Breen (2007).

Sometimes it is the line manager who suggests that self-monitoring may be useful. This may be before giving a task to the employee or during an informal conversation when work is in progress. However, the line manager may even give total freedom to the employee and not offer any suggestions. Tools often suggested for self-monitoring include to-do lists, MS Excel spreadsheets and ad-hoc project planning tools. If the suggestion is taken up, the employees state that they develop these tools on their own, keep the tools on their computer and do not share the tools with other colleagues.

“I feel comfortable using to-do lists. Sometimes I have a to-do list for each different project I am involved in. I keep them in OneNote, but I don’t share them with others. They are only useful to me. I need them when I wake up in the morning to know what has to be done, otherwise I don’t have a clear idea right away.” (E1)

“My line manager suggested I keep track of my work progress. Since I started doing it, I feel more motivated. I think it is easier to keep track of what I learn. I usually use an Excel spreadsheet.” (F5)

“When I first joined the company, I decided to keep a diary. Now I hardly ever bother to update it. I prefer the summary required by the internal application which asks me to justify how I spend each hour of work.” (B3)

In conclusion, self-monitoring of performance is generally associated with a positive empowerment experience, accompanied by job satisfaction, commitment to company objectives and high levels of performance. Various tools are used to monitor the employee’s own performance, such as to-do lists, spreadsheets and ad-hoc applications. Employees not only monitor the progress of their work on an individual

level but sometimes use monitoring tools on a team level. Some staff members monitor their own competencies. A line manager might support self-monitoring by advising employees to keep an eye on the progress of their work, the quality of their work and their communication with internal and external clients.

4.5 How Generation Z employees experience line manager relationships

Generation Z employees experience empowerment mainly in terms of the possibility of implementing the technical solutions they consider most effective and defining the order in which tasks are carried out, knowing that they have their line manager behind them in case they need technical or psychological support.

This type of relationship shows self-determination (Deci *et al.*, 1989) and competence (Gist, 1987), which are aspects of psychological empowerment related to the frequency, duration and intensity of the actions that the line manager dedicates to their staff. As the frequency, duration and intensity of the interaction with the employee increases, the level of competence seems to increase and self-determination decreases. Therefore, the line manager committed to supporting the empowerment of their staff needs to find a balance in the time they dedicate to the relationship with each of them.

Some employees indicated that they would like a line manager who is more involved in their work, while others are satisfied with the time they spend with them. One member of staff indicated that it would be frustrating to have a line manager who was more present, because this would signal a lack of trust and would be a message that might be transmitted to the whole team, thus damaging their reputation among colleagues. The level of involvement of the line manager, therefore, appears to be a key aspect in the relationship with their employee in terms of employee satisfaction with their empowerment experience.

“I think the first thing to mention about my line manager is that he helps me when I need it. His management style is open and quite informal. And that, in my opinion, is the best approach to empowerment. [...] He encourages all his staff to grow. [...] He encourages us to do the best job we can and is always happy to help us. [...] From my point of view, I’m working in an environment that I consider empowering.” (H2)

These words show an example where the level of involvement of a line manager is considered satisfactory. There are also, however, less satisfied employees.

“I think my boss needs to be more in touch, talk to me more often and come and see what kind of work I’m doing and check my results because so far, since I’ve been with this company, my results have been judged by other people who work here, but not by my boss. There is practically nothing that he’s seen. He doesn’t often give me an assignment. The assignments come to me from elsewhere, so he has no power at all to manage the things I do or the complexity of the assignments I’m given. I only see him during our bimonthly team meetings.” (C4)

In this example, the empowerment relationship does not seem to work, because the line manager is not the reference figure to whom the employee feels they can turn if needed. It is not the line manager who can give feedback on the work done. It is not the line manager who has the power to assign tasks to the employee that can increase the sense of empowerment. It should also be borne in mind that the line manager alone does not determine the workload of the employee because (although it is not explicit in the excerpt above) the employee reports back to the line manager hierarchically and to a project leader functionally. This example, therefore, shows that the line manager is not always the most appropriate figure to support the psychological empowerment of an employee. Here the reason is related to the organisational structure, as the line manager does not directly supervise the employee’s work and the project leader might be more focused on the project results than on the employee’s development. Basically, as pointed out by Pérezts *et al.* (2011), employees reporting to two different managers may feel a lack of autonomy and control, experiencing low levels of psychological empowerment.

The words of the last interviewee indicate that they would like more involvement from their line manager or someone else. The person to be involved should show attention to the work done, provide feedback on job performance and offer recognition for achievements.

Employees talked about the trust they receive from their line managers regarding their ability to work to the standards required by the organisation. Many of them would like to have more confidence, even though they know that the risks of failure could lead to serious consequences for the company, such as longer delivery times or increased costs due to excessive material consumption. On the other hand, the non-intervention of a line manager is sometimes perceived positively by the employee as a demonstration of trust.

“He lets me work alone for long stretches of time, sometimes even three or four days. I can do more or less what I want. If there is something urgent, he’s told me that I have to be good at multi-tasking and in any case I have his trust, because he knows that I can do a lot of different tasks and find a solution to any unforeseen problems. [...] I decide what to do first and what to do later. My list may say I’m going to do ten different things, but in my head, I decide what’s most important.” (D1)

Employees experience empowerment when their line manager avoids micromanagement, showing that the line manager is not interested in getting involved in everyday problems. Interviews with employees did not reveal the negative aspects of management control predicted by Edwards (1979) in the sense that direct control exercised by line managers was never indicated as a limitation of the freedom experienced by employees due to excessive involvement by their direct superior. The opposite, however, is true. Some employees would like to see greater involvement from their line managers. As noted in the case of the employee reporting to two different figures, and this is also true in general, the person doing structural empowerment should feel more involved, communicate more and give more feedback on performance and progress, and provide appropriate recognition.

Empowerment is often experienced as the freedom to do it without help from anyone else and freedom to do it with others, underlining the dimensions of self-determination and competence, as indicated in previous sections of this chapter. The impact dimension is often linked to the performance of operational and administrative tasks, over which line managers are willing to transfer power permanently. There is less agreement, however, among employees’ answers as regards the meaning dimension, probably partly because their line managers do not fully clarify the connection of individual contribution to a wider purpose. Each employee interprets the meaning dimension in their own way, with variations between those who seek meaning in the satisfaction of making products for the biomedical industry and those who connect meaning to the company’s social responsibility policies. There seem to be high levels of job satisfaction among employees and commitment towards the organisational goals. The performance levels of employees are also judged to be generally good by their line managers.

Employees reported on their ability to evaluate their own job performance and progress, reflecting through the researcher's questions on self-determination, competence, impact and meaning (Spreitzer, 1995). No particular benefit emerged from formal performance management activities. While line managers claim that formal performance management activities are valuable because they receive updates on employee performance, employees do not receive as much benefit. In contrast, informal conversations about performance are also valued by employees because feedback comes when it is useful and is specific to the situation at hand.

“Since I joined about a year ago, I had my first official performance review meeting a few days ago. We set targets for the next year. He told me he’s happy with how I’m performing. This first year went well. [...] I wasn’t worried about the outcome of the meeting, because if he’d had anything to say, I think he would have spoken up sooner. So, in a way, this meeting was just a formality.” (D2)

“At the end of the day, if I wasn’t doing a good job, someone would tell him, and he would... tell me. So, if nothing happens, that means it’s okay. No news is good news, isn’t it?” (G1)

“I don’t know if my boss knows when I’m doing a bad job, to be honest. He usually congratulates me when I do well. Anyway, I think I know when I’m doing a bad job. I’m stricter than anyone else in judging myself. I know when I can do better. But sometimes I am constrained by time limits, and it is in situations like this that I say to myself ‘Do the best you can with the time you have.’ [...] Sometimes I have to give up the idea of perfection, because it’s not necessary, although it gives me a lot of satisfaction to pay attention to the details.” (A1)

These excerpts highlight that the line manager does not always provide feedback on the performance of employees, as is reasonable to expect in the real world. However, some employees show a well-structured internal critical sense that informs them about the level of performance and progress achieved with their work, without having to wait for feedback from their line manager. This result confirms the importance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Gist, 1987) as a psychological dimension related to empowerment. However, the lack of external feedback may also represent a negative experience for employees who are unable to make realistic assessments of their own performance and progress concerning the goal to be achieved. If the self-assessment is inaccurate or if the

level of self-efficacy is low, an employee may feel demotivated or even abandoned. However, as already noted in the section on what employees do when they feel empowered, no employee feels abandoned in the company under review.

In conclusion, the relationship with one's line manager is crucial for the empowerment of an employee. When it is not the line manager who transfers power, gives feedback and builds trust, the line manager is not the figure who can foster the process of psychological empowerment of the employee. In the company under review, employees stated that they want a line manager who is present, who can provide technical and psychological support, but who avoids micromanagement. The person to be involved should pay attention to the work done, provide feedback on job performance and offer recognition for the results achieved.

4.6 How Generation Z employees experience the empowerment climate

None of the employees mentioned the possibility of their line manager developing specific skills to support psychological empowerment, such as coaching and mentoring skills. In addition, none mentioned specific competencies they could develop themselves to increase their understanding of their own empowerment experience and how to be highly empowered, for example through courses on mindfulness or emotional intelligence. However, many employees spoke of the need to develop specific skills to perform tasks within their current roles. Through the development of these skills, employees believe they can improve knowledge and behavioural competence that leads to success in their role (Spreitzer, 1995).

Line managers have generally been found to encourage the training of their staff, taking into account the skills that employees report as being useful in their role. This aspect highlights the ability of line managers to fulfil the function of competence development as a dimension of empowerment (Bandura, 1986). The growth in competence is useful for employees, line managers and the company because it increases functional flexibility and thus potentially organisational performance.

The formal performance management mechanism generates thoughts, emotions and behaviours in employees that vary according to the rigour with which the line manager conducts meetings and the importance that the line manager attaches to the formal approach of performance appraisal compared to informal actions. As noted at the

beginning of this chapter, when it was indicated that ownership of the formal performance management process is in the hands of the line manager, no line manager indicated this as a tool to support the empowerment of their staff, believing that it is their own management style that makes the difference. This idea is also shared by their staff. Company policies in general are often seen by research participants as hygiene factors, and therefore useful to reduce job dissatisfaction, but not as motivation factors suitable to increase job satisfaction (Herzberg *et al.*, 1959). Company policies can therefore contribute to the empowerment climate (Seibert *et al.*, 2004), but psychological empowerment needs much more frequent and intense relations between line managers and employees than those required, for example, by performance management policies.

The views of employees vary to a greater or lesser extent between those who believe that the formal performance-review process is useful for negotiating their own objectives in order to add clarity to what is required by their role and those who believe that the formal process is only necessary to satisfy HR managers who want to see the policy respected. Employees, like their line managers previously, also recognise that there are some important organisational benefits to adopting the formal performance management process, such as the ability of the company to produce evidence to support demotion or dismissal decisions. However, this possibility is considered remote for Generation Z employees because they all feel confident that they do not have to defend themselves against accusations of poor performance and therefore experience the demands of the performance management policy as a mere formality. This way of interpreting the policy, which is also supported by some line managers, does not contribute to adding value to the performance of employees or their level of psychological empowerment.

Among the informal supporting mechanisms for empowerment, employees mentioned individual performance-improvement conversations. Employees do not see these conversations as the first step in a formal process of reviewing their ability to do the job but as an opportunity to discuss with the line manager how to improve their performance. Thus, the individual meeting is experienced as a positive example of interest by the line manager in their professional development. This is why these conversations are often requested by employees and not by line managers and are a useful way of strengthening mutual trust and increasing the dimensions of psychological empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995).

Employees do not attribute the same benefit to collective project update meetings as to individual performance-improvement conversations. Collective project update meetings are arranged regularly by line managers and are intended to help their team to learn more about the company's strategy and the macroeconomic context, understand the company's expectations regarding organisational performance and prioritise the projects to which top management is most committed. Interviews with employees, however, reveal their difficulty in transforming high-level corporate information into information that has a positive effect on their job performance or psychological empowerment.

Only one employee among all those interviewed referred to a diary as a supporting mechanism for his psychological empowerment.

“When I first joined the company, I decided to keep a diary. Now I hardly ever bother to update it. I prefer the summary required by the internal application which asks me to justify how I spend each hour of work.” (B3)

A diary can be used to support one's own empowerment experience because it helps to make sense of one's role in the company, one's learning and progress in skills development in order to identify future areas for development and prepare for conversations about performance with one's line manager.

“In my diary I wrote down things I wanted to do the next day, trying to detail the goals and imagining the satisfaction of achieving them. Of course, my diary also contained reflections on what I had experienced on the day that had just ended. I usually updated it in the evening before going to bed. It was my way of releasing thoughts and sleeping peacefully. I needed it because the new working environment was so stimulating and so different from the one I had known until then at university. I wrote down information about the new working environment... what I was told to do so that I wouldn't forget. I also wrote about my moods. There were my answers to my line manager's questions about what I had learned and what I would do differently if I could go back. That kind of conversation seemed to give me a lot of motivation. But now I've stopped writing because I've got into a routine and my comments are starting to be repetitive.” (B3)

Tools such as paper diaries and blogs in written or video form, used as these words suggest, support personal awareness and self-accountability (Whitmore, 2017) and

thus can be effective in positively experiencing one's own empowerment journey. However, diaries and blogs are tools that require a fondness for communication, consistency in updating and analytical skills on the part of the employee. They are not tools that can be imposed, but only suggested.

Line managers and employees give different weight to the value produced by the coaching and mentoring activities that the line manager carries out. While recognising the importance of actively listening, asking questions and giving feedback, line managers consider themselves to be much more decisive than their staff in supporting psychological empowerment. Line managers likely make some attribution errors in their assessments of their own role, including intentions to encourage empowerment, but those intentions are not followed up with concrete actions. However, the positive effect of coaching and mentoring on empowerment is undeniable, not only because these are activities that show the line manager's focus on the employee's performance (Hawthorne effect), but also because they support the employee's inner dialogue, as do, for example, the diary and the blog, and they stimulate the employee to contribute to their team's performance.

Line managers say they want to be even more visible and present in the working life of their employees so that they can talk about their job performance whenever they feel it is useful.

"I believe that discussing things with my staff is an essential part of my job. If it wasn't, I could sit in the office all day. Unfortunately, the attention I pay to my staff is never enough. [...] Of course, I should do more. All line managers should do more." (F)

This wish is in line with what the employees expressed. In addition to a greater presence of their line managers when they want feedback from them, employees view positively the goal-setting activity they perform with their line managers when the performance management cycle begins. That meeting, if utilised to the fullest, could allow employees to appreciate how their individual performance fits into the broader picture of organisational performance and thus contribute to the meaning dimension of their psychological empowerment.

Throughout this chapter it has been observed at several points that among the four dimensions proposed by Spreitzer (1995) the meaning dimension is the most neglected

by line managers, probably because it is not always easy to propose a connection between individual and organisational or social objectives. This leaves it to the employee to search for a possible connection, but without indications or guidelines from their manager, the meaning may be missing for so long that it causes disengagement, dissatisfaction and overall low levels of empowerment.

As an activity to support their empowerment, the employees mentioned the opportunity that some of them have to give presentations in front of senior managers. These activities are reserved for people who are already at an advanced level of empowerment. The aim is to extend the area of influence of these employees and to create opportunities to increase mutual trust between employees and line managers.

In conclusion, employees have company policies at their disposal that can foster an empowerment climate. However, no policy alone is sufficient to empower people. The employee's relationship with a person who can permanently transfer power, give confidence and give feedback is essential to experience psychological empowerment. Individual meetings with the line manager to discuss performance are more effective than collective meetings to update the team on strategic projects for the company. Presenting the results of one's work to senior managers can be a role-enriching activity and foster personal awareness and self-accountability, as can keeping a diary or a blog.

4.7 Summary of findings from interviews with Generation Z employees

Psychological empowerment at work manifests itself through the sense of control a person has over their work and which they experience through their perceptions of their surroundings and relationships with others.

Line managers can prepare Generation Z to develop the skills needed to work in organisational and social contexts that are changing rapidly and generating new occupations. In addition to specific technical skills, Generation Z employees will need to develop career-critical soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving, which have also been crucial for previous generations.

The employees interviewed expressed high expectations of enjoyable and fulfilling work. They want to be able to contribute to changing the world through their work. They feel satisfaction in knowing that someone will benefit from their contribution because they work in the biomedical sector and also because of their organisation's

corporate social responsibility initiatives. Success, money and financial stability are important, but the employees interviewed are not willing to sacrifice their happiness for a career that lacks meaning. Personal growth matters more than salary. Diversity is an internalised value. Hybrid and flexible work is an attractive option. Work-life balance is interpreted as quality time for work and personal life, without fixed schedules defining boundaries between the two.

The interpretation of empowerment varies between two perspectives that can be presented as the ‘freedom to do it alone’ for some employees and the ‘freedom to do it with others’ for other employees. These two distinct interpretations of empowerment lead to different psychological dimensions. For employees who are oriented towards ‘freedom to do it alone’, self-determination is of great importance, because these people like to decide how to manage their own activities. For employees who are oriented towards ‘freedom to do it with others’, competence is more important, because these employees like to solve problems, even with the help of colleagues and their line manager, without necessarily giving importance to whether decisions are made alone or as a team.

When employees feel empowered, they are confident in their abilities and aware of their impact on the organisation. They do not experience feelings of abandonment. They appreciate the trust they receive from their line manager. Trust is often described by employees as the freedom to make decisions and to have the unconditional support of their line manager. The empowerment relationship between line manager and employee is unique and focused on the employee’s current role. The line manager must be careful to ensure fairness in the way they treat their staff, given the uniqueness of each empowerment relationship in which they are involved. Delegation can also increase the feeling of psychological empowerment for Generation Z employees. The tasks used to increase empowerment often require operational decisions, because strategic decisions remain in the hands of line managers. However, even the mere possibility of expressing one’s own point of view on strategic issues promotes the psychological empowerment of employees, because it is in line with a participative decision-making process.

Self-monitoring of performance is generally associated with a positive empowerment experience, accompanied by job satisfaction, commitment to company objectives and high levels of performance. Various tools are used to monitor one’s own performance, such as to-do lists, spreadsheets and ad-hoc applications. Employees not

only monitor the progress of their work on an individual level but sometimes use monitoring tools on a team level. Some staff members monitor their own competencies. A line manager might support self-monitoring by advising employees to keep an eye on the progress of work, the quality of their own work and communication with internal and external clients.

The relationship with one's line manager is crucial for the empowerment of an employee. When it is not the line manager who transfers power, gives feedback and builds trust, the line manager is not the figure who can foster the process of psychological empowerment of the employee. In the company under review, employees stated that they want a line manager who is present, who can provide technical and psychological support, but who avoids micromanagement. The person to be involved should pay attention to the work done, provide feedback on job performance and offer recognition for achievements.

Employees have company policies at their disposal which can foster an empowerment climate. However, no policy alone is sufficient to empower people. The employee's relationship with a person who can permanently transfer power, give confidence and give feedback is essential to experience psychological empowerment. Individual meetings with the line manager to discuss performance are more effective than collective meetings to update the team on strategic projects for the company. Presenting the results of one's work to senior managers can be a role-enriching activity and promote personal awareness and self-accountability, as can keeping a diary or a blog.

4.8 Summary of the chapter

This chapter analysed the psychological dimensions of empowerment that Generation Z employees experience at work.

The relationship between line manager and employee is essential to support empowerment because, in general, the line manager is the person who can permanently transfer power, give feedback and build trust with the employee. The Generation Z employee experiences all the psychological dimensions of empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995) but seems to be left alone in the search for meaning in their individual work in relation to larger organisational or societal goals. This dimension alone could have negative consequences for the whole experience of psychological empowerment.

Chapter 5 – Development of an explanatory model

Research has already highlighted the importance of employee empowerment for the survival and success of organisations, because this relational approach represents an effective response to the growing complexity of the workplace and its context. “Empowerment is critically important in enabling [...] businesses and organisations to survive in this ever-expanding national and international marketplace.” (Ripley and Ripley, 1992: 20). In particular, the study by Seibert *et al.* (2011) highlights that psychological empowerment is positively associated with job satisfaction, commitment towards organisational goals and job performance, and is negatively associated with employee strain and turnover intentions. Therefore, starting from the key aspects analysed so far, this chapter proposes a conceptualisation of employee empowerment and an explanatory model that can help line managers to recognise effective empowerment practices and to integrate these practices into the repertoire of their own behaviours, especially in professional relationships with Generation Z employees. In addition, a plan for the development and assessment of empowerment skills is provided as an operational tool that line managers can use to improve their ability to empower Generation Z employees. To complete this chapter, the implications of employee empowerment for the HR function are also discussed.

5.1 Conceptualisation of employee empowerment

The conceptualisation of employee empowerment illustrated in Figure 5.1 on the following page stems from the idea that the link between empowerment and other theoretical constructs cannot be ignored. Among the main concepts that affect the empowerment experiences of Generation Z employees, it emerged from the interviews that the line manager’s leadership plays a key role. Similarly, the employee’s self-efficacy is another essential component. Not all employees have the same level of self-efficacy when they start an empowerment-based professional relationship with their line manager, and this can explain why each employee’s empowerment experience is unique.

The level of self-efficacy influences the success of the empowerment experience in the company. The feeling of being empowered, in turn, strengthens self-efficacy.

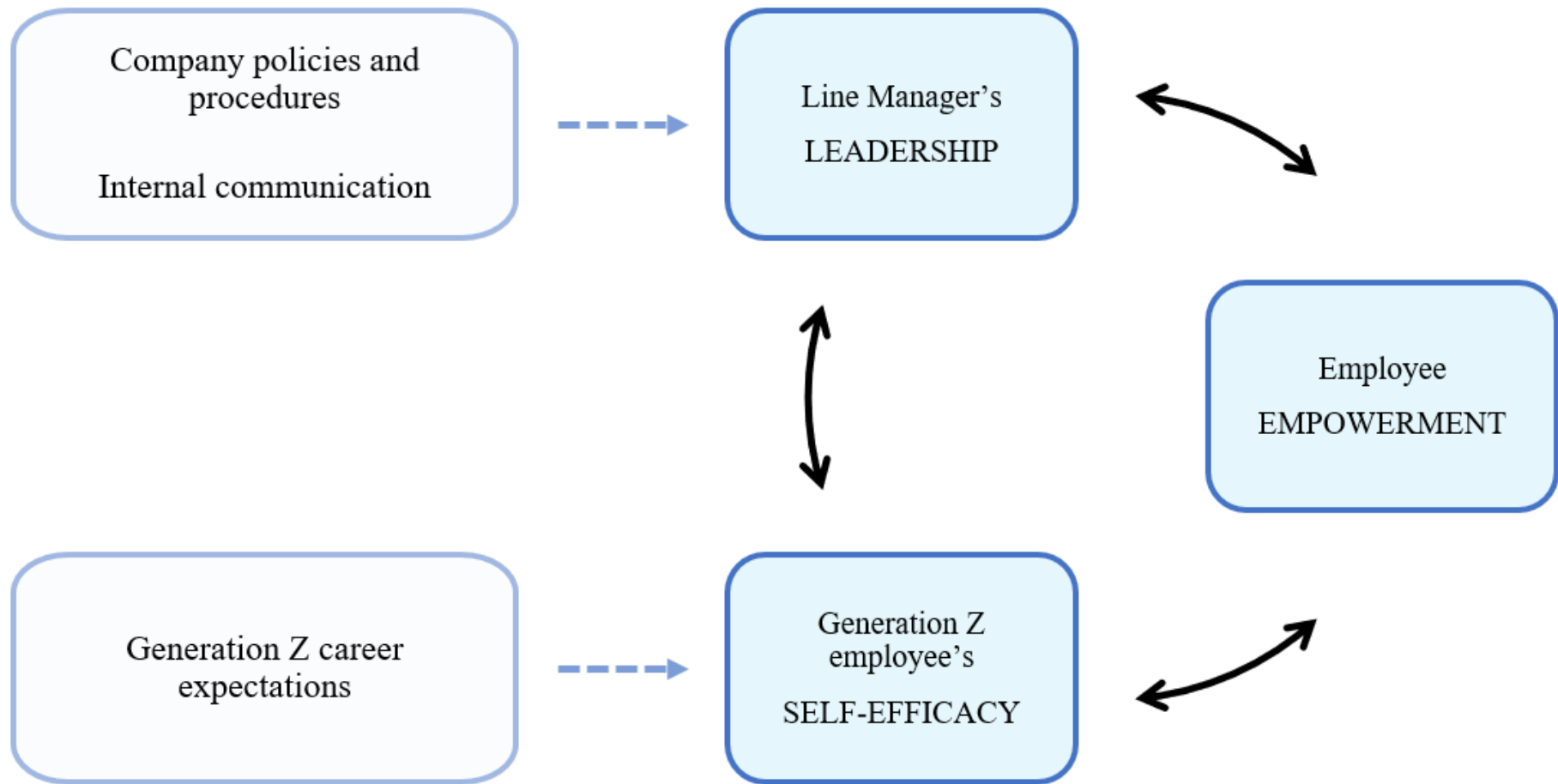


Figure 5.1 – Conceptualisation of employee empowerment

Similarly, the practices adopted by a line manager determine the most suitable leadership style that they can use to strengthen their employees' empowerment experiences. These experiences, in turn, represent learning opportunities for line managers to reflect on their own leadership style. A line manager should evaluate the activities and behaviours that are more effective to empower the different employees they supervise. In Figure 5.1 the line manager's leadership, Generation Z employee's self-efficacy and the employee empowerment, which is supported by the line manager and experienced by their employee, are the components of a cycle in which each dimension influences positively or negatively the other two when it receives positive or negative stimuli, respectively. Since these effects are positive or negative for all the constructs involved, the three components of the cycle can all be positive because of a virtuous cycle, or negative otherwise.

This conceptualisation shows that effective leadership has both a direct and indirect positive effect on the empowerment experience, because it produces an increase in the employee's self-efficacy and simultaneously an improvement in the empowerment experience that the line manager believes they can offer. Likewise, an improvement in the perception of self-efficacy has both a direct and indirect positive effect on the employee empowerment experience because it improves the employee's empowerment experience and returns positive feedback to the line manager about their leadership.

The line manager's leadership style is influenced by the company policies and procedures and depends on their ability to effectively manage internal communications. Internal communications are an opportunity for the line manager to ensure alignment between individual, team and organisational objectives. To seize this opportunity, the line manager should translate organisational objectives into individual and team goals. By doing so, the line manager can engage their employees by increasing the meaning dimension of their psychological empowerment.

Generation Z employees' perception of self-efficacy is moderated by their career expectations. The more articulated and the more intense these career expectations are, the easier it can be for Generation Z employees to achieve high levels of self-efficacy.

5.2 Structural empowerment actions

The analysis of the interviews has made it possible to explain the complexity of the relational dynamics between line manager and employee, showing the activities and behaviours that a line manager can adopt to improve the psychological empowerment of their employees and highlighting potential critical issues in this type of relationship. Moving to a higher level of abstraction, it is possible to think about formulating a model that explains the empowerment relationship between line manager and employee in the company under observation.

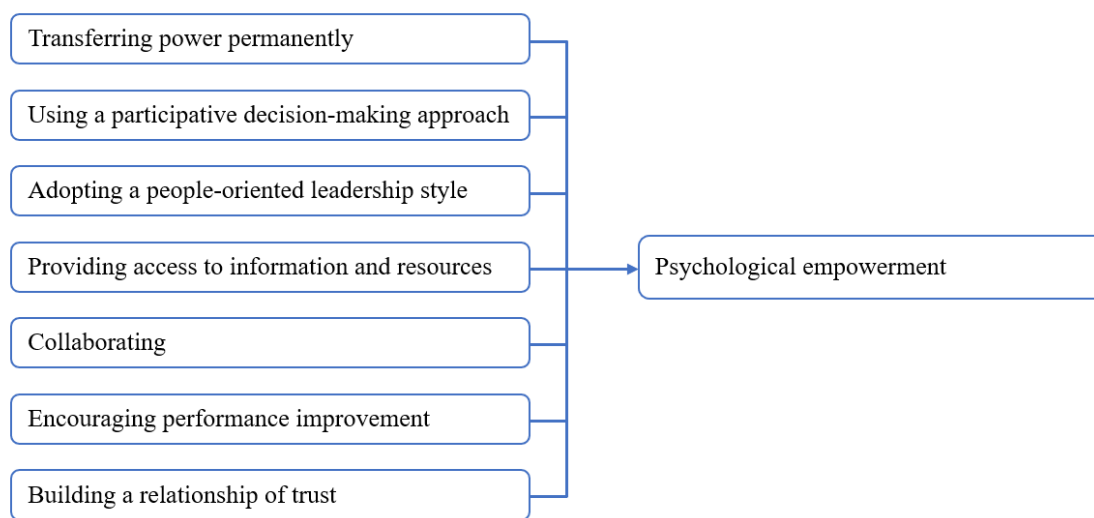


Figure 5.2 – Structural empowerment actions performed by the line managers

Figure 5.2 above shows the structural empowerment actions that a line manager can perform to play an active role in the employee's psychological empowerment experience. These structural interventions correspond to the analytical categories (interpretive codes) related to the theme 'What line managers do when they empower', but indirectly they are also emerged from the other themes identified in this research. It is worth reading Appendix G for further details. Other actions may well be effective but they have not been reported by the interviewees or interpreted by the researcher in a sufficiently distinctive way with respect to the analytical categories indicated in Appendix G. Furthermore, as emerged from the interviews with the line managers, each of these actions alone can do little to support psychological empowerment. Their combined use determines a greater result than the contributions generated by any individual action. A holistic approach in implementing the actions is therefore likely to

ensure better results for those line managers who want to empower their Generation Z employees.

As analysed through the interviews, the benefits of psychological empowerment seem to be linked above all to a balanced use of the structural interventions implemented to support individual employees. In addition, the personalisation of structural interventions based on the needs and wishes of the individual employee is perceived by the employee as a more effective activity than the impersonal use of structural actions designed for the entire workforce. For example, corporate communications of strategic importance have been deemed to be of little use by Generation Z employees when they do not explain the impact and implications for the working life of the people involved. Similarly, the company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working have shown that they are unable to contemplate all individual needs, despite contributing to some extent to the empowerment climate. It is therefore not the abundance of structural interventions that must be sought by the organisation under scrutiny but their balanced and tailor-made use, which should be based on the needs of the individual employee.

Transferring power permanently is an action that is not always performed in the organisation, but when it happens it concerns the execution of operational and administrative tasks, because strategic decisions remain in the hands of line managers. Sharing and distribution of power is an issue that can create tensions and conflicts between line managers and employees, limiting empowerment and its benefits. The literature clarifies that line managers can accept their power being reduced only if they recognise the transformation of their role from resource controllers to people developers and interpret this transformation in a positive sense. Empowerment literally means giving power. Therefore, without a permanent transfer of power, which in any case should take place in proportion to the employee's abilities, the psychological empowerment remains limited.

Using a participative decision-making approach is a genuine desire of several line managers, even if there is inconsistency in practice, because the degree of participation in decisions depends on the specific area of the business investigated and on the behaviour of the line manager involved. Often, for a line manager, involving their employees in the decision-making process simply means collecting their points of view.

Only in some circumstances in the organisation examined does the decision-making process represent for the line manager a real devolution of the final decision to their team or to a team member already considered highly empowered. In the context under evaluation, there is not always an agreement between line managers and employees regarding the idea that an organisation shows greater speed of response to critical issues when employees identify the solution to a problem and apply it without waiting for the approval of their line manager. Sometimes employees declare that they are reluctant to act for fear of making bad decisions and suffering the consequences. Therefore, a line manager should create an environment in which making mistakes is conceived as part of the learning process and at the same time develop their employees' ability to make decisions.

Adopting a people-oriented leadership style is an indication coming from the interviewed employees. They revealed that psychological empowerment is favoured by a line manager who is present, who can provide technical and psychological support, but who avoids micromanagement. According to Ripley and Ripley (1992), an empowering leader is a person who rejects the traditional role of resource controller to become a coach. The line managers who were interviewed showed different degrees of maturity in playing the coach role, with ample room for improvement by some, even if in their own way they are all committed to creating a positive work environment through the construction and development of satisfying interpersonal relationships. The assumption is that an environment where employees feel valued for the results they achieve encourages high-level performance.

Providing access to information and resources is an opportunity for the line manager to encourage better performance from their employees. Information and resources are useful for employees to feel involved in company projects and to give space to their creative energies. Line managers provide information by planning a meeting with their team, which is held on average every two weeks, and in some cases by translating organisational goals into team goals and by explaining the information on the internet and intranet. When exploring the issue of resources that should be available to their employees, line managers distinguish different types of resources, indicating physical resources such as work tools; information resources such as access to company databases and to the opinion of people who are key to the performance of the task or project; and budgeted financial resources. In the organisation under examination,

economic and financial information remains confidential and access to budget resources without authorisation is not possible, while the use of other types of resources is encouraged.

Collaborating is a feature that unites teams with a higher level of empowerment. When the line manager seeks the collaboration of their team in solving problems, instead of acting independently, the employees seem to develop greater psychological empowerment. In particular, the dimension of competence increases in employees, explained as ‘freedom to work with others’. Collaboration is an action that, practised at company level and not only within the work unit, can speed up the development of empowerment climate.

Encouraging performance improvement is a feature that line managers can effectively support on an individual level through coaching and mentoring, in particular when giving feedback. The dimension of psychological empowerment that is promoted is linked to the ‘freedom to do it alone’ and corresponds to self-determination. In the organisation examined, some line managers showed commitment and sensitivity in returning feedback to their employees, appropriately balancing autonomy and support. Finding the right balance depends on the needs of each employee and the sensitivity of the line manager, and is a skill considered very important by Generation Z employees.

Building a relationship of trust is an action that allows the line manager to assume more easily the role of enabler. In this role, the line manager helps the employee to define their needs, desires and objectives in line with the objectives of the team, department and organisation, identifying obstacles and exploring possible strategies for overcoming the identified obstacles. From the interviews it emerged that behaviours capable of generating trust such as coaching and mentoring are not implemented towards all employees. Many employees often feel a lack of support and feedback. Some do not feel safe taking the initiative without the approval of their line manager. The line manager should give employees greater control over their work and at the same time help their employees to exercise this control effectively. Trust can be developed in three specific moments: when the employee is carrying out the assigned tasks, when they exercise control over these tasks and when their line manager is called upon to remove some impediments to the execution of the tasks. Through training and support, coaching

and mentoring, the line manager can strengthen the employee's self-confidence, self-efficacy and well-being.

5.3 Explanatory model of employee empowerment

As observed in the literature review and in the analysis of the interviews, there are still issues related to employee empowerment that have not been fully identified and understood. The recognition of these issues and the structural actions that line managers can take to support the psychological empowerment of their employees are the basis of the employee empowerment model proposed in this section of the chapter and illustrated in Figure 5.3 on the following page.

The proposed model originates from the structural empowerment actions indicated by the line managers interviewed (Figure 5.2) and places these actions in a broader framework in which there are also empowerment-supporting mechanisms promoted by the organisation, such as company policies and corporate communications. The psychological empowerment of a Generation Z employee is positively or negatively influenced by how the organisation designs and implements its company policies and corporate communications and by how a line manager implements their structural empowerment actions towards that employee. Generation Z expectations act as moderating factors on the dimensions of psychological empowerment.

The line manager is responsible for balancing and personalising the structural actions indicated in Figures 5.2 and 5.3, in line with the considerations and suggestions expressed in the chapters on findings and discussion and with the organisational limitations imposed by the context. However, the organisation should offer training, support and advice to line managers in managing the employee empowerment process. The organisation should also explain to all the stakeholders its strategic evolution through corporate communications that are not cold institutional messages. Corporate communications should be conveyed by the line managers of different business areas in such a way as to inspire workers to feel part of a community capable of achieving important goals, thus stimulating the meaning dimension of empowerment. Finally, in addition to the responsibilities of the organisation, or rather its HR function, it is worth considering the development of company policies that increasingly support the empowerment climate.

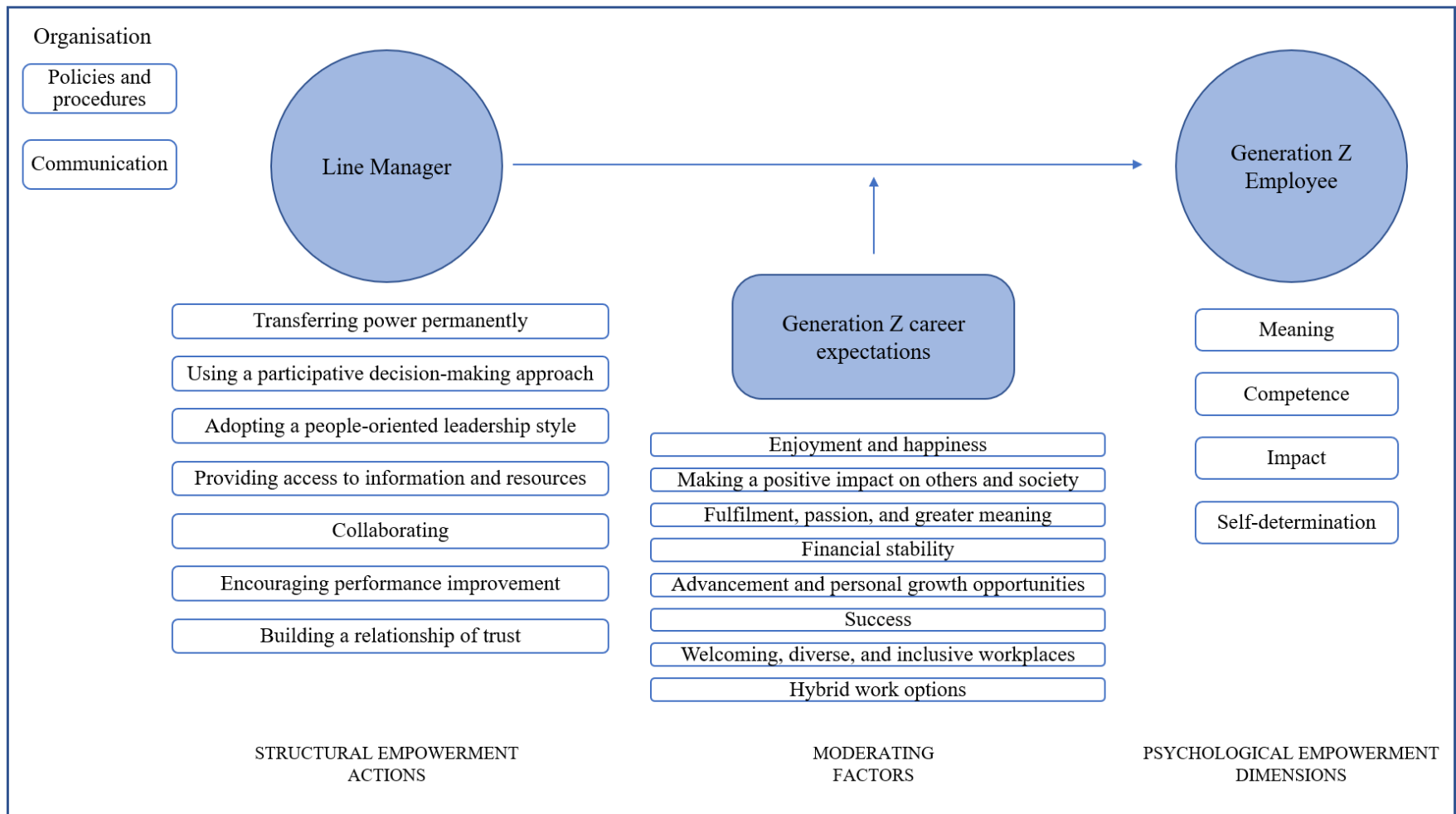


Figure 5.3 – Explanatory model of employee empowerment

The explanatory model of employee empowerment presented in Figure 5.3 differs from the conceptual model outlined in Figure 5.1 for three reasons: focus, scope and level of abstraction.

The conceptual model presents a cycle with three components, which are the main concepts that work together in the empowerment experience of Generation Z employees by enhancing or inhibiting each other. The explanatory model, instead, is focused on two components, which are the main players in most of the empowerment relationships analysed in this dissertation. Therefore, the conceptual model may be more relevant to academia, while the explanatory model may be more useful for line managers and HR practitioners.

In addition, the conceptual model has a larger scope than the explanatory one. The explanatory model represents only a portion of the relationship between line manager and employee. It is based on what emerged from the interviews. Each element of the explanatory model is strictly connected with the coding scheme. Therefore, the explanatory model can be strongly argued for. This is not exactly the case with the conceptual model.

Finally, the conceptual model of employee empowerment has a higher level of abstraction than the explanatory model, which may lead some readers to question the validity and reliability of the considerations suggested by the conceptual model. The answer to this objection is that any attempts to interpret reality require an act of trust when the evidence is not sufficient, but researchers must remain true to the principle of research integrity. Therefore, because the operational model is more solid than the conceptual one, the difference between them is not hidden. However, both models are included in this dissertation because the conceptualisation has the advantage of generating a greater debate on how leadership and self-efficacy act on empowerment, while the explanatory model is useful to operationalise the idea of empowerment.

5.4 A plan for empowerment development and assessment

This section presents a development and assessment plan for line managers wishing to improve their ability to empower their employees. By filling in Table 5.1 on the following page, a line manager shows commitment to improving three empowerment skills in the three months following the start of this development activity. Table 5.2

provides the line manager with support in assessing the initial and final proficiency level for the skills identified. The columns marked ‘Strategies’ and ‘Resources’ must be filled in taking into consideration ideas for developing the desired skills. The line manager’s self-assessment of an employee’s perception of impact, self-determination and meaning should be based on that person’s thoughts and emotions.

A Plan for Empowerment Development					
INSTRUCTIONS for line managers: In the competence category indicate the three skills you want to develop in the next three months based on their importance for your job success. Specify the initial level of proficiency, strategies and resources to improve these skills. In the impact, self-determination and meaning categories indicate, respectively, the results achieved, the degree of autonomy you have worked with and the value you give to the tasks carried out.					
Psychological dimension of empowerment	Skill family	Skill	Proficiency	Strategies	Resources
Competence	Transferring power permanently				
	Using a participative decision-making approach				
	Adopting a people-oriented leadership style				
	Providing access to information and resources				
	Collaborating				
	Encouraging performance improvement				
	Building a relationship of trust				

Psychological dimension of empowerment	Description	Self-assessment
Impact	Results	
Self-determination	Autonomy / Freedom	
Meaning	Value / Connection to the organisation’s purpose	

Table 5.1 – A plan for empowerment development

Empowerment Assessment				
Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Transferring power permanently	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishes a clear communication channel - Knows what tasks should be transferred permanently - Defines the desired outcome - Continuously seeks to identify ways to improve, challenging current practice and suggesting a better way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Picks the right person for the job, based on the employee's strengths and goals - Provides the right resources and level of authority - Uses process analysis tools to map and analyse processes, seeking continuous improvement in response times, quality, cost and waste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is patient - Allows for failure - Uses process analysis tools to map and analyse end-to-end processes, understands blockages and drives continuous improvement in service delivery and customer satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delivers and asks for feedback - Drives the use of formal continuous improvement processes to improve process efficiency and effectiveness, and reaches customer delivery and satisfaction targets

Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Using a participative decision-making approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Makes concrete, pragmatic and daily decisions that impact work unit - Makes short-term decisions - Uses appropriate decision-making processes - Seeks advice from above regarding difficult decisions - Carries out decisions from above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Makes decisions that are practical applications of abstract and strategic organisational issues and problems - Reviews implications of long-term decisions - Selects appropriate decision-making processes, and provides training - Carries out decisions from above - Assesses economic, social and political factors related to the organisation's needs, survival and future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Makes abstract and strategic organisational decisions - Makes long-term decisions - Provides guidance regarding difficult decisions - Reviews assessments of economic, social and political factors related to the organisation's needs, survival and future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Makes abstract and strategic organisational decisions - Makes long-term decisions - Establishes effective decision-making climate - Provides guidance regarding difficult decisions - Is accountable for organisational decisions - Reviews assessments of economic, social and political factors related to the organisation's needs, survival and future

Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Adopting a people-oriented leadership style in interpersonal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listens emphatically to seek understanding - Uses persuasion - Gives feedback on colleague performance - Writes regular reports to the line manager - Manages emails - Reads technical information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to people to identify patterns of problems that impact organisational projects - Uses influencing skills - Sets up training on how to communicate feedback to employees - Writes reports for top management - Sets up training on how to write reports - Manages emails - Reads reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to people to identify patterns of problems that impact organisational policies - Gives many reports and presentations - Allocates funds for training - Prepares reports for Board of Directors - Sets policies about emails - Reads reports and relevant professional literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to people to identify patterns of problems that impact organisational policies - Gives many presentations - Signs reports for Board of Directors - Reads reports and relevant professional literature
Adopting a people-oriented leadership style in intra-organisational communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disseminates information within the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develops processes to enhance intra-organisational communication - Collects and forwards information from and to the appropriate colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recommends processes to enhance intra-organisational communication - Filters reports and data and forwards to the appropriate executives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sets policies that impact intra-organisational communications
Adopting a people-oriented leadership style in inter-organisational communication	<i>Not expected at this level of empowerment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attends professional meetings and conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attends professional meetings and conferences - Meets with key clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attends professional meetings and conferences - Meets with key clients - Liaises with other organisations and institutions

Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Providing access to information and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participates in establishing the organisation's vision - Provides work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participates in establishing the organisation's vision - Develops action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participates in establishing the organisation's vision - Allocates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uses assessments to forecast the organisation's future

	unit action plans - Assigns work and schedules according to plan - Takes short-term risks after careful analysis - Identifies fiscal needs	plans - Establishes procedures for implementing work plans - Integrates budget needs from all units	resources for implementing plans	- Establishes the organisation's vision and direction with strategic goals - Approves action plans - Reviews results - Takes long-term risks after careful analysis - Approves budgets
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Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Collaborating with own work unit employees	- Is aware of own attitudes, assumptions and beliefs about people - Develops a work environment that is supportive and that involves other colleagues - Shows continual interest in employee needs and problems, and responds appropriately - Facilitates resolution of conflict in own work unit	- Establishes programmes to foster appreciation of others' values, attitudes and beliefs - Applies knowledge of group dynamics and human behaviour to all programmes - Shows continual interest in employee needs and problems, and responds appropriately - Resolves difficult interpersonal and intra-unit conflicts	- Develops policy endorsing diversity of personnel - Works to create supportive work culture - Shows continual interest in employee needs and problems, and responds appropriately - Resolves difficult interpersonal and intra-unit conflicts	- Develops policy endorsing diversity of personnel - Sets the tone of the organisation's culture - Shows continual interest in employee needs and problems, and responds appropriately - Resolves difficult interpersonal and intra-unit conflicts
Collaborating with other work unit employees	- Interprets and applies organisational goals to work unit - Reports employee needs to line management	- Establishes programmes to facilitate the implementation of organisational goals - Integrates employee needs into organisational plans	- Establishes goals for inter-group relations - Develops policies that integrate various employee needs	- Develops policy for inter-group relations - Develops policies that integrate various employee needs - Represents the organisation with outside groups - Resolves inter-group conflicts

Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Encouraging performance improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orients new colleagues to their role in the work unit - Provides information for job descriptions - Participates in interviewing candidates - Organises the work for colleagues - Organises necessary equipment, supplies and job aids - Works closely with colleagues and monitors performance daily - Regularly recognises individual and team performance - Participates in team celebrations - Participates in development interventions - Recommends colleagues for advancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orients new colleagues to their role in the work unit - Creates job descriptions - Sets up processes for obtaining pool of candidates - Formulates procedures for organising work - Reviews performance evaluations and communicates with top management - Establishes performance-review procedures and reporting processes - Provides training in performance management - Establishes recognition initiatives - Researches and recommends ways to celebrate accomplishments and progress - Establishes interventions for development, succession planning and advancement - Recommends colleagues for advancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orients new colleagues to their role in the work unit - Conducts job interviews - Allocates resources for equipment and supplies - Establishes policies and resources for performance-management programmes - Establishes policies and resources to ensure recognition of performance - Creates own team celebrations - Ensures allocation of resources for development, succession planning and advancement - Recommends colleagues for advancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conducts interviews - Sets policies on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working - Establishes policies and resources to ensure recognition of performance - Leads the organisation's celebrations - Establishes policies for development, succession planning and advancement

Skill	Proficiency			
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Building a relationship of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assesses and recommends colleagues for appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Researches career-development techniques, tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finds resources for career coaching and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishes policies for career coaching and mentoring

	career-development opportunities - Coaches troubled colleagues - Refers colleagues for an employee assistance programme	and programmes - Recommends and implements approved programmes - Selects career-assessment tools and techniques - Provides training in career coaching - Provides coaching and training for troubled colleagues - Establishes employee assistance programmes	- Approves programmes - Allocates resources for employee assistance programmes	
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Table 5.2 – Empowerment assessment (adapted from Hart and Waisman, 2005)

5.5 Implications of employee empowerment for the HR function

Today, much more than in the past, people question the meaning of their work. It is therefore necessary to respond quickly to their new needs to better tackle issues such as the great resignation (Rusconi, 2022) and the new job opportunities associated with digital transformation (Ifenthaler *et al.*, 2021) and ecological transition (Couppey-Soubeyran and Espagne, 2022). Through employee empowerment, line managers can now contribute to making companies places where workers’ requests are taken into account more effectively, since employee empowerment is not an end goal but a continuous process of trust development and adaptation to the context (Vermeer and Wenting, 2016). However, the response of organisations in the current post-pandemic economic context must take place at all organisational levels and cannot be delegated only to line managers. Therefore, over time, wide-ranging structural actions will have to be designed and implemented by senior managers and will concern the organisational design and development.

The implications of employee empowerment for human resource management will be numerous and will cause profound changes over the entire life cycle of employees. All HR areas will be involved. The decision to implement structural empowerment actions will have an impact on recruitment and selection, learning and

development, talent management, reward, employee relations, people analytics, employee experience, and diversity and inclusion.

Although this dissertation focuses on line managers' behaviours and activities influencing the psychological empowerment of their employees and does not address the structural change of the entire organisation, it is worth pointing out the main issues that have emerged as essential for the HR function during the interviews conducted with the research participants.

Recruitment and selection – As observed during the analysis of the interviews, empowerment works if the employee wishes to receive power. Therefore, business practices for attracting and retaining talented people should be able to discriminate between those who enjoy this type of professional relationship from all the other candidates. This condition is essential in order to ensure the creation of a high-performance organisation. However, it is not the only criterion to be sought. In the past, recruiters sought the fit between the person and the role and, when possible, the fit between the person and the organisational culture (O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991). The interviews with Generation Z employees revealed that this approach is no longer adequate, because the environment in which the organisation operates and future scenarios are turbulent and uncertain. Therefore, talented people should be required to have a dynamic fit between their knowledge, skills and abilities and the needs that the organisation will manifest over the years. In essence, new talents should be required to keep updated their ability to respond to organisational needs, maintaining a flexible mindset based on continuous learning and ongoing adaptation to the context, a requirement that seems to be appreciated by the Generation Z employees interviewed in the company under scrutiny. This is why recruitment and selection are considered crucial areas in building a heterogeneous pool of skills that are valuable to satisfy changing organisational needs. In this sense, the main criterion for selecting talented people should be the ability to bring to the organisation skills useful for governing the organisational context and the potential to learn those skills that will be appreciated in the future, at the expense of better matches with current job descriptions or with the organisational culture. Therefore, the strategic role of recruitment and selection remains (Snow and Snell, 1993), but the criteria to be pursued change.

Learning and development – The motivation to build the competence needed to govern tomorrow’s problems should be supported by adequate learning and development interventions. Therefore, the interventions to update knowledge and skills should not only be focused on providing people with the tools to best perform their current role, but also on enhancing a company vision that offers greater meaning to business activities and allows participation in decision-making processes with greater awareness, producing better results. Although the employees interviewed were generally satisfied with the opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills through activities related to their current role, programmes aimed at making empowerment a more formal approach of managing professional relationships could be useful and should be pursued as an HR strategy throughout the entire employee’s life cycle. The resulting learning experience should enable the employees as individuals to govern context-specific issues, and the organisation to overcome role divisions and evolve as a system (Yolles, 2021).

Talent management – A talent management strategy embraces multiple activities concerning the acquisition and development of high-potential people. Within this area of the HR function, succession planning is a particularly important process because it enables the organisation to meet its business needs. Career management activities are also important because they enable employees to meet their professional needs and career aspirations. However, from the interviews conducted with Generation Z employees, it has emerged that empowerment-based relationships require updating the approach to talent management, because organisations often pay more attention to succession planning than to career management (Bratton *et al.*, 2022), although they are both essential processes in that succession planning and career management were described by the interviewees as capable of determining a significant impact in terms of performance, engagement and retention.

In the Fortune 500 company under analysis, the succession-planning exercise was carried out without direct involvement of the employees indicated as key people. The line managers and the HR function justified the decision by arguing that until the last minute there is no certainty of keeping a promise about the new role that is assigned to the selected employee. In the future, succession planning should not be carried out without involving the person concerned. Employees should be supported to manage their own career. For example, they should be appropriately informed about the job vacancies available internally. This occurs in many organisations already, but too often there are

still barriers for employees who aspire to cover roles in different business areas. Sometimes the external job market is used to avoid leaving other job positions uncovered (Bratton *et al.*, 2022), without thinking that the motivation to cover a specific job position may decrease over the years and therefore it is advisable to give people the responsibility of choosing their career path within their current organisation.

The HR approach in the design and management of career systems will have to become more transparent and fairer. With a limited number of organisational levels to scale, horizontal movements will be much more frequent than vertical ones, careers within the company will be self-managed once all information is shared, and the HR function will play the role of adviser and not that of decision maker (Bakke, 2013) to offer organisations and employees career systems more aligned to the needs of both parties (Boxall and Purcell, 2022; Ventolini and Mercier, 2015; Janand and Voynnet Fourboul, 2015).

Reward – Professional relationships based on employee empowerment can be fostered by a reward system that stimulates employees to adopt desirable behaviours, in line with key organisational processes (Kerr, 1995). However, compensation and benefits cannot be linked to the job description because employee empowerment introduces new work systems based on the ‘freedom to do it alone’ and the ‘freedom to do it with others’, which leads to a change in the tasks identifying a specific role and therefore to the boundaries of that role (Gerhart *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, compensation and benefits cannot be linked to the organisational level because employee empowerment leads to much less hierarchical organisations: “An individual’s effectiveness is based on results and credibility, rather than on formal authority, job descriptions, and position in the hierarchy” (Bahrami, 1992: 43).

The employees interviewed would like their reward to be linked to the acquisition of new skills, their individual performance and their team performance. This result is confirmed by previous studies (Brousseau *et al.*, 1996; Nicholson, 1996) which highlighted the importance of rewarding the worker and not the work itself. Paying the person and not their work encourages the acquisition of new skills and strengthens both the participatory culture and the commitment to become autonomous at work: “Skill-based pay encourages people to learn horizontal skills. This allows these individuals to

see things from other people's viewpoints, which is especially important in a horizontally oriented organizational structure" (Lawler, 1992: 168).

However, although these changes in the reward system have the potential to accelerate the practice of employee empowerment, it may be difficult for the organisation to accept the heterogeneous set of skills that employees wish to see recognised and establish adequate systems to certify the acquisition and the development of these skills (Armstrong and Brown, 2019).

Employee relations – With the introduction of employee empowerment practices, employer and employee expectations change. In the psychological contract that Generation Z employees establish with their employer, there are several new elements compared to the psychological contract that was typical of previous generations. Employees interviewed state that they do not care about fancy job titles, do not like being managed too closely by their line manager and are not willing to sacrifice their free time for a company whose mission is not linked to a greater good in society. However, Generation Z interviewees seek support and feel the pressure to learn new skills and to make a career. They want their work to be fun and fulfilling. They are willing to work with flexibility in that they would love to work anywhere in the world and at any time that is compatible with their personal and family commitments. In Italy, organisations are raising their awareness of how they can meet their employees' needs with different types of employment contract (full time vs. part time / permanent vs. fixed term), taking into account critical issues for the company such as lack of skills in specific geographic areas and the level of organisational performance (Dorigatti and Pedersini, 2021). The challenge for organisations that want to create and maintain positive working relationships with their employees is to apply legislative provisions and company policies with transparency, fairness and practicality, because that increases the pressure in terms of internal consistency (Morris *et al.*, 2019).

People analytics – To meet multiple different purposes, attempts to monitor and measure employee empowerment are usually made by several stakeholders but rarely by the employees the empowerment initiatives are aimed at (Bloom, 2020). The different indicators used can lead to different evaluations because the definition of empowerment is often vague (Del Val and Lloyd, 2003). Empowerment by its nature implies an evolving process, based on interacting elements that embrace values, behaviours,

knowledge and relationships. There are no universal indicators to measure empowerment, because empowerment does not follow a linear progression and depends on the context. The HR function should therefore integrate the empowerment advancement evaluation carried out by outsiders with the self-evaluation carried out by the employees involved, because the self-evaluation exercise is in itself empowering for the people who are involved and because the information collected can provide richness in the interpretation of the indicators that are developed for other company stakeholders. Based on the interviews conducted in this dissertation with Generation Z employees, the HR function should investigate in detail the meaning employees attribute to their current role, career expectations and opportunities for learning and professional development.

Employee experience – The decision to introduce empowerment-based approaches at work often stems from the desire to improve employee experience and at the same time organisational performance (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020). Empowerment helps line managers keep their employees' engagement at a high level when empowerment practices are effectively implemented (Blanchard and Johnson, 2015). However, the line between high engagement and work intensification is thin (Burchell *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, alongside employee engagement it is advisable for the HR function to keep job satisfaction at a high level, guaranteeing an adequate work-life balance through appropriate policies and procedures related to flexible working arrangements, learning and development, and rewards. The employees who were interviewed have highlighted how they would love the opportunity to work anywhere in the world without time constraints, how important it is for them to develop managerial skills that enable them to make a career quickly and how the relationship with their line manager is essential for their professional growth and for the technical and psychological support they can receive when their line manager acts as a coach.

Diversity and inclusion – When the organisation decides to embrace an empowerment-oriented approach, individuals or entire business areas may show a certain degree of resistance to change. The HR function with its people professionals dealing with diversity and inclusion issues should ensure that all employees understand their role and what the organisation expects of them (Thompson, 2022). This action is important not so much for the new employees of Generation Z, who do not know how the organisation was structured in the past, as for the old employees who struggle to recognise their new role in the transition period from the traditional organisational model

to the empowerment-based model. In addition, the HR function should support the skill development of line managers who want to make empowerment work in practice, strengthening their people-enabler mindset. The commitment of the senior management could be useful to accelerate line managers' awareness that they are no longer resource controllers. In order to measure progress towards the new approach, the HR function may decide to evaluate the policies and practices that have an impact on employee empowerment, such as those related to performance management, the use of social media at work and remote working. Other assessments requested on a regular basis could concern possible improvements in terms of organisational culture, business climate and values.

5.6 Summary of the chapter

This chapter suggested a theoretical model to explain how empowerment occurs in the company under observation. The psychological empowerment of Generation Z employees is the result of a mix of factors, to which both formal and informal actions by line managers and organisational interventions in charge of the HR function contribute.

A plan for the development and assessment of the skills necessary to empower Generation Z employees was proposed to help line managers in the transition to the new role. In the organisation under consideration, no radical structural interventions are envisaged to promote empowerment, such as a change in the organisational structure. In any case, there are behaviours and activities that line managers can consider to support the psychological empowerment of younger employees and there are various company policies and procedures that can be rewritten by the HR function to further strengthen the empowerment climate. Internal communications should also be rethought to show a closer connection with the work of all employees. Working on the meaning dimension is a task that is up to both line managers and people who deal with communication.

The implications of professional relationships based on empowerment are numerous for both line managers and the HR function. Line managers should accept the transformation of their role from resource controllers to coaches. At the HR level, various aspects related to recruitment and selection, learning and development, talent management, reward, employee relations, people analytics, employee experience, and diversity and inclusion should change.

Conclusion

Empowerment is a word that has been used often in organisations. However, it sometimes appears to be misunderstood or not fully appreciated. This dissertation analysed the experiences of empowerment in a Fortune 500 company, which is similar to many other multinational organisations for several reasons (when observed under the McKinsey 7S framework). The analysis covered the behaviours and activities of line managers, the psychological dimensions of their Generation Z employees and the empowerment climate promoted by the organisation. Exploratory research is the methodology approach that was used. The goal was to understand the empowerment experiences of younger employees, rather than testing a theory or some hypotheses. From the analysis of the interviews that were conducted, a theoretical model was created and used to provide a development and assessment plan for the structural actions of line managers and to assess the managerial implications of empowerment for the HR function. The use of a case study strategy made it possible to explore the relational dynamics within a typical multinational working context where differences and similarities within several teams and business areas offer a full picture of the managerial implications of empowerment.

This chapter presents the main conclusions and recommendations deriving from the analysis that was carried out. After outlining the general conclusions of the dissertation and the implications for the theory and practice of empowerment, the chapter continues with the research opportunities on empowerment experiences that can be grasped from this study and ends with the observations on what the researcher has learned during the research process.

Generation Z empowerment experiences

In line with the definition of Conger and Kanungo (1988), most line managers recognise that empowering means transferring power permanently to their employees and giving them the authority to make decisions. Even if the authority granted is limited to the boundaries of the employee's current role, this limitation is not experienced in a negative way by Generation Z employees, because they feel they have sufficient autonomy. Line managers are aware that they are making a decisive contribution to the empowerment experience of their younger employees. The activities and behaviours that

the line managers have declared to use for structural empowerment in the organisation under study are the following:

- transferring power permanently (especially in administrative and operational areas, while the most strategic tasks remain in the hands of the line managers);
- using a participative decision-making approach (through both the involvement in the decision-making process and the devolution of the final decisions);
- adopting a people-oriented leadership style (through technical and psychological support, and avoiding micromanagement);
- providing access to information and resources (especially access to technical information and resources, while access to financial ones remains limited);
- collaborating (within the team and with the higher levels of the organisation);
- encouraging performance improvement (through coaching, mentoring and more specifically by providing feedback and advice); and
- building a relationship of trust (by transferring control, helping employees exercise control effectively and showing honesty, transparency and reliability).

In addition to these rather discretionary structural empowerment actions, line managers are required to support the application of policies and procedures and to make sense of organisational communications by translating corporate objectives into individual and team goals. Essentially, the approach used by the line managers to empower their employees is to give them the power to meet the requirements of their role without directly intervening in their work, building a healthy relationship and acting as facilitators in the gradual development of their employees' mindset and skillset, which ultimately lead to full empowerment.

The Generation Z employees expressed high expectations of enjoyable and fulfilling work. They feel satisfied when someone in the world can benefit from their contribution. Their satisfaction is due to two factors: they work in the biomedical sector and their organisation implements convincing corporate social responsibility initiatives. Success, money and financial stability are important, but the employees who were interviewed are not willing to sacrifice their happiness for a career that lacks meaning.

Personal growth matters more than salary. Diversity is an internalised value. Hybrid and flexible work is an attractive option. Work-life balance is interpreted as quality time for work and personal life, without fixed schedules defining boundaries between the two.

The interpretation of empowerment varies between two perspectives that can be presented as the ‘freedom to do it alone’ for some employees and the ‘freedom to do it with others’ for other employees. These two distinct interpretations of empowerment lead to different psychological dimensions. For employees who are oriented towards ‘freedom to do it alone’, self-determination is of great importance, because these people like to decide how to manage their own activities. For employees who are oriented towards ‘freedom to do it with others’, competence is more important, because these employees like to solve problems, even with the help of colleagues and their line manager, without necessarily giving importance to whether decisions are made alone or as a team.

When employees feel empowered, they are confident in their abilities and aware of their impact on the organisation. They do not experience feelings of abandonment. They appreciate the trust they receive from their line manager. Trust is often described by employees as the freedom to make decisions and to have the unconditional support of their line manager.

In this dissertation, employee empowerment is defined as follows. Employee empowerment is a three-dimensional construct that benefits the organisation, line managers and their employees. Line managers are involved in carrying out activities to encourage their employees to have responsibility, competence and confidence to be able to successfully perform all tasks related to their role. Employees are expected to have, or progressively develop, desire, motivation and confidence in their ability to take responsibility, shape their work role, take decisions and manage their workload in such a way that they excel in their role and add real value to the organisation. Organisational systems and processes should be available to and used by all members of the organisation. The employee can understand and influence the goals, objectives and strategy of the organisation and have access to mechanisms and tools that will help them define and measure their contribution to organisational effectiveness and to work with their line manager to create their own development and career path within the organisation.

Empowerment is essentially a three-way collaboration that benefits employees, their line managers and the organisation and promotes success and sustainability. Employees have full responsibility for their role, line managers enable the development of full ownership of that role, and organisational systems support employees in being accountable for their own performance and organisational effectiveness, all in a context where the organisation's mission and vision are aligned with the plans and goals related to individuals, groups and departments.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the opinion of line managers on the effectiveness of their structural empowerment actions was more positive than that of their employees and this was not simply due to an attribution error. The line managers believed that both the formal actions defined by policies and procedures and the informal actions linked to the leadership style of each line manager have value in supporting the empowerment experience of their employees by promoting the acquisition of power, authority and responsibility within the work unit. Generation Z employees, on the other hand, stated that it was mainly the discretionary effort of their line managers with their informal activities that had an impact on the experience of psychological empowerment.

The views of employees vary to a greater or lesser extent between those who believe that the formal performance-review process is useful for negotiating their own objectives in order to add clarity to what is required by their role and those who believe that the formal process is only necessary to satisfy HR managers who want to see the policy respected. Employees, like their line managers, also recognise that there are some important organisational benefits to adopting the formal performance management process, such as the ability of the company to produce evidence to support demotion or dismissal decisions. However, this possibility is considered remote for Generation Z employees because they all feel confident that they do not have to defend themselves against accusations of poor performance and therefore experience the demands of the performance management policy as a mere formality. This way of interpreting the policy, which is also supported by some line managers, does not contribute to adding value to the performance of employees or their level of psychological empowerment.

Among the informal supporting mechanisms for empowerment, employees mentioned individual performance-improvement conversations. Employees do not see these conversations as the first step in a formal process of reviewing their ability to do

the job but as an opportunity to discuss with the line manager how to improve their performance. Thus, the individual meeting is experienced as a positive example of interest by the line manager in their professional development. This is why these conversations are often requested by employees and not by line managers and are a useful way of strengthening mutual trust and increasing the dimensions of psychological empowerment indicated by Spreitzer (1995).

This dissertation highlighted that ultimately it is the employee who decides how psychologically empowered they feel. If an employee recognises that they have sufficiently high levels of autonomy and competence, they will make decisions, will be able to self-monitor the progress of their work and will be proactive in keeping their line manager informed. Belonging to Generation Z does not necessarily make the empowerment process longer than it was for previous generations. However, a line manager who wants to empower a Generation Z employee has a wide range of motivational levers to act on and should decide carefully which lever to use to avoid the negative sides of empowerment, such as feelings of abandonment or waste of time.

In summary, empowering Generation Z employees is possible when the employee and their line manager recognise that empowerment is based on a professional relationship in which the employee feels they have the freedom to decide how to carry out their work and their line manager feels they can effectively support (through the seven structural actions previously indicated) the employee's journey of acquiring the mindset and skillset that are useful to cover organisational positions of greater management responsibility. This does not always imply vertical career progression for the employee. However, it implies benefits in terms of job satisfaction, performance and commitment for the employee and their line manager, which often suggest an increase of the overall business effectiveness.

Managerial implications of Generation Z empowerment

The Generation Z employees who were interviewed showed traits of marked realism and a desire for independence, sometimes with the aspiration to transform their hobbies into real jobs. It does not seem strange that this generation tends to reject the classic hierarchical models that still regulate much of the world of work. Ultimately, these are models of the last century that are ill-suited to meet the needs and aspirations of Generation Z. This generation seems to appreciate the power of transparency even more

than previous generations and in general does not perceive mistakes as something negative. Indeed, they often obtain useful information from mistakes in order to improve in the future, thus demonstrating appreciation for empowerment-based professional relationships.

Already today a substantial percentage of Generation Z members who have not chosen independent paths to their professional development are an active part of companies and contribute to the business growth. Therefore, companies must quickly develop structural empowerment interventions to attract and retain their younger employees.

What has been revealed so far about the Generation Z interviewees enables the author of this dissertation to identify a check list useful for line managers and HR people to avoid a management approach that is distant from the nature of these young employees. It is necessary to start from the assumption that Generation Z does not tolerate rigidly vertical management and shows that they have a concept of meritocracy that is not anchored only to the results to be achieved.

- Whenever possible, the line manager of a Generation Z employee should be chosen among Generation Y members and not among previous generations, because Generation Y managers have a better chance of dealing well with their Generation Z employees since they share some characteristics and aspirations. However, this condition cannot be the only criterion to be taken into consideration when choosing the line manager, since the line manager's ability to implement the seven structural actions presented in section 5.2 is what matters most.
- Depending on the business area, the work assigned to the Generation Z employee should include elements that generate fun, learning and satisfaction, and should exclude strict and mandatory guidelines on how to complete the required task in order to give space to the autonomy of each employee.
- A line manager should create conviviality within the work unit, fostering creativity and reducing repetitive tasks as much as possible, for example by automating them.
- A line manager should never resort to strong attitudes and positions. If line managers take time to listen to their employees' viewpoint, they also have the opportunity to

understand it, get to know their team members better, improve the relationship of trust with them and choose the solution that comes from the employees when it is more effective than their own. However, when line managers come up with the best solution, they should explain to their team the reasons the team should adopt such an approach, because Generation Z needs more than previous generations to give meaning to their actions in relation not only to business performance but also to social objectives.

- It is not wrong to think that Generation Z's access to adulthood is faster than previous generations, given that this generation has had the whole of human knowledge available through the internet. Therefore, a line manager should not hesitate to transfer the responsibility for specific tasks to those employees of Generation Z who show adequate maturity, despite their young age.
- A line manager should be aware of the values that their employees believe in. Their upbringing is different from that of previous generations. Many members of Generation Z often spend more time chatting via social media than talking to their parents.
- A line manager should remember that there is no clear separation between time spent online and offline for Generation Z members. This generation is always connected and therefore the workplace should be organised according to hybrid work models based on the idea that work can be done anywhere around the world at any time.
- A well-performed task should be rewarded through different mechanisms than those used for previous generations. For example, the line manager should impress their Generation Z employees by tying the rewards to their desire for fun and quest for meaning.
- A line manager should involve their Generation Z employees in defining team objectives, action plans and collaborations with other teams, letting their employees express their ideas, helping them to structure their thinking and devolving the final decisions when appropriate.

At the HR level, the formal introduction of an empowerment-oriented approach requires not only a structural change of the organisation but also new processes related to

recruitment and selection, learning and development, talent management, reward, employee relations, people analytics, employee experience, and diversity and inclusion.

Recruitment and selection specialists should favour those candidates who show they are willing to keep their skills up to date in order to respond to organisational needs, maintaining a flexible mindset based on continuous learning and ongoing adaptation to the context.

Learning and development programmes should be developed and implemented to increase awareness and competence on how to make empowerment relationships work and how to foster, through empowerment, business strategy to respond to the turmoil and uncertainties of the business context.

Talent management specialists should change their approach when they are called upon to support Generation Z employees in managing their career, moving from decision makers to advisers.

Generation Z employees who were interviewed would like their reward to be linked to the acquisition of new skills, their individual performance and their team performance, rather than their role or organisational level.

Generation Z employees do not care about fancy job titles, do not like being managed too closely by their line manager and are not willing to sacrifice their free time for a company whose mission is not linked to a greater good in society. The challenge for organisations that want to create and maintain positive working relationships with their employees is to apply legislative provisions and company policies with transparency, fairness and practicality.

To meet multiple different purposes, attempts to monitor and measure employee empowerment are usually made by several stakeholders. The HR function should therefore integrate the empowerment advancement evaluation carried out by outsiders with the self-evaluation carried out by the employees involved, because the self-evaluation exercise is in itself empowering for the people who are involved and because the information collected can provide richness to the interpretation of the indicators that are developed for other company stakeholders.

Empowerment helps line managers keep their employees' engagement at a high level when empowerment practices are effectively implemented. However, the line between high engagement and work intensification is thin. Therefore, alongside employee engagement it is advisable for the HR function to keep job satisfaction at a high level, guaranteeing an adequate work-life balance through appropriate policies and procedures related to flexible working arrangements, learning and development, and rewards.

When the organisation decides to move towards an empowerment-based structure, people professionals dealing with diversity and inclusion issues should ensure that all employees understand their role and what the organisation expects of them.

Underpinning concepts

Job enrichment contributes to psychological empowerment, because it offers variety, autonomy, feedback and often identity and meaning to employees (Lawler, 1986). The employees who declared high levels of empowerment revealed that they love their work for the variety of situations to which it exposes them and for its ability to satisfy their professional ambitions and expectations in terms of career progression, learning opportunities and autonomy. For these employees, job enrichment is both horizontal and vertical. It is not simply a matter of expanding responsibilities without learning new skills. The importance of job enrichment as a key element in employee empowerment experiences is highlighted in this dissertation by a person employed in the quality control unit. This employee said that they felt their work was not very varied and did not offer many opportunities to learn something that was meaningful. Due to how the role was designed, this person was willing to leave the company within a few months, despite their competence. The lack of job enrichment in their situation made psychological empowerment difficult.

The concept of participative management emerged mainly in interviews with line managers when they were asked to explain with examples the leadership style they adopt with their employees. In their answers, the prevailing examples highlighted a participation continuum (Vroom, 2000) which includes both strategic decisions taken by the line manager, in some cases following input from the employees, and operational or administrative decisions left by the line manager to the employees. In addition, the sharing of emotions in participative management was recognised to facilitate decision

making (Piré-Lechalard and van Hoorebeke, 2021). Therefore, the employee empowerment process is fuelled by the contribution of information or advice to strategic decisions taken in agreement with the line manager and by the trust received in making operational or administrative decisions independently. Negative effects of participative management such as social pressure to contribute were not recorded in interviews with Generation Z employees (Baloff and Doherty, 1989). Perhaps their job tenure is still experienced as a honeymoon. Likewise, negative effects of participative management were not highlighted by line managers, who, on the contrary, were happy to adopt a democratic leadership style to manage their time more effectively, to empower with conviction, or not to replicate the approach of their former supervisor now that they have such role.

The permanent transfer of power is one of the key structural actions to make empowerment possible. Line managers have recognised several benefits associated with the transfer of power. Among the employees who were interviewed, the majority said that they actively seek power. The employees' answers highlight the transition from coercive power to coactive power (Follett, 1918), coupled with a change in line managers' behaviour. As already noted, "power is to organisations as oxygen is to breathing" (Clegg *et al.*, 2006: 3). Therefore, the exercise of power is essential in organisations, but it should be present in the right proportions to avoid counterproductive effects. Line managers still have the legitimate power and the reward power, while Generation Z employees are often holders of the power deriving from their specialised technical knowledge, which increases with competence; both line managers and employees can have individuals with strong charisma among their ranks; and neither line managers nor employees resort to coercive power, although it is clear to both groups that the termination of employment is a sanction that line managers could use in case of need (French and Raven, 1959). Finally, only line managers are often able to exercise informational power due to their privileged position and their greater experience within the organisation (Raven, 1965).

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) is another concept underlying the empowerment experience described by Generation Z employees and their line managers. This concept was highlighted in three different situations: employees declared that they had the ability to organise the future activities assigned to them, which corresponds to high levels of self-efficacy, when they felt competent and highly empowered; their line managers

reported episodes in which through their feedback they were able to support the self-efficacy of their employees; and finally the line managers mentioned their own level of self-efficacy in assigning the tasks needed to complete a work project. A line manager also admitted being challenged by an empowered employee when a new and unexpected problem made the line manager exhibit doubts about the correct way to proceed, which revealed lack of confidence in working with considerably empowered employees.

Academic contribution

The original contribution of this dissertation to academic knowledge consists of the exploration of empowerment experiences within a multinational company in which the empowerment processes are not formally defined by policies and procedures but are informally promoted by management. In this dissertation, both the structural perspective and the psychological perspective are recognised as essential to the understanding of employee empowerment relationships. Previous studies on employee empowerment were mainly conducted through quantitative analyses and without a specific focus on Generation Z.

This dissertation contributed to the discourse on empowerment through a qualitative analysis, discovering that the supporting mechanisms to structural empowerment that line managers consider to be effective, such as policies on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working, can be improved according to Generation Z employees. These policies and procedures, which are written without a direct reference to employee empowerment, seem to offer line managers reassurance that the empowerment process is in progress. However, it is the more informal aspects related to the line manager's leadership style that contribute most to the empowerment experience according to the employees who were interviewed. For example, the performance management process with its steps formalised by the HR function does not contribute to the employees' perception of being empowered as much as specific and timely feedback when requested or needed or as a manifestation of trust by the line manager.

This dissertation also highlighted that empowerment can be successful if line managers and employees play their part proactively. On the one hand, the line manager must be willing to implement a series of very distinct structural actions, including transferring power permanently to the employee and building a relationship of trust with

them. On the other hand, the employee must be willing to accept the power to carry out their work autonomously and proficiently.

The implications of professional relationships based on empowerment are numerous for both line managers and the HR function. Line managers should accept the transformation of their role from resource controllers to coaches. At the HR level, various aspects related to recruitment and selection, learning and development, talent management, reward, employee relations, people analytics, employee experience, and diversity and inclusion should change.

Finally, it should be remembered that, although it is beyond the scope of this analysis, a more radical approach to empowerment would also require a structural change of the organisation, which is an aspect that the company under observation does not seem to be considering at the moment. This key element makes the company a case that is theoretically generalisable to many other multinational companies in which the limits to empowerment are clearly defined and do not include self-management or flatter hierarchies.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This dissertation was conducted in a multinational organisation that has been operating for around fifty years. In terms of the number of employees and turnover, the Italian subsidiary is considered a large-sized business. In smaller or younger organisations, the empowerment experience could be shaped by different or additional dynamics to those identified in the company under scrutiny. The results of this dissertation should therefore not be automatically extended to those workplaces, although the researcher acknowledges the appeal of generalisations because potentially other managers, in addition to those in the organisation under review, may learn about empowerment from this dissertation and consequently be more effective within their own teams.

The experience and professional skills of the line managers described in this dissertation may be similar to those of other managers who are at the bottom of the chain of command, supervising staff in operational roles and converting strategic goals into goals that are appropriate for their staff on a daily basis, with all the difficulties and contradictions that this activity entails. Therefore, the reflections, behaviours and actions

of line managers described in this dissertation in relation to the empowerment experience of their staff may resonate with a wider audience of managers, especially since this dissertation was conducted across teams operating in different areas of the business. Consequently, the explanations offered by this case may represent lessons not only for line managers working with operational staff in the company under review. With due caution, even middle managers in organisations with long chains of command or entrepreneurs within family-owned companies can reflect on the issue of empowerment from the results of this dissertation, especially in knowledge-based industries.

The researcher identified in advance the thematic areas on which to focus the investigation through the semi-structured interviews. Whenever the researcher became aware of how useful certain themes might be, time was spent on exploring them in greater detail to gain more information and depth of analysis from the interviewee. On the other hand, some opportunities for broader reflection may have been missed because the researcher may not have realised the importance of certain clues.

Miles *et al.* (2020) warn against generalising from specific cases, explaining that each case has a characterising history and in the process of generalisation people overlook some aspect of this history, with the risk of incurring possible inaccuracies or misunderstandings. Despite the difficulty of generalising beyond the boundaries of the organisation under consideration, the aim of this dissertation is still important because the empowerment experience has not been explored through both structural and psychological perspectives in the past, because empowerment studies have rarely been conducted through qualitative analysis and because the topic of employee empowerment has not yet been adequately updated concerning Generation Z.

As for the areas of future research that the author of this dissertation, and hopefully other researchers, might find it interesting to explore from the results of this study, it is worth highlighting three topics.

Employee empowerment has intrinsic value because an empowered person enjoys their time at work. This implies that empowerment can also be considered as an end in itself and not just a means to achieve better performance, to support innovation or to produce other benefits for the company. Therefore, further research deserves to be conducted in the psychological field, involving occupational psychologists with specific

skills to assess the personality traits that best respond to a work environment where professional relationships are based on empowerment.

Employee empowerment is a subjective and unique experience. This justifies the choice of having the individual and the team as the units of analysis in this dissertation, since this study has analysed, in addition to the structural perspective, the psychological perspective of the individuals and their interactions with other team members and with their line manager. However, individual or team efforts to gain empowerment are ineffective or costly without the support of the organisation. Therefore, further research deserves to be carried out by taking business units and organisations as the units of analysis in order to examine the change process linked to the introduction of an organisational structure designed to support psychological empowerment and any resistance to such organisational change. Comparative studies between companies where empowerment has been introduced not only through mindset and skillset development programmes but also through a change in the organisational structure can provide important information to share with the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education and other relevant institutions and bodies.

Employee empowerment is a universal concept, because it can be designed for all companies in the world where everyone has the right to feel that their job is impactful, meaningful, carried out autonomously and with competence. However, this concept should also take into consideration the specific business context, because what matters in an empowerment experience also depends on the specific organisational culture, which includes norms, beliefs and values. These aspects can be different in different parts of the world, and they can change over time. Therefore, further research deserves to be carried out through a longitudinal investigation, which was avoided in this dissertation to make this research project manageable in the timeframe imposed by the doctoral programme and to abide by the new rules imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A longitudinal study could consider the influence of technological changes, including the increasing use of tools and devices based on artificial intelligence, which have the power to free people from routines and to offer them free time to carry out potentially empowering creative tasks.

A final thought

Sometimes the term 'subordinate' is used to identify a person who works for a line manager, but in this dissertation the term 'subordinate' has never been used, as the researcher finds it derogatory. The word is derived from medieval Latin 'subordinatus', which means having an inferior rank or being placed in a lower order (Danner, 2014). The researcher has experienced Generation Z employees as people who want to attain great results at work and be proud of the job role they have. They are not less than their line manager and being highly empowered gives them the opportunity to achieve their true potential. The researcher hopes that these research findings aid the understanding of how Generation Z empowerment experiences can be further developed for the benefit of individuals, their companies and society as a whole.

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Appendices

Appendix A – The dissertation structure in 21 steps

The structure of this research study and its internal coherence can be appreciated through the application of a knowledge visualisation framework suggested by Morais and Brailsford (2019).



Figure A.1 – The dissertation structure in 21 steps (based on Morais and Brailsford, 2019)

1. Keywords

Employee empowerment. Psychological empowerment. Structural empowerment. Line manager. Employee. Generation Z. Explanatory model. Fortune 500.

2. Streams of thoughts (main theories)

Psychological empowerment and structural empowerment are the two complementary perspectives used in this dissertation to analyse the employee empowerment relationship.

3. Research gap

A review of the literature reveals the difficulty of explaining how to make empowerment work in practice.

4. Research questions

Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees? How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment? How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?

5. State of the science (current answers to the research questions)

According to Arnold *et al.* (2000) line managers should show commitment to their own work and to their team's work, identifying high standards (leading by example); helping the team become more self-sufficient (coaching); involving their team in decision-making (participative decision-making); sharing all information and company policies (informing); spending time talking about what worries their employees and offering suggestions for improving the well-being of those people (showing concern and interacting with the team). However, even if these behaviours are helpful to show the commitment of the line manager towards their team and the organisation, they have not yet been proved empowering.

According to Spreitzer (1995), employees, regardless of the generation to which they belong, can feel empowered when they are able to give meaning to their work, appreciate the impact that their contribution determines, have the autonomy they want and possess competence.

According to Armstrong and Taylor (2020), corporate policies related to performance management can support the empowerment experience when creating alignment between individual, departmental and organisational goals.

6. Philosophical stance

There are multiple meanings, interpretations and realities. Knowledge arises from the exploration and the understanding of narratives, stories, perceptions and interpretations. The contribution to knowledge is made from a new perspective and a better understanding of the empowerment experience in the context in which line managers and their employees operate.

7. Research strategy

Case study.

8. Collection techniques

Semi-structured, one-to-one, internet-mediated interviews and a reflective diary containing the researcher's comments on interview content and conducting style and other considerations.

9. Analysis techniques

The researcher has conducted a thematic analysis using a pattern matching technique and has relied on a reflective diary as a support tool for the analysis. In the reflective diary attention has been paid to the researcher's comments on the content of the interviews and the interview style, observations to improve the interaction with the participants, notes on non-verbal communication aspects, evaluations on secondary sources such as corporate policies and institutional videos, and reflections on the values and bias of the researcher and the participants.

10. Quality criteria

Credibility. Confirmability. Dependability. Transferability. Authenticity.

11. Unit of analysis

The units of analysis are the line managers and their employees taken individually and as a team.

12. Level of analysis

Analysis at the individual and group level.

13. Nature of data

Qualitative information resulting from the transcripts of the interviews, videos on the official YouTube channel, the company website, and company policies on performance management, the use of social media at work and remote working. Quantitative information deriving from the reading of recent financial reports.

14. Origin of data

The primary sources of information are the interviews with the line managers and their Generation Z employees. The secondary sources are institutional videos, corporate policies and financial reports.

15. Sample

Thirty-four participants selected through non-probabilistic sampling, heterogeneous by team and function and homogeneous by generation in the case of employees.

16. Pathos (emotions linked to the study)

Satisfaction for managing a complex project, for the solidity of the arguments and for the critical thinking skills developed during the development of this dissertation. Joy for the goal that this document makes possible to reach. Gratitude for the wonderful relationship built with my supervisory team. No negative feeling to be mentioned (the time spent in research was valuable up to the last second).

17. Logos (scientific logic)

Quasi-inductive approach to theory development.

18. Ethos (limitations of the study)

Theoretical limitations: classical model; concept of Generation Z. Methodological limitations: use of interviews not adequate to grasp the perspective of those who do not want to be interviewed. Operational limitations: time constraints; ability of the researcher to interpret the signals indicated by the participants; COVID-19 pandemic.

19. Wisdom (the researcher's knowledge, skills and experience)

The researcher has been a business management consultant and university lecturer in organisational behaviour and HR management; previously he has worked as an electrical engineer in a work environment similar to the workplace of the participants in this research study.

20. Trust (partners)

Supervisory team. Magellan Research Centre. Research participants. HR managers of the company under investigation.

21. Time

Three years.

Appendix B – Identification of the Fortune 500 company

Below are the messages used by the researcher to get in touch through the LinkedIn platform with people who are potentially interested in conducting this study in the company where they work and who have the authority to become an influential sponsor of this research project. The example shown refers to the company being investigated. Please consider that the number of characters that can be used in the LinkedIn presentation message is limited and therefore the first text is short and direct.

Dear <X1>

I am studying for a PhD programme at Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3. I would be grateful if I could be part of your professional network. I would like your advice on my research project (if you don't mind me asking), which is focused on the employee empowerment experience.

Regards,
Fabio

If the connection request is accepted, messages on LinkedIn can be sent without character limitations. In case of acceptance, a thank-you note is sent after one day.

Merci for accepting my invitation to connect.

Regards,
Fabio Rizzi
PhD Student
Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3
iaelyon School of Management
Laboratoire Magellan

After a couple of days, the researcher sends a new text. The time elapsed from the first message is useful to let the new connection become familiar with the researcher's activities on the LinkedIn platform and to start building trust and consideration. The new text includes the research project to let the contacted person <X1> share it with other people, hereinafter referred to as <X2>, <X3> and <X4>, within their company <Y>.

Dear <X1>

I am delighted to share with you the attached PhD research project. I would like your advice about the opportunity to share this project with your HR colleagues in order to conduct my PhD research on employee empowerment at <Y>. Specifically, my research will look at the employee empowerment experience. I plan to conduct a series of interviews with key people at <Y>. Parts of the interviews might be used in my dissertation, without any information being traceable back to the interviewees or the company.

Your organisation will receive a report presenting the data analysis and a detailed list of recommendations that are specifically tailored to your business environment. Oral

feedback to the appropriate body of your organisation will be planned if needed. You will be able to update knowledge and to improve managerial practice of empowerment in the workplace at a time when successive waves of technological development are becoming more frequent and have the power to change how line managers enhance employees' performance, responsibility and commitment towards organisational goals. Please let me know if you or your HR colleagues may have an interest in working with me to implement a unique research project that satisfies your aspirations and meets my university research standards. Should you or your HR colleagues need additional supporting documentation, or should you like to arrange a video call before you make a decision, I will accommodate your requests with pleasure.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Regards,

Fabio Rizzi

PhD Student

Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3

iaelyon School of Management

Laboratoire Magellan

<X1> could be the gatekeeper or the person introducing the gatekeeper to the researcher. In the scenario that led to the identification of the company under study <Y>, the gatekeeper was an HR manager, hereinafter referred to as <X2>, while <X1> was a senior director. The researcher, <X1> and <X2> had a video conference call during which the researcher presented himself and his research project, highlighting the purpose of the project, the benefits for the company and the solutions to overcome any company concerns regarding information processing and management.

The benefits highlighted for the participants related to the opportunity they had to reflect on their behaviour at work, for the company managers the report on employee empowerment they would receive from the researcher, and for the business world as a whole the advancements in the management field that would be possible thanks to the support of company <Y>.

<X1> provided the email address of <X2> to the researcher. The communication that the researcher sent to <X2> was originally written in Italian, because <X2> has Italian as their first language, but here it has been translated to facilitate understanding. From this moment on, all communications with the people who work in the company under study took place in Italian.

Hello <X2>.

I hope you're well. I am writing to ask if you have any updates regarding the opportunity of carrying out the research project we talked about last week.

As already pointed out, any information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your company name will not appear in any public documents. I will delete my notes once the information has been aggregated and, in any case, no later than six months after the interviews. I will share with you a report that analyses the information collected, suggesting actions for improvement. I will be happy to discuss the report in person and to visit you on-site as soon as possible.

I am available and willing to share any information and supporting documentation you desire.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Fabio

The gatekeeper <X2> responded to this email asking the researcher to present his research project to other business decision makers in a video conference call with all of them. After the video conference in which the researcher addressed the decision makers' concerns, <X2> sent the researcher an email confirming that all the company decision makers agreed to let him carry out his research study within the company. Only then did the researcher receive the contact details of the person <X3> who acted as the company point of reference for the project. Specifically, <X3> was an HR specialist who promoted the research initiative to the employees through a newsletter and collected the manifestations of interest from those who had the requisites to participate in the research interviews. To provide <X3> with all the necessary information and reduce any possible misunderstanding, the researcher sent <X3> the email shown below through which he requested a video conference meeting with <X3>.

Good morning <X3>.

I am happy to involve you in this project on employee empowerment.

I have prepared a document to be sent as an attachment to the people who will participate in this study. Even if the information I will collect is used only in an aggregate form, it is important to have signed consent from each interviewee. The interviews will be conducted in Italian or English, depending on the interviewee's preference. At the end of the interviews, I will deliver to <Y> a report with my analysis and recommendations for improvements that I hope I will discuss with you personally as soon as the opportunity arises, in line with your company provisions. Please let me express my gratitude to you and all your colleagues for your time and consideration.

Please also consider my document as a draft or as an attempt to save you some time. In the same spirit, I suggest a meeting over the phone or on Zoom to define the interview schedule and identify any potential problems. I am available on Tuesday 21st, Thursday 24th or Monday 27th July at the time that suits you best. Looking forward to hearing from you!

Speak soon.

Fabio Rizzi

At this point <X3> shared with the researcher the list of people who could be contacted, their contact details and the confirmation that the interviews could be conducted during working hours. The following email was used to arrange the interview with each research participant <X4>.

Good morning <X4>.

I am happy to involve you in the 'Empowerment & Performance' project. This is an opportunity to help your company understand which managerial practices work best in the organisational context of <Y> in relation to empowerment.

The term empowerment indicates a set of actions that enable an individual to feel they are the owner of their role in the company. Empowered people experience greater job satisfaction, are more engaged and perform better.

After conducting several interviews within <Y>, I will analyse the information at an aggregate level and present a report with strengths, areas for improvement and good practices.

The information collected during the interview will be treated confidentially. No information will be attributable to the individual interviewee and the transcripts / recordings will be deleted once the report is created. I invite you to read the consent form attached here, to sign it and to return the signed version to me before the interview.

In addition, I invite you to double-check whether you are available for our interview on Friday 25th September. Please let me know the time that is most convenient for you. The approximate duration of the meeting is 90 minutes. The interview will take place through the Zoom platform. I recommend that you choose a place with a good connection where you can speak freely. As soon as I receive your confirmation about the time, I will send you the invitation through Outlook.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Speak soon.

Fabio

To summarise, the people the researcher has contacted directly were:

- First point of contact and senior director <X1>
- Gatekeeper and HR manager <X2>
- Point of reference and HR specialist <X3>
- Research participant <X4>

The company under study was indicated with <Y>.

The organisation chosen for this study was identified after establishing several connections on LinkedIn with people from different companies who had given their availability. The process of identifying the company <Y> took a couple of months overall.

The evaluation of any collaboration must be carried out honestly by the researcher and the company. It is worth mentioning an episode that shows how the choice of the company <Y> was not based on exclusively opportunistic reasons related to the willingness to participate of corporate decision makers. Before talking to the managers of <Y>, the researcher had proposed his project to an HR manager at another company, who had been dubious about approving research participation on behalf of their company since the company was undertaking an organisational restructuring resulting in job losses. Therefore, the research interviews with their focus on the empowerment experience could have been interpreted as a provocation. After a video conference to assess the situation with the HR manager, the researcher and the manager agreed that it was not wise to develop the research project in that context, as the participants were experiencing the stress of the ongoing restructuring and concerns related to their own professional future.

Important note – A researcher can build a trusting relationship with research participants even before interviewing them. Every opportunity for interacting with company representatives should be conceived by the researcher as an opportunity to generate trust, leaving the people contacted with a positive impression that over time influences other people who will be willing to be involved as research participants or who have already been involved (Bryman, 2021).

Appendix C – Interview questions

The following questions can be used to investigate the five research themes initially identified: collaboration (C); motivation (M); leadership style (L); performance (P); and development (D). However, it should be observed that during the interviews the questions were updated to take into account the evolution of the research topics.

Suggested questions to ask line managers include:

1. How would you define your leadership style? (L)
2. What role does delegation play in the way you lead your team? Why do you believe so much (or so little) in the power of delegation? (L)
3. How do you get over the sense that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself and avoid the urge to micromanage? (L)
4. To what extent do you think it is worth putting in more time showing someone how to do something than doing the job yourself? (L)
5. How much time should a manager expect to devote to managing the delegation of a task, especially at first? (L)
6. Are there certain tasks that lend themselves to delegation better than others? (L)
7. How do you decide who is the right person to delegate a task to? (L)
8. What is the best way to set clear expectations about what you want when delegating? Is it with written instructions? Or is a conversation best? (L)
9. What type of support do you provide when you delegate a task (money, training, manpower, advice, anything else)? (L)
10. How do you know an employee is doing a good job? (P)
11. Generally speaking, how do you monitor performance? What are your key performance indicators? (P)
12. How often do you ask your employees to report to you on progress towards their goals? (P)
13. What is the best way to balance correction of mistakes with encouragement? (P)
14. Tell me about the current performance management system in place? How do you use it? Does it help you work well? How would you improve it? (P)
15. How do you know whether your team goals are stretching but attainable? (P)
16. How do you know whether these goals are important to your team? (P)
17. Do you spend more time analysing a problem or developing solutions? (P)
18. Do you think that your employees have greater clarity about the issues they face after they talk with you? (P)
19. To what extent do you purposefully use language that shows awareness of an employee's feelings? (C)

20. Do you feel that your team is working well collaboratively? Can you give me an example? (C)
21. What are the main drivers of success in your team? (M)
22. Are there any differences in the way you manage a motivated employee and an employee who isn't motivated enough? What are the differences? (M)
23. To what extent do you think you know how to create an environment in which your employees feel free to present their own ideas? (D)
24. How often do you talk with your employees about their current role, their career and suitable development opportunities? To what extent do you think your employees value the time you spend having these conversations with them? (D)
25. How good are you at helping your employees develop clear, simple and achievable action plans? Why? (D)
26. Is there anything else you would like to do to help your team reach their goals? (D)
27. What could the organisation do to help your team reach their goals? (D)
28. With regard to this interview, do you have any questions for me?

Suggested questions to ask employees include:

1. Do you know what is expected of you at work? (P)
2. What are your goals at work? How do you plan to achieve them? (P)
3. How do you know that you are doing a good job? (P)
4. At work, do your opinions seem to count? (P)
5. How do you monitor your own work performance? (P)
6. How would you rate your performance since your last check-in with your manager? (P)
7. Name three things you have done well in the last three months. Why do you think those were successful? (P)
8. Provide an example of a tough situation you handled well, and the key strengths you relied on. (P)
9. Is your team committed to doing quality work? (P)
10. What do you think about the current performance management system in place in your organisation? Does it help you perform well? Why? (P)
11. At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day? (D)
12. Could you give me an example of how you have grown professionally recently? (D)
13. In which projects and areas do you think your skills would add the most value? (D)
14. Which areas would you like to develop professionally in the coming period? Which skills can you improve upon? What support do you need to do that? (D)
15. Do you have other strengths or skills that you feel are not currently being used? What are they? (D)

16. Do you spend sufficient time, attention and resources on your development? Explain why you do or do not. (D)
17. What could help you develop further? [for example, training opportunities, equipment, coaching and mentoring from more experienced colleagues...] (D)
18. When do you feel most valuable in this team? (D)
19. Is there anything more your line manager could do to help you improve your job performance? (D)
20. How would you rate your line manager's leadership style? Why? (L)
21. How does your line manager ask you to carry out a task or a project? (L)
22. Does your line manager tell you why the task is important and what the benefits are for you, your team and the organisation? (L)
23. How much freedom do you have to decide how a task or a project will get done? (L)
24. What information do you receive to carry out a task or a project? Does your line manager tell you clearly what should be done, when it should be done and the end result they expect? Does your line manager explain any possible complications that may arise? Does your line manager encourage you to ask questions? (L)
25. Do you feel you are always granted the level of authority required to complete a delegated task? (L)
26. How does your manager monitor your progress? (L)
27. How important is it for you that you are chosen to carry out tasks with the potential to develop your skills? (M)
28. Do your colleagues receive tasks that can help them develop their key skills too? (M)
29. Do you always get the opportunity to use your strengths and skills when you are doing a task that has been delegated to you? (M)
30. Do you feel you are always committed to completing a delegated task? Why? (M)
31. In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work? (M)
32. Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important? (M)
33. Do you have a best friend at work? (C)
34. How would you describe the relationship you have with your line manager? And with your colleagues? (C)
35. What is your proudest achievement when thinking about your performance in your team? (C)
36. How can you better support and encourage your colleagues on future projects? (C)
37. With regard to this interview, do you have any questions for me?

Appendix D – Information sheet

PhD Research Project – Employee Empowerment

Empowerment is a set of measures designed to help employees feel responsible for their job outcomes so that they can be more productive and have higher job satisfaction. Generation Z, also known as the first generation of true digital natives, has expectations when it comes to productivity at work and job satisfaction that are not always met.

The purpose of this PhD research is to investigate the empowerment experience of Generation Z in organisations and its impact on performance. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- Through what activities and behaviours does a line manager influence the empowerment experience of their Generation Z employees?
- How do Generation Z employees experience psychological empowerment?
- How do organisational processes improve or worsen the empowerment experience?

The researcher wishes to compare the empowerment experience of managers and their employees through individual interviews.

Specifically, the research will look at the following areas:

- the processes that help and hinder empowerment of Generation Z;
- the line manager interactions;
- the relationship between line manager and team;
- how empowerment is fostered;
- the impact of employee empowerment on performance.

Methodology

The research will be conducted by one-to-one interviews, with eight line managers from your organisation and at least two employees from each team. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and all the information will be treated as confidential, with all identifying elements removed.

Benefits for your organisation to join the project

Your organisation will receive a report presenting the analysis and a detailed list of recommendations that are specifically tailored to your business environment. Oral

feedback to the appropriate body of your organisation will be planned if needed. You will be able to update knowledge and to improve managerial practice of empowerment in the workplace at a time when successive waves of technological development are becoming more frequent and have the power to change how line managers enhance employees' performance, responsibility and commitment towards organisational goals.

Confidentiality

- Employees' participation is voluntary.
- Participants can refuse to answer any of the questions asked by the researcher.
- Participants can withdraw from the interview at any time.
- Participants can withdraw their data from the research within two weeks of the interview.
- The interview will be recorded and no one – except the researcher and the supervisory team – will listen to the interview.
- All the interviews will be transcribed and all identifying information will be removed.
- Parts of the interview might be used in the researcher's thesis or publications, without any information being traceable back to the interviewee.

About the researcher

Fabio Rizzi has worked as a business management consultant for more than five years, helping organisations in Italy and in the UK develop leadership and collaboration. He has also been a university lecturer in organisational behaviour and in HR management at the University of Bologna, Italy, and at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies at the Université Jean Moulin in Lyon under the supervision of Professor Jérôme Chabanne-Rive, former Dean of the Lyon School of Management, and Professor Marc Valax, French specialist of empowerment practices.

Contacts

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Professor Marc Valax	Mobile: ...	Email: ...

Thanks for reading this information, and please hold onto it for future reference!

Appendix E – Participant consent form

The purpose of this PhD research is to investigate the empowerment experience of line managers and their Generation Z employees in your organisation.

The researcher is comparing the empowerment experience of line managers and employees in different teams and functions, by holding a number of one-to-one interviews.

This form represents your consent to participate in this research, and signifies that you agree to the following points:

- Your participation is voluntary.
- You can refuse to answer any of the questions asked by the researcher.
- You can withdraw from the interview at any time.
- You can withdraw your data from the research within two weeks of the interview.
- The interview will be recorded and no one except the researcher and the supervisory team will listen to the interview.
- All the interviews will be transcribed and all identifying information will be removed.
- Parts of the interview might be used in the researcher’s dissertation or publications, without any information being traceable back to the interviewee.

Name

Date

Appendix F – Research plan

The researcher has followed a research plan in which every action was taken to achieve the purpose indicated in Table F.1 below.

Step	Activity	Purpose
1. Getting started	Definition of research questions	To identify the boundaries of the field of study
	Themes from the pre-research	To start from research topics identified inductively (not deductively)
2. Selecting the organisation and the embedded cases	Theory to inform the conceptual framework	To extend or develop the theory relating to different aspects of employee empowerment
	Organisation chosen as a typical case	To ensure transferability
	Homogeneous and heterogeneous sampling	To focus efforts on the in-depth analysis of different key themes
3. Crafting instruments and protocols	Research interviews and reflective diary	To explore key themes and to clarify meanings
	Qualitative information	To understand multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives
	Single investigator	To ensure full control of the research process
4. Entering the field	Almost simultaneous collection and analysis of information	To direct the research study towards issues that are important for both the researcher and the participants
	Semi-structured, one-to-one, internet-mediated interviews	To allow the researcher to take advantage of emergent themes and unique case features
5. Analysing information	Within-case analysis	To gain familiarity with information and preliminary theory generation
	Cross-case pattern search	To force the researcher to look beyond initial impressions and see evidence through multiple lenses
6. Shaping propositions	Iterative tabulation of evidence for each construct	To sharpen construct definition, credibility and transferability
	Replication, not sampling, logic across cases	To confirm, extend and sharpen theory
	Search evidence for ‘why’ behind relationships	To build credibility
7. Enfolding literature	Comparison with conflicting literature	To build credibility, to raise theoretical level and to sharpen construct definitions
	Comparison with similar literature	To sharpen transferability, to improve construct definition and to raise theoretical level
8. Reaching closure	Validation	To end process when marginal improvement becomes small

Table F.1 – Research plan

Appendix G – Coding scheme

The coding was performed for each answer provided by the research participants during their interviews and for any other document analysed, such as the company policies and procedures on performance management, use of social media at work and remote working. Below is a short version of the entire coding scheme with the extracts used in the findings and discussion chapters.

Extract supporting the code and theme	Descriptive codes	Interpretive codes / Analytical categories	Themes
<p>“The line manager agrees with each employee on individual goals to be achieved and reviews progress during the past twelve months both in formal meetings and on numerous other informal occasions. [...] The annual appraisal is the formal occasion when the line manager provides feedback to each employee on their performance throughout the appraisal period.” (Company policy)</p>	<p>Company policy on performance management</p>		
<p>“You can expect your line manager to meet with you to define your priorities and then set your objectives. The agreed objectives will be the starting point for the final evaluation. Based on the initial objectives you can see if your performance is good, but it is not worth looking for simple objectives just to get good marks. Goals are for growth. Your manager will ask you to evaluate yourself and then give you their assessment. It’s a bit like going back to the marks your lecturers gave you at university. Those marks told you how much you had studied, and you knew there was room for improvement if they weren’t very good.” (C2)</p>	<p>Employee’s interpretation of the performance management process</p> <p>Employee’s analogy of performance management with academic grades</p>	<p>Benefits and limitations of the company policy on managing performance</p>	<p>Company policies as empowerment-supporting mechanisms</p>
<p>“We had a course where the basic aspects of performance appraisal were explained. We were taught some methods of giving feedback. I learned how important it is to give the employee space to express their point of view before I express my own. We saw the pitfalls associated with certain biases. We also simulated feedback in all its stages, from the planning of the meeting I do through Google Calendar to the conclusion of the meeting with the summary of the improvement actions the employee agrees to take. In the end, I realised that the evaluation process is really</p>	<p>Line manager’s description of the training programme designed to manage the performance appraisal meeting</p>		

<p>important, although the forms and all the various steps can sometimes seem exaggerated.” (C)</p>			
<p>“The employee must refrain from using social media during working hours or on devices provided by [employer] unless the use is related to their role, authorised by their line manager and consistent with the company’s equipment policy. The employee must not use [employer] email addresses to register on social networks, blogs or other online settings used for personal purposes.” (Company policy)</p>	<p>Company policy on the use of social media at work</p>		
<p>“In my opinion, it is right to limit the use of social media at work. It’s not necessary in order to work well, and I don’t want the lack of boundary between my personal and professional life to lead me to work long hours from home, with the excuse that only results count.” (A1)</p>	<p>Employee’s appreciation of work-life balance</p>		
<p>“It’s amazing how much I’ve learned from social media in my role. It is true that we have wiki pages in the company, but sometimes the most useful information is on external forums. Seeing as I can surf the internet freely, I don’t see why I can’t take a break every now and then and look at my Instagram profile or TikTok, especially when I’m using my laptop at home or carrying it around instead of my personal laptop. It would be a hassle to have two laptops or two smartphones. And then, if I want to, I can make up for the time spent on the internet. [...] It’s the results that count and my line manager is happy with me. [...] I like a company that doesn’t put constraints on what I do in the office and what I do for the company when I’m out and about.” (A2)</p>	<p>Social media as a learning tool</p> <p>Distinction between devices for work and personal life as a nuisance</p> <p>Employee’s appreciation of work-life balance</p>	<p>Benefits and limitations of the company policy on using social media at work</p>	
<p>“In principle, any job role at [employer] can be considered for hybrid work. However, some activities can clearly only be carried out properly on-site, while others can be performed equally or even more effectively elsewhere, usually the employee’s home. [...] For a role to be considered for hybrid working for a period of time of at least six months, the employee must submit a request for flexible working to their line manager who will assess the request under [employer’s] flexible working arrangements policy. [...] The days of the week chosen to be worked remotely must be agreed with [employer].” (Company policy)</p>	<p>Company policy on remote working</p>	<p>Benefits and limitations of the company policy on working remotely</p>	

<p>“I am much more productive when I am in the office. The lack of separation between private and work life scares me.” (A)</p>	<p>Line manager’s appreciation of work-life balance</p>		
<p>“The ideal solution is hybrid work where you do what you want, come to work when you want and stay at home when you want. To code the devices I use at work, I don’t need to be in the office. I only need to be there when I am testing whether the code I have written really works outside the simulation environment. Then coming to the office is really necessary. I mean, I want to be in the office when I have to be in the office, but I don’t want to be in the office if I don’t have to be there.” (A2)</p>	<p>Employee’s appreciation of hybrid work solutions</p>		
<p>“I really appreciate the opportunity to work from home sometimes. [...] I may well be more productive at home. My work-life balance has certainly improved. I save time on public transport. I can take more time for myself.” (B3)</p>	<p>Employee’s appreciation of work-life balance</p>		
<p>“Working remotely allows me to hold more meetings and therefore to coordinate better with my colleagues and employees. Remote meetings are more effective because everyone respects the start and end times of the meeting much more, but sometimes you end up having meetings that could be resolved with an email.” (B)</p>	<p>Line manager’s disadvantage of remote work</p>		
<p>“The performance of my employees is managed through annual numerical assessments. The score my employees get depends on how good they are at achieving their goals, how they behave at work and how they carry out the activities in their job description.” (B)</p>	<p>Line manager’s description of performance evaluation</p>		
<p>“I book the room for the meeting, I schedule the meeting on Google Calendar, I prepare my talk, I think about the objectives. Each employee is different from the others in terms of skills and attitude, but I try to propose the objectives in s.m.a.r.t. terms to each of them. I also think about the possible future workload that an employee might have.” (C)</p>	<p>Line manager’s description of the formal approach to performance management</p>	<p>Formal performance management</p>	<p>How performance is monitored and managed through empowerment</p>
<p>“My boss proposes the most important objectives for me, taking into account the needs of the company and what we have to do as a team. So far, I’ve always liked what I’ve done here so I haven’t had any problems accepting the proposed objectives. When I asked to go on an English course he said yes. When I asked to go to an electronics fair I was interested in</p>	<p>Employee’s description of the formal approach to performance management</p>		

<p>he said yes. The project I am involved in is stimulating. Why should I be unhappy?" (C3)</p>			
<p>"As far as possible I try to propose the projects we are going to work on and let my staff choose what they think is best for them. [...] In truth, I admit that I advise them and direct their choices to where I want them to go, based on multiple factors. When I really don't have room for manoeuvre, I have to impose myself by saying that it's the only decision open to me." (E)</p>	<p>Line manager's description of the formal approach to performance management</p>		
<p>"It's not what's written in a policy that motivates my staff, it's the enthusiasm they show and which I support with my questions about how work is progressing, my advice and feedback while the project is underway, my congratulations and 'thank yous' [...] The performance management policy helps, so there is written documentation to distribute rewards fairly and to have some evidence of poor performance in case it is necessary to justify certain serious decisions." (G)</p>	<p>Line manager's reflection on the importance of formal and informal approaches</p>		
<p>"How are you doing with the project you're working on? What do you need to complete it on time? What are you finding most difficult to do today? What about in the next few days? Do you need me to do anything for you?" (B)</p>	<p>Line manager's questions to grant autonomy</p>		
<p>"I am the most experienced in the field. It is normal for me to have the last word. [...] Sometimes I intervene to settle disputes between technicians who would like to approach the project differently. [...] Sometimes I take preventive action to stop my employees from wasting time on issues that I've come across before." (F)</p>	<p>Line manager's manifestation of assertive leadership</p>		
<p>"It is better to apologise than to ask permission. My manager appreciates my motivation and I think that's how you learn new things. If I am wrong, I am sure he'll let me know." (F2)</p>	<p>Employee's proactive reaction</p>	<p>Informal performance management</p>	
<p>"Of course, I want my employees to develop skills and become autonomous in performing many different tasks. I want to be able to trust them more and more, but it is undeniably important to me that the project progresses on time. I don't want to be a week away from the delivery date and find that we are a month behind." (G)</p>	<p>Line manager's focus on results and people</p>		
<p>"I think I have an open and honest dialogue with my employees. [...] If something is wrong, I seek a two-way dialogue and try</p>			

<p>to be specific in pointing out actions for improvement. I hope my honesty will be repaid in the same way. [...] I would like them to tell me where they feel they are struggling so that I can give them the right support. They generally do, because as soon as they come into the company, they're full of hopes and expectations that sometimes we can't fulfil." (C)</p>	<p>Line manager's description of the professional relationship with their employees</p>		
<p>"My employees who work with greater freedom should be given both burdens and honours in the sense that if they do well we are all happy, but if they make mistakes they have to take responsibility. It is too easy just to take the honours. The problem is that many people want more autonomy but do not want the risk of suffering the negative consequences of mistakes. [...] The negative consequences depend on the seriousness of the mistakes. For example, an employee may not be involved in crucial projects, may not receive a bonus and, in an extreme scenario, could lose the chance of being offered a permanent position or a promotion. [...] Under these circumstances, far fewer employees venture into uncharted territory." (F)</p>	<p>Line manager's interpretation of employees' burdens and honours</p>		
<p>"I'm happy when I can get my hands dirty again. It happens rarely, but sometimes there are serious delays and major shortcomings in the quality of the work done. In these cases, I make sure that my eagerness to solve the problem does not lead to any of my staff feeling discharged from their duty to contribute. I want them all to be involved. [...] I want to show that problems can be solved together and that everyone can contribute." (A)</p>	<p>Line manager's team spirit in difficult times</p>		
<p>"When I go back to being a technician instead of the boss, everything seems easier, but I look for collaboration and support from the whole team rather than rushing to solve the problem alone, although it would sometimes be much more convenient." (D)</p>	<p>Line manager's focus on collaboration and support</p>		
<p>"I'm not a control freak, but I'm ready to confront an employee head-on if I think it's the right thing to do. Otherwise, I offer help." (H)</p>	<p>Line manager's manifestation of assertive leadership</p>		

<p>“I have had an employee who wanted to have a meeting with me to discuss his performance because he felt he needed to improve. I first reassured him by telling him I did not doubt that he would improve because he had the skills to do so. [...] Then I showed him some specific examples of what he should have done and did not do. [...] I made sure he understood the specific points I was talking about. I asked him if there were any reasons why he could not do what was expected of him and he replied that it was a difficult moment because his girlfriend had just left him. I tried to console him and when I realised that he did not want to elaborate I simply said I’d be there to listen at any time. [...] I’d offer him a shoulder to cry on, but above all technical support for the work to be done. At that point, he laughed. We arranged a new meeting. [...] He seemed satisfied with the outcome of our chat.” (A)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on individual performance-improvement conversations with their employees</p> <p>Line manager’s description of an individual performance-improvement conversation</p>		
<p>“I think it is worth talking to your employee when their performance is not up to expectations. I don’t want to get to the point where I say, ‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll do it.’ I don’t think it’s particularly empowering to take away a person’s chance to improve. Not only does it take away that person’s opportunity to do better, but it also sets a dangerous precedent concerning how performance will be managed in the future in my team. If I intervene before an employee has encountered any difficulties, I give them licence to think ‘Well, I don’t have to worry, because my boss will take care of it anyway.’ Instead, I want my employees to try to cope on their own. Of course, if there are serious problems, I will provide the necessary support, but not before seeing them ‘suffer’, especially if the task was discussed in advance and they were happy to take it on.” (G)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on an individual performance improvement conversation</p> <p>Line manager’s interpretation of how to empower their employees</p>		
<p>“If I have trusted someone, I expect them to carry out the task assigned to them with access to all the resources and information they need without having to ask my permission. People in my team who are not autonomous will see me involved much more directly and quickly than those who know how to operate on their own. [...] I observe and intervene more frequently when people with limited autonomy are in difficulty. [...] I solve the problem directly</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on how to deal with employees who have different levels of autonomy</p>		

<p>when it is a minor issue. Otherwise, I prefer young employees to be supported by a more experienced colleague. I avoid interfering with employees who have shown in the past that they can manage on their own.” (C)</p>			
<p>“I get involved in an employee’s problems much quicker when I know that person has no experience and comes to us directly after graduating.” (D)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on how to deal with employees who have different levels of autonomy</p>		
<p>“I look at performance from results and behaviours. I rely mainly on intuition and direct observation, but also on the employee’s thoughts about their role and the work they’ve done. Before making any decisions about rewards and promotions, I talk to my colleagues in the department who have had the opportunity to observe the person at work. The opinion of peers also counts. If I’m going to reward someone, it has to be a decision that has a broad basis of consensus.” (H)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on the sources used to assess employee performance and the purpose these sources serve</p>		
<p>“I just need to see how [a staff member] moves around the department to be able to see what their performance will be like, especially if they haven’t been with us for long.” (F)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on the sources used to assess employee performance and the purposes these sources serve</p>		
<p>“I think younger employees find my initial presentation with news updates about the company useful before we start the actual project progress meeting we hold twice a month. I only select information for our team that I think will be of interest, such as expansion into new geographical areas or important appointments at the top. [...] I do this because I think my employees can feel proud to work for a group that is expanding.” (A)</p>	<p>Line manager’s perspective of how useful the company information is for their employees</p>	<p>Line manager’s viewpoint on internal communication of company information</p>	<p>Internal communication of company information</p>
<p>“Corporate information is provided through different channels: company emails, individual and group meetings, our internal corporate network [the intranet] and even official presentations by top management. [...] If you have time to search on our intranet, you can find everything, but then you no longer have time to work.” (E)</p>	<p>Line manager’s list of company information sources</p>		
<p>“I attended an official event once because</p>	<p>Employee’s</p>	<p>Employee’s</p>	

<p>the new CEO had arrived at the plant in Japan where I'd been sent for a few months. Really, I couldn't see what his talk could add to my work. It felt like a distraction, to be honest. [...] My satisfaction comes from knowing that there will be a device on the market that I made and that if I go to the pharmacy, I can see it and I can tell everyone: 'I made that'. That really gives me satisfaction, not the words of a CEO I don't know." (H3)</p>	<p>perspective of how useful the company information is</p>	<p>viewpoint on internal communication of company information</p>	
<p>"It is our line manager who tells us every now and then what might be relevant for our work. We know that everything is available online or on the official social media channels, but I don't really follow them. I just get the news that we all discuss together at the bimonthly team meetings." (C4)</p>	<p>Employee's perspective of how useful the company information is</p>		
<p>"In my opinion, empowerment is the feeling of knowing you have everything you need to do the task you have in mind: knowledge and skills, physical and mental resources, and power to decide how to do what you want to do. And then you do it. [...] In my team people display these characteristics to varying degrees." (H)</p>	<p>List of empowerment features (resources and power to decide)</p>		
<p>"If my employees feel empowered, then they must feel that they can take decisions without having to ask my permission for everything. They are responsible for those decisions and the results that follow because if they took a decision there must have been a good reason for it. And they also need to know that I will support their decision and their assessments. [...] To me, these are the kind of behaviours that make you realise that you have the instruments to take decisions and be responsible for your work without having to go to your boss every time to ask for permission." (D)</p>	<p>Autonomy and accountability as features of empowerment</p>	<p>Features of empowerment</p>	<p>How line managers interpret empowerment</p>
<p>"I think there's an analogy between being empowered and driving a car. To drive a car, you must practice and learn skills that will enable you to be on the road without endangering yourself or others. Then perhaps you get so good at it you go rallying. Similarly, to be empowered you must practise and develop skills to make sure you're not dangerous to yourself or others. The hope is that once you are empowered you can race towards the company's goals. [...] I mean skills that are not only related to safety in the workplace, but more to the ability to make decisions</p>	<p>Analogy between being empowered and driving a car Empowerment as a way to achieve more and quicker</p>	<p>Purpose, boundaries and focus of empowerment</p>	

that can get the work moving forward quickly.” (F)			
“Clearly the goal is to have employees who only need instructions on what is to be done. They get organised to carry out the task by themselves and I can forget about that side of the project because I know it will be carried out in the best possible way.” (D)	Purpose of empowerment		
“If I entrust a whole project to you, I don’t check to see which tasks are in your job description and which aren’t. I give you the whole thing. I don’t expect you to only take technical decisions. I expect you to also take decisions concerning the relationship with other departments and customers.” (B)	Boundaries of empowerment		
“I honestly believe that my efforts to support empowerment have to focus on the current role of my employees. I need them to be good today. I’ll think about the future tomorrow.” (E)	Empowerment focused on current/future roles		
“If I want to keep my younger employees motivated, I can’t keep asking them if they want to do the same task, because they’ll say no. I prefer to ask them to do different tasks and push the boundaries of their current role. If I don’t get that chance and they tell me they don’t want to keep doing the same task, I can insist and justify it by the fact that I’ve tried to give them learning opportunities whenever I have had the chance.” (C)	Going beyond the limits of the current role to keep the employee motivated		
“Empowerment gives more value to the team and the whole department because I can say: ‘H1 can take care of this project because H2 is currently busy on another project’. This means that H2 doesn’t have to divide his time between two different projects and slow down the completion of both. It also means that the client doesn’t have to wait for H2 to finish the work he’s doing now before he sees his own project realised. We call it functional flexibility.” (H)	Benefits of empowerment in terms of functional flexibility	Empowerment used to increase functional flexibility	Why line managers use empowerment
“No one else will be responsible if you have the last word, and that is why a person to whom I give ownership of a task will pay more attention and be more committed to it than a person who is only delegated to do it.” (B)	Benefits of empowerment in terms of employee’s accountability	Empowerment used to increase competence, focus and commitment	
“I find that this generation has many more job opportunities at their fingertips and smartphones than previous generations. This drives my employees to ‘fall in love’ with many different companies while	Line manager’s reflection on how to instil a sense of belonging and	Empowerment used to attract, retain and develop talent	

<p>working here. It’s not easy for me to help my employees develop a sense of belonging to this company because in their minds there is always the comparison with a different company or a friend who works at Google. It wasn’t like that for my generation, or at least the choices were more limited. The so-called ‘war for talent’ is global and daily here. [...] What do I do in my own small way to win this war? I try to show why it’s good to work here, how everyone’s contribution helps to achieve important goals as a group and all that can be learned in this business environment.”</p> <p>(A)</p>	<p>how to win the war for talent</p>		
<p>“If you give your employees the chance to do more, they give you more. And every time you activate this mechanism their competence improves, and they achieve more.” (E)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on the competence dimension</p>		
<p>“I once heard a story that illustrates very well what it means to give meaning to what you are doing. It is the story of a wanderer who walking in the desert meets three people doing the same job, but the first one says he’s breaking stones, the second one’s supporting his family and the third one’s building a cathedral. Here we have people with exactly the same approach and it’s true that it’s usually the youngest who are building the cathedral, and you can see that because they’re always eager to do it and they hardly ever say no if you explain to them why their contribution is important, why we’ve chosen them for the task and what they’ll learn from this experience.”</p> <p>(G)</p>	<p>Metaphor to explain the meaning dimension</p>		
<p>“My employees who work with greater freedom should be given both burdens and honours in the sense that if they do well we are all happy, but if they make mistakes they have to take responsibility. It is too easy just to take the honours. The problem is that many people want more autonomy but do not want the risk of suffering the negative consequences of mistakes. [...] The negative consequences depend on the seriousness of the mistakes. For example, an employee may not be involved in crucial projects, may not receive a bonus and, in an extreme scenario, could lose the chance of being offered a permanent position or a promotion. [...] Under these circumstances, far fewer employees venture into uncharted territory.” (F)</p>	<p>Line manager’s interpretation of employees’ burdens and honours</p> <p>Suffering negative consequences as a result of making mistakes</p>		

<p>“Although it’s not easy, we often learn from our mistakes. My employees must be conscious that mistakes are part of the learning process. But you have to make mistakes early on so that the error does not have a devastating impact on the project. What I always say is that you must not be afraid of making mistakes, but you must learn from them so that you don’t make the same ones again and again.” (D)</p>	<p>Mistakes as part of the learning process</p>		
<p>“If I had to explain to each employee every single action needed to get to the end of a project, in five years’ time I would still be here, and I still wouldn’t have come to the end of the list. I prefer to explain the client’s expectations in detail and the process in general terms, and then remind them of the deadlines. I ask if the information provided is enough to get started and then let everyone try to work it out for themselves. In the end, we only learn when we come across a few difficulties and make some mistakes.” (H)</p>	<p>Making mistakes without suffering negative consequences</p>		
<p>“When I ask a member of staff for advice on how they would complete a task, I can see whether the activity would be stimulating for them. Sometimes the enthusiasm of my younger employees is palpable even if we’re talking about administrative tasks or tasks with low added value, such as entering data in a database because the process hasn’t been automated yet. [...] Sometimes they decide how to make such a mechanical job interesting. Once G1 completed a very long task in one day because he had decided to use the task as a test to evaluate his attention to detail. Another time, G1 automated the process, which may have taken longer than entering the data manually but showed me that he had learned new aspects of Visual Basic programming.” (G)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on the impact dimension</p>		
<p>“Doing empowerment makes my life easier. [...] I get rid of some of the things cluttering my desk. [...] Honestly, there are more worthy reasons, but this shouldn’t be underestimated, should it?” (C)</p>	<p>Benefits of empowerment in terms of personal convenience</p>	<p>Empowerment used to take care of more strategically relevant responsibilities</p>	
<p>“I think it’s in my nature. It’s just the way I do things.” (A)</p>	<p>Benefits of empowerment in terms of doing the right thing</p>	<p>Empowerment used to be true to own nature and values</p>	

<p>“The relationship with my boss in the old job? [...] He wasn’t good with people. [...] His way of doing things wasn’t the best way to bring out the best in people. If you try to control everything others do, and you put constraints on them and say no all the time, don’t expect to be loved or understood when it is you who is wrong. At most, you are feared for as long as you have power, but then you are nothing. [...] I certainly don’t behave like that with my employees. I believe there is great potential in each of them and I am certainly not jealous if they do their job well. I don’t feel threatened when they do a good job and I hope that one day one of them will be ready to take over from me. [...] That person I told you about earlier would crush you instead for fear that you might overshadow him or step into his shoes.” (B)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on bad examples and good teachers</p>		
<p>“As soon as a new employee joins the team, I bring in a more experienced colleague as part of the induction process. Obviously, no one can work autonomously at first, but I’ve seen various people grow, so I’m generally confident in my ability to guide someone from total dependence to total independence, which is actually interdependence here because we work together. [...] To evaluate progress I observe the person directly in the field, in particular their familiarity with the work tools. I ask them questions to figure out if they have an idea of the time the various activities require and if they keep track of the progress of the job. I also ask them questions to determine whether they pay attention to the quality of the work they do and to the work their colleagues do. I listen to what they say to gauge how they address their colleagues and whether they help their colleagues coordinate their work. I also ask others to give an evaluation so that the person doesn’t fall victim to my biases.” (G)</p>	<p>Employee’s performance and employee’s reflection on performance as indicators of empowerment</p>	<p>Line managers’ indicators of empowerment</p>	<p>How line managers recognise empowerment</p>
<p>“I like to delegate and show that I have confidence in what an employee will do, but sometimes I have to pay more attention to the coaching and mentoring aspects and invest more time in these activities because otherwise the task is not interpreted as empowering, indeed some may think the task is beyond their abilities.” (G)</p>	<p>Time spent in an empowerment relationship as an indicator of empowerment</p>		

<p>“What signals to me that there is empowerment is the level of performance, employee satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. These key performance indicators or KPIs may well vary, but they are like stock market indices when the economy is growing: they show a positive trend in the presence of empowerment.” (B)</p>	<p>Level of performance, employee satisfaction and commitment to the organisation as indicators of empowerment</p>		
<p>“When the learner outperforms the master then the master has to step aside. [...] One day I realised that an employee of mine had become really good at programming in C++. [...] His solutions are often better than mine, no matter how good a programmer I consider myself to be. Now I not only give him carte blanche, but I study his solutions to keep up to date and make sure they are applied to all our machines as standard.” (E)</p>	<p>Line manager learning as an indicator of empowerment</p>		
<p>“The main thing is to know whether the employee wants to be empowered and there is no better way to know this than to ask him or her.” (D)</p>	<p>Empowerment only for employees willing to be empowered</p>		
<p>“Sometimes empowerment doesn’t work simply because you focus on the wrong person. You can empower someone, but if that person doesn’t want to be empowered and always prefers to come back to you for final approval their understanding of empowerment is going to be completely different from someone who badly wants that empowerment. [...] Working with those who want to be empowered can be difficult but working with those who don’t want to be empowered is even more difficult.” (H)</p>	<p>Empowerment as the wrong management approach for people not willing to be empowered</p>	<p>Employee’s willingness to be empowered as the basic assumption for making empowerment happen</p>	
<p>“When I think I’ve identified the right person to carry out a task, I talk to them and explain what skills they’ll be able to develop, including both technical skills and transferable skills such as problem-solving and leadership. I ask them what they think of my proposal and whether they’d be happy to carry out the task. [...] Then I talk about the key aspects and delivery time. If I sense the person is reticent, I ask why and respond to any concerns or doubts, hoping to get them fired up.” (F)</p>	<p>How to talk to the person to be empowered</p>		
<p>“One day I found out that the task I had given to A1 had actually been carried out in part by one of their colleagues, so I wondered: ‘Weren’t you supposed to develop the skills we had discussed together?’ It was a surprise, but not a</p>	<p>Line manager’s reaction to the unexpected behaviour of an empowered employee</p>	<p>How line managers should not react to empowerment</p>	

<p>problem, although I would've liked to have known about this initiative in advance." (A)</p>			
<p>"My staff often work in different areas of our design centre and are sometimes working remotely. I can't always check what they are doing in person. Of course, I have to trust them, but I trust them to do a good job because I have known them for over a year, and I know what kind of people they are. [...] In any case, before the final delivery, we always have at least one meeting to discuss any critical issues." (E)</p>	<p>Link between duration of empowerment relationship and level of confidence in the employee's performance</p>	<p>How line managers predict empowerment</p>	
<p>"If all goes well, at the end of the eighteen months the employee will be fully autonomous, and I won't be interfering in their work anymore." (C)</p>	<p>Eighteen months to fully empower an employee</p>		
<p>"When I think I've identified the right person to carry out a task, I talk to them and explain what skills they'll be able to develop, including both technical skills and transferable skills such as problem-solving and leadership. I ask them what they think of my proposal and whether they'd be happy to carry out the task. [...] Then I talk about the key aspects and delivery time. If I sense the person is reticent, I ask why and respond to any concerns or doubts, hoping to get them fired up." (F)</p>	<p>How to talk to the person to be empowered Line manager's description of how to motivate their employees</p>	<p>Adopting a people-oriented leadership style</p>	
<p>"I once heard a story that illustrates very well what it means to give meaning to what you are doing. It is the story of a wanderer who walking in the desert meets three people doing the same job, but the first one says he's breaking stones, the second one's supporting his family and the third one's building a cathedral. Here we have people with exactly the same approach and it's true that it's usually the youngest who are building the cathedral, and you can see that because they're always eager to do it and they hardly ever say no if you explain to them why their contribution is important, why we've chosen them for the task and what they'll learn from this experience." (G)</p>	<p>Metaphor to explain the meaning dimension</p>	<p>Encouraging performance improvement</p>	<p>What line managers do when they empower</p>
<p>"I let the employee who has carried out the actions required by the compliance form sign the part of the document related to the work they've done. Even though I am ultimately responsible for the project, I believe that having my employees' signatures on an official document makes them aware of what they're responsible for without any misunderstanding. If they sign, I trust their work. [...] If they don't sign, we</p>	<p>Line manager's description of how to motivate employees</p>	<p>Using a participative decision-making approach</p>	

<p>sit around a table to find out what's wrong. [...] Then they know, for example, that they can manage overtime when needed, deal with office expenses through petty cash or urge other departments to work with us to avoid bottlenecks or unnecessary delays.”</p> <p>(C)</p>			
<p>“I trust people who deserve trust. My way of performing a task does not necessarily reflect theirs, but once we have discussed expectations of the outcome, any differences in the process are irrelevant. The important thing is to arrive at the agreed result.” (A)</p>	<p>Line manager’s reflection on the importance of arriving at the agreed result</p>	<p>Building a relationship of trust</p>	
<p>“A good team consists of people with different abilities. I need to know the strengths and areas for improvement of each of my staff to bring out the best in them in terms of performance. And the only way I know is to talk to them, figure out what motivates them and use their skills in a way that is consistent with their preferences and abilities. [...] Obviously, I provide guidelines on the performance expectations we need to reach in this team and the freedoms we can allow ourselves.”</p> <p>(G)</p>	<p>Line manager’s description of a good team</p>		
<p>“We do quality control here. Procedures are documented and must be followed to the letter. When a new employee joins the team, they learn to carry out the individual procedures. The more autonomous they become, the more complex the tasks I entrust to them, and these require not only executing many different procedures but also updating them following international and European directives [...], training less experienced employees, defining new control procedures and organising work within our team together with other employees.” (D)</p>	<p>Employee’s job description in the quality control team</p>	<p>Collaborating</p>	
<p>“When our branch manager said he wanted to increase turnover by fifty per cent from one year to the next, I had to explain to my staff what such an ambitious target meant to us in terms of the number of projects and clients to prioritise. I wanted to make it clear to everyone which projects and clients they should be paying the most attention to because they are considered strategic for our subsidiary. [...] Sharing information of this kind immediately leads people to direct their preferences towards projects that pose a greater or lesser degree of risk, depending on how much they want to be exposed to</p>	<p>Line manager’s information sharing and translation of organisational goals into team goals</p>	<p>Providing access to information and resources</p>	

recognition and criticism.” (B)			
“Having a sizeable ego can be a problem if your purpose at work is to make your employees feel like key players. You may have trouble letting go of power. Unfortunately, I met someone who had an oversized ego and acted like a dictator at work. [...] Sometimes it just takes a little bit of kindness.” (F)	Line manager’s reflection on how difficult the permanent transfer of power to employees can be	Transferring power permanently	
“I am tired of colleagues who never smile, just because they have to show that they work so hard and are full of worries. I want colleagues who can smile. Long live the people who see the glass half full. It’s the optimists who can instil hope and confidence in others. Pessimists may be right, but they just don’t know how to dream.” (F)	Optimism as a personality trait of line managers who can empower effectively		
“When I was looking for a job as an engineer, I hoped to find it before my technical knowledge got too old.” (E2)	Increasing speed of technological advancements	Future landscape of work	What Generation Z employees want from their career
“With all these technological innovations I expect to deal with new things all the time and leave all the repetitive tasks to the machines, and it will be my responsibility to program the machines that will do this.” (F4)	Technological innovations used to make jobs more creative		
“We may not have humanoid robots cleaning our houses as we see in the cartoons, but we already have devices that decide to clean when it’s dirty and recharge themselves. [...] In my work I will need creativity, empathy and above all the ability to use artificial intelligence.” (C4)	Artificial intelligence as a new discipline to master at work		
“What is really important for me is that I’m happy and that I enjoy what I do. I don’t want to be one of those people who dread going to work because they know they’ll be unhappy all the time. I don’t even care that much about the salary, as long as it’s enough to live on. I just need to be happy.” (B1)	Happiness and enjoyment	Generation Z career expectations	
“I want to make a difference. Don’t get me wrong, it would be great to be able to travel, earn a lot of money and become famous, but none of that really matters if my work doesn’t make a difference to anyone.” (E1)	Positive impact on others and society		
“The most important aspect of my job is the opportunity it gives me to do something I love, not just pay the bills.” (D3)	Fulfilment and meaning		

<p>“A fulfilling life is a life of job satisfaction, related to what I love doing. [...] Making a difference in a positive way for the people I care about is also fulfilling.” (A2)</p>	<p>Fulfilment, impact and job satisfaction</p>		
<p>“I’d like to have a life where I didn’t have to worry unduly in case of unforeseen expenses. A life without debt... being able to go on holiday... and a decent pension.” (G1)</p>	<p>Financial stability</p>		
<p>“To earn a lot of money and be happy is what I would like. I’d like my abilities to be recognised at all times. For the moment I can’t complain, but I’d like to make sure I have a salary that grows fast as my role becomes more important here.” (H3)</p>	<p>Career progression, happiness and money</p>		
<p>“The most important thing in my professional life is to have a job that keeps me thinking, keeps the wheels of my brain turning, day in and day out.” (H1)</p>	<p>Personal and professional growth</p>		
<p>“The most important thing for me is to do work that stimulates my brain. [...] I can’t stand being bored, which is when I have to sit on my hands because there’s downtime outside my control.” (E1)</p>	<p>Intellectual stimulation and not boredom</p>		
<p>“I’m thinking of leaving this company. [...] I’ve been here just over a year. [...] I’m in quality control so there is no room for alternative or creative methods. I’m not really interested in growing in this role because there’s not much room to do new things. [...] Once you have learned the process, it will be the same for at least a year. [...] I’m not interested in a job that just pays the bills, especially at my age.” (D3)</p>	<p>Creativity and not boredom</p>		
<p>“I’m never bored. The thing I like most is that every day is different.” (H4)</p>	<p>Job variety</p>		
<p>“I can’t stand wasting time at my age because time is too important now. For my father, a year is a relatively short time. For me it’s a very long time.” (H3)</p>	<p>Not wasting time</p>		
<p>“I don’t care about money. I care about working hard and demonstrating my worth and merit.” (A1)</p>	<p>Success</p>		
<p>“We have to be careful to look at people in their complexity and diversity. We are not just the ones our bosses can delegate a list of tasks to that they don’t do. [...] Each of us has superpowers that can be useful, even if they sometimes seem very specific and uncommon.” (F1)</p>	<p>Valuing diversity</p>		
<p>“I really appreciate the opportunity to work from home sometimes. [...] I may well be more productive at home. My work-life balance has certainly improved. I save time</p>	<p>Work-life balance</p>		

<p>on public transport. I can take more time for myself.” (B3)</p>			
<p>“I like a company that doesn’t put constraints on what I do in the office and what I do for the company when I’m out and about.” (A2)</p>	<p>Hybrid workplace</p>		
<p>“For me, being empowered means complying with the job description, making my own decisions and being consistent with what has been decided, but also making changes if necessary, without having to tell my boss or others and without worrying about what my boss thinks.” (F5)</p>	<p>Empowerment is about reaching goals without involving the line manager</p>		
<p>“My line manager lets me do it. He doesn’t challenge what I do. For example, he doesn’t ask, ‘Why did you do this?’ or ‘Why didn’t you do that?’ He doesn’t tell me how to distribute my workload and I really like that, because I prefer to organise my own activities. If I make a mistake I learn. [...] I think my line manager has found the right way of helping me understand how my work can meet the needs of the company and how I can make a difference.” (H2)</p>	<p>Empowerment is about making a difference individually</p>	<p>Empowerment as opportunity to work alone</p>	
<p>“I feel empowered when I meet the expectations that others have of my role. Being empowered does not mean doing what you want or working alone. You are free, but there are boundaries to respect which depend on the structure, the boss, the company policies... It is a bit like the freedom that Italian citizens have: they are free, but they have to respect the laws of the nation. [...] You are free and within that freedom, you have to construct your role in relation to that of others.” (D2)</p>	<p>Empowerment is about meeting other people’s expectations and abiding by the company rules</p>		<p>How Generation Z employees interpret empowerment</p>
<p>“I have to sign a document certifying the testing of the devices we design and assemble here. There is a testing protocol to follow. Although the protocol is always the same, the problems I encounter in testing are often different, so I have to use my problem solving and analytical skills to get the job done. Sometimes I set myself tight deadlines to motivate myself to finish the job without wasting time, which complicates my life, but my satisfaction lies in always finding a way to get to the end. It isn’t a problem if I sometimes ask others, including my boss, for help. I am not in competition with anyone. We are all in the same boat solving problems that at least initially seem impossible. [...] My</p>	<p>Empowerment is about following protocols and getting to the end, with or without help from others</p>	<p>Empowerment as opportunity to solve problems with others</p>	

work is important to me because nothing could come out of the department without my contribution.” (D1)			
“He trusts me. He trusts that I will do the best I can with what I have at my disposal, which then means being able to rely on my colleagues and the equipment in the department.” (B2)	Trust as unconditional support and freedom to make decisions	Goal internalisation	What Generation Z employees do when they feel empowered
“He has never said to me ‘I trust you’ but he doesn’t have to. He lets me do my job. If I have problems I can call him, but I don’t want to disturb him when I can do without him.” (F3)	Freedom to make decisions and technical support		
“I feel empowered when I can make decisions that affect my project... decisions that can influence the realisation of the project, respecting all the deadlines already decided and the budget. This doesn’t mean that everyone above me will agree with my decisions, but I have the freedom to present them and give reasons for them. Accepting my decisions is often easier than rejecting them, because I am convincing and because they are not really big decisions. In any case, those above me only decide the direction in which the project should go after hearing my proposals.” (G2)	Freedom to make decisions and perception of control		
“My line manager once told me ‘If you think it’s the right thing to do, do it. It might be the wrong way, but we’ll judge that later.’ I don’t make decisions that involve expenses for the company or changes in the long term. Those decisions are up to my line manager. Mine are short-term decisions and are usually approved.” (E3)	Freedom to make decisions		
“My job satisfaction grows weekly because with each passing week I feel I have a greater impact on the results we need to achieve as a team.” (F2)	Impact on the results	Perceived control	
“Personally, I feel empowered in my work because when I go to my boss, he tells me that I don’t have to ask him for confirmation, that I am fully authorised to proceed, even though in reality there is no company policy authorising me and my job description is not that specific, so sometimes I think: ‘Are you sure it’s up to you to do this? Better ask.’ But every time I ask for confirmation, his answer is always the same. ‘Do it yourself. You know what you are doing is right. Your way of thinking is correct. I am happy if you proceed as you have decided.’ So, yes, I am empowered to the extent that I can call	Distinction between what can be done and what cannot be done by an empowered employee		

<p>clients and talk to them about technical aspects. But I don't develop new products. That's up to my boss." (C3)</p>			
<p>"I feel empowered when I can make decisions that affect my project... decisions that can influence the realisation of the project, respecting all the deadlines already decided and the budget. This doesn't mean that everyone above me will agree with my decisions, but I have the freedom to present them and give reasons for them. Accepting my decisions is often easier than rejecting them, because I am convincing and because they are not really big decisions. In any case, those above me only decide the direction in which the project should go after hearing my proposals." (G2)</p>	<p>Power to influence the direction of a project</p>		
<p>"There are people among us who benefit from more freedom of action than others. I think this is normal. It depends on experience. However, I don't think G would be too bothered if I chose to carry out a task in a different way from how he would, and look... even if I knew the way G would carry out the task and chose a different solution it wouldn't be a problem for G. But, in the end, he would hold me to account and try to show me why he was right... because the fact is he's usually right." (G1)</p>	<p>Power to carry out a task in a different way from the line manager</p>	<p>Perceived competence</p>	
<p>"Personally, I feel empowered in my work because when I go to my boss, he tells me that I don't have to ask him for confirmation, that I am fully authorised to proceed, even though in reality there is no company policy authorising me and my job description is not that specific, so sometimes I think: 'Are you sure it's up to you to do this? Better ask.' But every time I ask for confirmation, his answer is always the same. 'Do it yourself. You know what you are doing is right. Your way of thinking is correct. I am happy if you proceed as you have decided.' So, yes, I am empowered to the extent that I can call clients and talk to them about technical aspects. But I don't develop new products. That's up to my boss." (C3)</p>	<p>Distinction between what can be done and what cannot be done by an empowered employee</p>	<p>Making employees aware of their control, competence, autonomy, motivation and learning</p>	<p>How Generation Z employees monitor work progress</p>
<p>"What I really like is the trust I receive from my boss. He is not someone who is on your back all the time. He lets me get on with it. He isn't anxious about meeting deadlines. Unlike others, he doesn't say to me, 'Do this!' or 'Have you done that?'"</p>	<p>Importance of competence and autonomy for employees</p>		

<p>And I appreciate that approach, because I have my independence, so to speak. Since I arrived, about a year and a half ago, I have seen an improvement in my skills and autonomy. [...] I can see myself improving month by month.” (B3)</p>			
<p>“My line manager suggested I keep track of my work progress. Since I started doing it, I feel more motivated. I think it is easier to keep track of what I learn. I usually use an Excel spreadsheet.” (F5)</p>	<p>Importance of motivation and learning for employees</p>		
<p>“To know how much I’ll have to work, I estimate my overall workload and divide it by the number of days I have available. This gives me an idea of how much on average I have to do each day. So I can see if I am ahead or behind schedule and inform my boss and colleagues where I’m at. [...] I like having the situation under control. I think I like to show others that even when something can go wrong, I’ve done everything I can to catch up.” (H3)</p>	<p>Numerical skills used to stay on track</p>		
<p>“Every year during the Christmas holidays there comes a particular day when I stick a Post-it on the wardrobe door. On the Post-it, I write down three goals that I’d like to achieve in the coming year. Not all of them are work goals. [...] I don’t always share work goals with my line manager because I don’t think I should also share what I want to do later on in my career. But working daily to achieve my goals gives meaning to my days here in the company, makes me achieve better results and fills me with satisfaction.” (H4)</p>	<p>Goal setting used to stay motivated in the long run</p>	<p>Developing the right monitoring strategies</p>	
<p>“I just use the Gantt chart, because there’s no point being the best in the class if it’s the teamwork that counts. This doesn’t mean that I back down and don’t do enough for the group. On the contrary, I’m happy to give my all, but because I work with others it makes little sense to put individual performance ahead of team performance.” (C1)</p>	<p>Gantt charts used to keep the team informed about work progress</p>		
<p>“I feel comfortable using to-do lists. Sometimes I have a to-do list for each different project I am involved in. I keep them in OneNote, but I don’t share them with others. They are only useful to me. I need them when I wake up in the morning to know what has to be done, otherwise I don’t have a clear idea right away.” (E1)</p>	<p>To-do lists used to plan for the day</p>		
<p>“When I first joined the company, I decided to keep a diary. Now I hardly ever bother to update it. I prefer the summary required by</p>	<p>Diary vs. company app used to justify</p>		

<p>the internal application which asks me to justify how I spend each hour of work.” (B3)</p>	<p>every hour at work</p>		
<p>“I think the first thing to mention about my line manager is that he helps me when I need it. His management style is open and quite informal. And that, in my opinion, is the best approach to empowerment. [...] He encourages all his staff to grow. [...] He encourages us to do the best job we can and is always happy to help us. [...] From my point of view, I’m working in an environment that I consider empowering.” (H2)</p>	<p>Line manager’s level of involvement is great</p>		
<p>“I think my boss needs to be more in touch, talk to me more often and come and see what kind of work I’m doing and check my results because so far, since I’ve been with this company, my results have been judged by other people who work here, but not by my boss. There is practically nothing that he’s seen. He doesn’t often give me an assignment. The assignments come to me from elsewhere, so he has no power at all to manage the things I do or the complexity of the assignments I’m given. I only see him during our bimonthly team meetings.” (C4)</p>	<p>Line manager’s level of involvement could be higher</p>	<p>Line manager’s level of involvement</p>	
<p>“He lets me work alone for long stretches of time, sometimes even three or four days. I can do more or less what I want. If there is something urgent, he’s told me that I have to be good at multi-tasking and in any case I have his trust, because he knows that I can do a lot of different tasks and find a solution to any unforeseen problems. [...] I decide what to do first and what to do later. My list may say I’m going to do ten different things, but in my head, I decide what’s most important.” (D1)</p>	<p>Line manager’s non-intervention is sometimes perceived positively</p>		
<p>“Since I joined about a year ago, I had my first official performance review meeting a few days ago. We set targets for the next year. He told me he’s happy with how I’m performing. This first year went well. [...] I wasn’t worried about the outcome of the meeting, because if he’d had anything to say, I think he would have spoken up sooner. So, in a way, this meeting was just a formality.” (D2)</p>	<p>Formal conversation about performance as something acceptable</p>	<p>Line manager’s feedback on performance</p>	
<p>“At the end of the day, if I wasn’t doing a good job, someone would tell him, and he would... tell me. So, if nothing happens, that means it’s okay. No news is good news, isn’t it?” (G1)</p>	<p>Lack of conversation about performance as something acceptable</p>		<p>How Generation Z employees experience line manager relationships</p>

<p>“I don’t know if my boss knows when I’m doing a bad job, to be honest. He usually congratulates me when I do well. Anyway, I think I know when I’m doing a bad job. I’m stricter than anyone else in judging myself. I know when I can do better. But sometimes I am constrained by time limits, and it is in situations like this that I say to myself ‘Do the best you can with the time you have.’ [...] Sometimes I have to give up the idea of perfection, because it’s not necessary, although it gives me a lot of satisfaction to pay attention to the details.” (A1)</p>	<p>Positive feedback and lack of negative feedback as something confusing</p>		
<p>“When I first joined the company, I decided to keep a diary. Now I hardly ever bother to update it. I prefer the summary required by the internal application which asks me to justify how I spend each hour of work.” (B3)</p>	<p>Diary vs. company app used to justify every hour at work</p>		
<p>“In my diary I wrote down things I wanted to do the next day, trying to detail the goals and imagining the satisfaction of achieving them. Of course, my diary also contained reflections on what I had experienced on the day that had just ended. I usually updated it in the evening before going to bed. It was my way of releasing thoughts and sleeping peacefully. I needed it because the new working environment was so stimulating and so different from the one I had known until then at university. I wrote down information about the new working environment... what I was told to do so that I wouldn’t forget. I also wrote about my moods. There were my answers to my line manager’s questions about what I had learned and what I would do differently if I could go back. That kind of conversation seemed to give me a lot of motivation. But now I’ve stopped writing because I’ve got into a routine and my comments are starting to be repetitive.” (B3)</p>	<p>Description of an employee’s observations and reflections kept in a diary Work environment as a new and positive experience</p>	<p>Employees’ thoughts, emotions and behaviours</p>	<p>How Generation Z employees experience the empowerment climate</p>
<p>“I believe that discussing things with my staff is an essential part of my job. If it wasn’t, I could sit in the office all day. Unfortunately, the attention I pay to my staff is never enough. [...] Of course, I should do more. All line managers should do more.” (F)</p>	<p>Importance of communication between line manager and employees</p>		

Table G.1 – Coding scheme

Appendix H – Research participant profile

No.	Generation Z employee	Gender	Birth year	Age	Highest degree obtained	Area of Study	Business Area
1	A1	Male	1998	24	Masters	Biomedical Engineering	Product #1 Development
2	A2	Male	1999	23	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Product #1 Development
3	B1	Male	2001	21	Bachelors	Mechanical Engineering	Product #2 Development
4	B2	Male	1996	26	Masters	Physics	Product #2 Development
5	B3	Female	2000	22	Masters	Business Management	Product #2 Development
6	C1	Male	1998	24	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Product #3 Development
7	C2	Female	1998	24	Masters	Biomedical Engineering	Product #3 Development
8	C3	Male	1999	23	Masters	Mechanical Engineering	Product #3 Development
9	C4	Male	1999	23	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Product #3 Development
10	D1	Female	1997	25	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Quality Management
11	D2	Male	1997	25	Masters	Mechanical Engineering	Quality Management
12	D3	Female	1998	24	Masters	Chemical Engineering	Quality Management
13	E1	Male	1998	24	Masters	Computer Science	Information Technology
14	E2	Female	1998	24	Masters	Computer Engineering	Information Technology
15	E3	Male	1997	25	Masters	Information Technology	Information Technology
16	F1	Female	1996	26	PhD	Biomedical Engineering	Operations – Product #1
17	F2	Male	1997	25	Masters	Biomedical Engineering	Operations – Product #1
18	F3	Male	1998	24	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Operations – Product #1
19	F4	Male	1996	26	Masters	Mechanical Engineering	Operations – Product #1
20	F5	Male	1997	25	Masters	Chemical Engineering	Operations – Product #1
21	G1	Male	1998	24	Masters	Physics	Operations – Product #2
22	G2	Male	1998	24	Masters	Biomedical Engineering	Operations – Product #2
23	H1	Male	2001	21	Bachelors	Biomedical Engineering	Operations – Product #3
24	H2	Male	2001	21	Bachelors	Biomedical Engineering	Operations – Product #3
25	H3	Male	2001	21	Bachelors	Electronics Engineering	Operations – Product #3
26	H4	Male	1999	23	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Operations – Product #3

No.	Line Manager	Gender	Birth year	Age	Highest degree obtained	Area of Study	Business Area
1	A	Male	1979	43	Masters	Mechanical Engineering	Product #1 Development
2	B	Male	1986	36	Masters	Physics	Product #2 Development
3	C	Male	1980	42	PhD	Electronics Engineering	Product #3 Development
4	D	Male	1981	41	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Quality Management
5	E	Female	1987	35	Masters	Computer Science	Information Technology
6	F	Male	1980	42	Masters	Mechanical Engineering	Operations – Product #1
7	G	Male	1984	38	Bachelors	Mechanical Engineering	Operations – Product #2
8	H	Male	1982	40	Masters	Electronics Engineering	Operations – Product #3

Table H.1 – Research participant profile

Appendix I – Dissertation summary in French

Résumé

Depuis que le terme « *empowerment* » a fait son apparition dans le monde de l'entreprise, de nombreux managers de proximité ont modifié leur approche de la gestion des relations avec leurs collaborateurs, dans le but de promouvoir la satisfaction professionnelle, un plus grand engagement envers les objectifs organisationnels et de meilleures performances. Pour ces managers de proximité l'*empowerment* a signifié l'abandon du style hiérarchique du « pouvoir sur » et, dans une certaine mesure, le fait de donner à leurs collaborateurs le pouvoir, la liberté, la responsabilité, les ressources et les informations nécessaires pour prendre des décisions et résoudre les problèmes liés au travail.

Ce travail de thèse explore les interventions structurelles d'*empowerment* conçues et mises en œuvre par des managers de proximité d'une entreprise multinationale qui appartient à la liste Fortune 500 et les aspects d'*empowerment* psychologique de leurs collaborateurs de la génération Z. Huit managers de proximité et vingt-six collaborateurs de la filiale italienne ont participé à des entretiens qualitatifs en ligne, décrivant comment ils vivent leurs relations professionnelles au sein de leur équipe et avec des collègues d'autres équipes.

La contribution originale de cette thèse aux connaissances académiques et à la pratique managériale consiste en l'analyse qualitative de l'expérience d'*empowerment* à partir de perspectives structurelles et psychologiques, afin d'offrir une compréhension approfondie de la dynamique relationnelle qui naît et se développe entre le manager de proximité et son collaborateur. Par le passé, la plupart des études sur l'*empowerment* n'ont considéré qu'une seule de ces deux perspectives, négligeant ainsi le fait que c'est leur interaction qui détermine l'essence même de l'*empowerment*. Par ailleurs, les études qui ont été réalisées avant ce travail de recherche ont souvent été effectuées à l'aide de méthodes quantitatives et sans s'intéresser spécifiquement à la génération Z.

Cette thèse contribue à alimenter le discours sur l'*empowerment*, en découvrant que les mécanismes formels de soutien à *empowerment*, tels que les règles et les procédures d'entreprise de gestion de la performance, l'utilisation des médias sociaux au travail et le télétravail, ne contribuent que partiellement à l'expérience d'*empowerment* psychologique des salariés de la génération Z. Dans l'entreprise examinée dans le cadre

de cette étude, les mécanismes de soutien à l'*empowerment* peuvent être améliorés, en permettant aux salariés d'utiliser les médias sociaux au travail et en élargissant les possibilités de travail hybride (c'est-à-dire le travail de n'importe quel endroit du monde et à n'importe quelle heure). L'approche formelle de la gestion des performances est utile pour définir les objectifs individuels, mais c'est ensuite par le biais de discussions informelles que l'*empowerment* peut vraiment évoluer, car c'est au cours de ces discussions que le feedback peut être fourni en temps voulu lorsqu'il est nécessaire. La relation entre le manager de proximité et son collaborateur est essentielle pour soutenir l'*empowerment* psychologique, car généralement le manager de proximité est la personne qui peut transférer le pouvoir de manière permanente, donner du feedback et établir une relation de confiance avec son collaborateur. Les salariés de la génération Z connaissent tous les aspects psychologiques de l'*empowerment* indiquées par Spreitzer (1995), mais ils semblent parfois égarés dans la recherche du sens à donner à leur travail individuel par rapport à des objectifs de plus grande envergure, par exemple au niveau de l'entreprise ou de la société. De ce fait, la dimension du sens pourrait avoir des conséquences négatives sur l'ensemble de l'expérience d'*empowerment* psychologique si elle n'est pas correctement accompagnée.

L'expérience et les compétences professionnelles des managers de proximité décrits dans cette thèse peuvent ressembler à celles d'autres managers qui se trouvent en bas de la chaîne de commandement, qui supervisent le personnel dans des rôles opérationnels et qui transforment quotidiennement les objectifs stratégiques en objectifs pertinents pour leurs collaborateurs, avec toutes les difficultés et contradictions que cette activité comporte. Par conséquent, les réflexions, les comportements et les actions des managers de proximité décrits dans ce travail de recherche en relation avec l'expérience d'*empowerment* de leurs collaborateurs peuvent résonner auprès d'un public plus large de responsables d'entreprise, d'autant plus que ce travail scientifique a été mené auprès d'équipes opérant dans différents services de l'entreprise. Ainsi, les explications offertes peuvent représenter des éléments de réflexion non seulement pour les managers de proximité travaillant avec le personnel opérationnel dans l'entreprise étudiée. Avec la prudence qui s'impose, même les cadres moyens des organisations à longue chaîne de commandement ou les entrepreneurs des entreprises familiales peuvent réfléchir à la question de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs à partir des résultats de ce travail de recherche.

Avant-propos

J'ai choisi d'étudier la question de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs en mettant l'accent sur la génération Z, car l'expérience que j'ai acquise en tant que consultant en gestion d'entreprise et enseignant universitaire avant de poursuivre mes études doctorales a éveillé mon intérêt et ma passion pour l'innovation dans la gestion d'entreprise.

Mon premier emploi après l'obtention de mon diplôme d'ingénieur m'a propulsé dans un environnement d'entreprise, où je devais rendre compte à un responsable qui avait beaucoup de mal à laisser travailler de manière autonome l'équipe dont je faisais partie. Ce responsable passait beaucoup de temps à expliquer en détail à chaque salarié les tâches à accomplir et la manière de les accomplir, à se renseigner quotidiennement sur les progrès réalisés par chacun d'entre nous et à rester au bureau bien plus longtemps que nécessaire.

Au fil des années, en évoluant dans ma carrière, j'ai également eu l'occasion de coordonner différentes équipes et je me suis souvent retrouvé face au dilemme suivant : souhaiter des performances élevées, en pensant secrètement à mes normes de qualité (qui étaient plus strictes que celles de l'entreprise), et en même temps vouloir que chaque membre de l'équipe s'épanouisse professionnellement, en offrant potentiellement à chacun la possibilité d'apprendre non seulement en faisant des erreurs mais aussi dans un environnement agréable et constructif. « Si seulement chaque employé pouvait améliorer ses compétences et sa confiance en moi et en ses collègues tout en travaillant ! », je me disais.

J'ai encouragé mes équipes à effectuer un travail de qualité même en mon absence, car j'ai toujours pensé que le *leadership* réside dans la capacité d'apprendre aux autres à prendre des décisions de manière autonome, sans avoir à me poser inutilement des questions et à me demander mon avis. En bref, je me sentais mal à l'aise d'avoir du pouvoir sur les autres.

Souvent un fossé se creuse entre une approche théorique de l'*empowerment* et sa mise en œuvre dans un contexte spécifique. J'ai rencontré des responsables d'entreprise qui affirmaient donner du pouvoir à leurs collaborateurs tout en affichant des comportements très différents, parfois plutôt basés sur le contrôle. Certains responsables d'entreprise semblaient capables de donner du pouvoir à leurs collaborateurs sans pour

autant que leur rôle soit réduit, alors que d'autres avaient du mal à renoncer à leur pouvoir.

Ces différences dans la mise en œuvre de l'*empowerment* m'ont amené à réfléchir à la signification de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs aujourd'hui, alors qu'une nouvelle génération de collaborateurs, la génération Z, fait son entrée dans le monde du travail, et à la question de savoir si l'*empowerment* des salariés peut être considéré comme une approche efficace de la gestion des relations professionnelles.

Toutes ces expériences et toutes ces considérations ont motivé ma décision de mettre à jour les connaissances et les pratiques en matière d'*empowerment* afin de comprendre dans quelle mesure cette dynamique relationnelle peut constituer une réponse aux transformations que le monde du travail subit en raison des fréquentes innovations technologiques, d'une plus grande sensibilité aux questions de durabilité et de la recherche d'un nouveau sens que les personnes attribuent à leur travail dans le contexte post-pandémique actuel.

Mon intention est de partager toutes mes connaissances sur l'*empowerment* avec le monde académique et le monde de la pratique des affaires.

Introduction

Ce travail de thèse explore la manière dont les managers de proximité soutiennent le processus d'*empowerment* de leurs salariés de la génération Z. Les considérations, les actions et les comportements des managers de proximité constituent la perspective structurelle (Kanter, 1977) tandis que le sens, l'impact, la compétence et le choix des collaborateurs de la génération Z constituent la perspective psychologique (Spreitzer, 1995 ; Conger et Kanungo, 1988). Pour enrichir la perspective structurelle, il existe également des mécanismes de soutien à l'*empowerment* tels que les règles et les procédures de l'entreprise en matière de gestion de performance, d'utilisation des médias sociaux au travail et de télétravail, qui sont utiles pour une compréhension plus approfondie du contexte de l'entreprise. Les différents points de vue présentés par les participants à la recherche montrent des comportements, des considérations et des critiques qui peuvent rendre l'expérience d'*empowerment* plus efficace non seulement dans l'entreprise examinée dans le cadre de cette étude mais également dans des entreprises similaires.

La perspective structurelle de l'*empowerment*, telle que présentée par Kanter (1977), met l'accent sur les interventions du manager de proximité visant à créer une relation de confiance avec son collaborateur, en trouvant un juste équilibre entre soutien et liberté. Le soutien est assuré par le feedback du manager de proximité et d'autres collègues, par l'accès aux informations et aux ressources dont le collaborateur a besoin et par les opportunités de développement professionnel et de carrière que l'entreprise met à sa disposition. La liberté, en revanche, est encouragée par la promotion de processus décisionnels autonomes et, par conséquent, par le transfert permanent du pouvoir du manager de proximité au collaborateur. Cette liberté s'exerce toutefois dans le respect des règles de l'entreprise qui déterminent le degré d'autonomie et donc le degré d'*empowerment* que le salarié peut expérimenter. Le manager de proximité aide le collaborateur à donner du sens à son travail, favorise sa participation aux décisions, exprime sa confiance dans le potentiel que le collaborateur peut atteindre et offre une liberté proportionnelle au niveau des compétences que le collaborateur possède, afin d'éviter que ce dernier ne se sente pas délaissé s'il n'a pas les compétences suffisantes pour gérer la liberté qui lui a été accordée.

La perspective psychologique de l'*empowerment* découle de la réponse psychologique du salarié aux actions de son manager de proximité et aux conditions de son travail. Les collaborateurs font l'expérience de l'*empowerment* psychologique lorsqu'ils ont l'impression de disposer de la liberté, de l'indépendance et de la discrétion nécessaires à l'exécution de leurs fonctions (autodétermination) ; lorsqu'ils donnent un sens à leur travail (signification) ; lorsqu'ils ont les capacités nécessaires pour faire leur travail et la confiance dans leur capacité à s'améliorer (compétences) ; et lorsqu'ils considèrent que la contribution qu'ils apportent à leur travail est pertinente (impact). Ces quatre dimensions indépendantes (Spreitzer, 1995) sont encore utilisées aujourd'hui pour analyser l'*empowerment* psychologique, car personne ne les a réfutées, et personne n'a pu déterminer d'autres dimensions indépendantes (Huq, 2016b).

Les modèles d'*empowerment* structurel et psychologique examinés en détail dans la revue de la littérature donnent un aperçu de la manière dont l'expérience de l'*empowerment* peut être améliorée par les managers de proximité et leurs entreprises. Cependant, il existe une lacune dans la recherche qui n'a pas encore été comblée. Pearson et Chatterjee (1996, p. 17) observent que l'on s'est beaucoup intéressé à la manière dont l'*empowerment* fonctionne plutôt qu'à la façon de le faire fonctionner. Des

années plus tard, ces mots sont toujours justes et ont, dans la mesure du possible, un impact encore plus important car depuis qu'ils ont été prononcés, une nouvelle génération de personnes est entrée dans le monde du travail : la génération Z. Wang et Lee (2009) rappellent que les théoriciens de l'*empowerment* doivent se concentrer sur l'identification des combinaisons optimales qui représentent des situations équilibrées ou adaptées dans différents contextes de travail, qui sont essentielles au bien-être des employés et à d'autres résultats professionnels et, plus récemment, Huq (2016a : 551) a affirmé que les entreprises peuvent tenter de mettre en œuvre l'*empowerment* de leurs collaborateurs sans comprendre clairement ce que cela signifie, comment le mettre en œuvre ou la complexité qui l'entoure. Cependant, on se souvient peut-être qu'Argyris (1998) avait affirmé que de nombreux cadres et PDG sont prêts à reconnaître publiquement la valeur de l'*empowerment* en tant qu'outil managérial efficace, mais qu'ils se plaignent ensuite, en privé, de ne voir aucune différence dans les résultats de leurs collaborateurs par rapport aux approches relationnelles dans lesquelles les responsables d'entreprise disent à leurs collaborateurs ce qu'ils doivent faire.

L'objectif de cette thèse est d'explorer la complexité de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs et de sa mise en œuvre, en remettant à jour les connaissances théoriques et les pratiques managériales qui y sont liées, afin de combler le manque de recherche représenté par de nombreuses voix différentes qui décrivent la complexité de la phase de mise en œuvre de cette pratique managériale. La décision de se concentrer sur la génération Z a été prise car ce groupe représente aujourd'hui environ trente pour cent de la population mondiale totale, selon le Forum économique mondial (Koop, 2021), et représentera vingt-sept pour cent de la main-d'œuvre mondiale en 2025 (Koop, 2021). En outre, les entreprises, en raison de l'influence croissante et de plus en plus fréquente des changements macro-environnementaux sur le monde du travail, deviennent des lieux où les relations humaines doivent être réinterprétées ou réinventées (Marchington, 2021). Il est donc intéressant de commencer par ceux qui, comme la génération Z, ont encore une vision idéalisée du travail en entreprise ou, du moins, n'ont pas d'idées préconçues fortement ancrées.

De plus, ce travail de thèse est également le fruit de la curiosité personnelle et professionnelle du chercheur qui l'a réalisé, une curiosité fondée sur l'expérience d'une personne qui a travaillé pendant plus de cinq ans sur les questions de formation et de développement en tant que consultant en management, en contact étroit avec les

managers de proximité et leurs collaborateurs dans le secteur de l'automatisation industrielle.

En s'appuyant sur la perspective structurelle et la perspective psychologique, l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs peut être interprété comme un concept tridimensionnel qui profite à la fois à l'entreprise, aux managers de proximité et à leurs collaborateurs, comme le montre la figure 1.2. Les managers de proximité sont impliqués dans la mise en œuvre d'activités visant à encourager leurs collaborateurs à avoir la responsabilité, la compétence et la confiance nécessaires pour accomplir avec succès toutes les activités liées à leur rôle. Les collaborateurs, quant à eux, sont censés avoir, ou développer progressivement, le désir, la motivation et la confiance en leur capacité à prendre des responsabilités, à définir leur rôle professionnel, à prendre des décisions et à gérer leur charge de travail de manière à atteindre l'excellence dans leur rôle et à apporter une réelle valeur ajoutée à leur entreprise. Les systèmes et processus organisationnels doivent être accessibles et utilisés par tous les membres de l'entreprise. Le collaborateur peut comprendre et avoir une influence sur les objectifs et la stratégie de l'entreprise, avoir accès aux mécanismes et aux outils qui l'aideront à définir et à mesurer sa contribution à l'efficacité de l'entreprise et à travailler avec son manager de proximité pour créer son propre développement et son propre plan de carrière au sein de l'entreprise.

Les questions de recherche auxquelles répond ce travail de thèse sont les suivantes :

- Par le biais de quelles activités et de quels comportements un manager de proximité influence-t-il l'expérience d'*empowerment* de ses collaborateurs de la génération Z ?
- Comment les collaborateurs de la génération Z expérimentent-ils l'*empowerment* psychologique ?
- Comment les processus organisationnels améliorent-ils ou nuisent-ils à l'expérience d'*empowerment* ?

En utilisant l'approche structurelle et l'approche psychologique de l'*empowerment*, ce travail de thèse ajoute une nouvelle perspective aux connaissances existantes sur le sujet de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs. Dans le passé, la recherche a

été menée à partir de l'une ou l'autre perspective, ignorant le fait que c'est l'interaction entre ces deux approches qui détermine l'essence de l'*empowerment* même.

En outre, en utilisant une approche qualitative avec des entretiens comme méthode de collecte de données, cette thèse offre une nouvelle perspective sur le sujet de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs. Alors que les recherches précédentes ont principalement utilisé des méthodes quantitatives pour explorer l'existence de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs, cette thèse utilise une stratégie de recherche qualitative pour explorer le rôle du manager de proximité dans la relation d'*empowerment* avec son collaborateur de la génération Z et pour comprendre pleinement l'interaction entre le manager, le collaborateur et l'entreprise.

Miles et ses collègues (2020) mettent en garde contre la généralisation à partir de cas spécifiques, expliquant que chaque cas a une histoire qui le caractérise et que, dans le processus de généralisation, certains négligent certains aspects de cette histoire, avec le risque d'encourir de possibles inexactitudes ou malentendus. Malgré la difficulté de généraliser au-delà des limites de l'entreprise considérée, l'objectif de cette thèse reste néanmoins primordial car l'expérience de l'*empowerment* n'a pas été étudiée auparavant à travers des perspectives structurelles et psychologiques, parce que les études sur l'*empowerment* ont rarement été menées à travers une analyse qualitative et parce que le thème de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs n'a pas encore été mis à jour de manière adéquate concernant la génération Z.

Revue de la littérature

Le thème de l'*empowerment* est tout aussi fascinant que complexe. Dans la revue de littérature, nous présentons les questions liées à l'*empowerment* qui méritent une attention particulière en termes de questions de recherche. Il est nécessaire de donner une définition précise de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs et des aspects qui doivent être pris en considération en fonction du niveau d'analyse. Yukl et Becker (2006) affirment qu'il est également nécessaire de préciser les conditions qui déterminent l'efficacité de l'*empowerment*. En effet, bien qu'une grande partie de la littérature sur les lignes directrices et les conditions favorables à un *empowerment* efficace soit basée sur le bon sens et les idées des professionnels, il existe peu de recherches systématiques pour les étayer. Il est donc nécessaire de mener davantage de recherches sur l'efficacité de

comportements et de pratiques spécifiques d'*empowerment* (Yukl and Becker, 2006 : 222).

La carence de recherche suggérée ici par Yukl et Becker (2006) et également signalée par d'autres auteurs au fil des années (Argyris, 1998 ; Huq, 2016a et 2016b) concernant la manière de mettre en œuvre l'*empowerment* dans la pratique fournit une justification de ce travail de thèse.

Au début du chapitre dédié à la revue de la littérature, nous avons procédé à une analyse critique de la manière dont les systèmes de gestion du travail et les pratiques managériales connexes ont évolué au fil du temps depuis la première révolution industrielle. Il est clair qu'au fil des ans, en Europe, la participation des salariés aux processus décisionnels au sein de leur entreprise a augmenté parallèlement à l'amélioration des conditions de travail et des connaissances et compétences des salariés, ainsi qu'à plusieurs autres facteurs internes et externes à l'entreprise. L'accent mis sur la motivation intrinsèque en tant qu'élément de la satisfaction au travail est un facteur clé de ce changement. Cependant, les principes du taylorisme n'ont pas disparu mais ont évolué et se sont adaptés à de nouveaux contextes organisationnels, laissant les pratiques d'*empowerment* toujours en bas de la liste des priorités des entreprises (Huq, 2016b ; Sisson, 2000).

Par la suite, nous nous sommes penchés sur les principes fondamentaux de l'*empowerment*, en examinant les influences de McGregor (1960) et de Likert (1961), qui ont encouragé des approches plus participatives dans les entreprises. L'enrichissement horizontal et vertical des emplois offre aux collaborateurs la possibilité de diversifier leurs activités et de développer de nouvelles compétences. La création d'emplois offrant aux employés une plus grande responsabilité personnelle a contribué à modifier le rôle des managers de proximité en déplaçant leur attention du contrôle vers le développement des individus (Holtz et Zardet, 2022 ; Purcell et Hutchinson, 2007). D'autres formes de participation des employés ont été explorées, notamment les cercles de qualité, le management à fort engagement et à forte implication. Le concept de pouvoir sur le lieu de travail a également été examiné, en analysant le défi de savoir comment et dans quelle mesure ceux qui ont du pouvoir sont prêts à le céder à d'autres.

L'*empowerment* structurel et l'*empowerment* psychologique font également l'objet d'une analyse détaillée. Au sein d'une entreprise, la perspective structurelle

explique ce que l'*empowerment* désigne par « faire » et la perspective psychologique explique ce que l'*empowerment* désigne par « être ». L'*empowerment* structurel a été examiné par rapport au manager de proximité et à l'entreprise en tant que détenteurs du pouvoir, tandis que l'*empowerment* psychologique a été examiné par rapport au collaborateur en tant qu'individu ayant des capacités cognitives spécifiques. Pour expliquer la perspective psychologique, le concept d'auto-efficacité a été introduit et deux modèles spécifiques d'*empowerment*, celui de Spreitzer (1995) et celui de Thomas et Velthouse (1990), ont été étudiés. Les liens entre l'*empowerment* et les autres concepts permettant de répondre aux questions de recherche au sein de l'entreprise examinée ont été précisés, ce qui a permis d'interpréter la manière dont la motivation intrinsèque peut être encouragée par les entreprises et les managers de proximité en renforçant l'impact, la signification, l'autodétermination et la compétence. La diversité des méthodes de mesure de l'*empowerment* a été évaluée, afin de déterminer dans quelle mesure la participation des collaborateurs au processus de mesure est présente ou devrait l'être. Ce domaine offre de nombreux aperçus intéressants sur les définitions et les indicateurs de l'*empowerment* utilisés par les managers de proximité.

L'influence du leadership sur les processus d'*empowerment* est examinée en ce qui concerne le leadership transactionnel et transformationnel. Les comportements spécifiques qu'un leader doit adopter pour encourager l'*empowerment* psychologique de ses collaborateurs ont été identifiés et ils montrent toutefois que les actions d'un responsable qui soutient l'*empowerment* de ses collaborateurs visent à lui donner du pouvoir.

Certaines règles et procédures peuvent être considérées comme des interventions structurelles d'*empowerment*. Celles liées à la définition et à la mise en œuvre des systèmes de gestion des performances sont examinées afin de comprendre comment elles créent les conditions nécessaires au soutien de l'*empowerment* psychologique.

Enfin, l'attention est portée sur la génération Z afin de mieux comprendre pourquoi il est nécessaire de concentrer les efforts de recherche liés à l'*empowerment* psychologique sur les collaborateurs appartenant à cette génération. Le thème de la recherche sur les générations a été exploré en profondeur, en identifiant les facteurs qui déterminent les différences entre les générations et les événements spécifiques qui distinguent la génération Z des autres générations. Nous avons expliqué les problèmes

liés à la recherche sur les générations, ainsi que les raisons pour lesquelles le concept de génération est plus approprié que celui d'étape du cycle de vie dans l'identification des participants à cette recherche doctorale.

Notre revue de la littérature met en évidence les raisons pour lesquelles la combinaison de l'*empowerment* structurel et psychologique est à la base de cette thèse et pourquoi la notion de génération Z est plus appropriée que la notion d'étape du cycle de vie pour caractériser les participants. Le tableau 1.2 résume la manière dont les enseignements tirés de la revue de la littérature sont utilisés pour élaborer le plan de cette thèse.

Dans ce travail de recherche, la définition de l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs est la suivante : la responsabilisation des employés est un concept à trois dimensions qui profite à l'organisation, aux managers de proximité et à leurs employés. Ce concept est illustré dans la figure 1.2.

Les managers de proximité sont impliqués dans la mise en œuvre d'activités visant à encourager leurs collaborateurs à faire preuve de responsabilité, de compétence et de confiance pour être en mesure d'accomplir avec succès toutes les activités liées à leur rôle. Les collaborateurs sont censés avoir, ou développer progressivement, le désir, la motivation et la confiance en leur capacité à prendre des responsabilités, à façonner leur rôle professionnel, à prendre des décisions et à gérer leur charge de travail de manière à atteindre l'excellence dans leur rôle et à apporter une réelle valeur ajoutée à l'organisation. Les systèmes et processus organisationnels doivent être accessibles et utilisés par tous les membres de l'entreprise. Le collaborateur, de plus, peut comprendre et influencer les buts, les objectifs et la stratégie de son entreprise et avoir accès aux mécanismes et aux outils qui l'aideront à définir et à mesurer sa contribution à l'efficacité de l'entreprise et à travailler avec son manager de proximité pour créer son propre développement et son propre plan de carrière au sein de l'entreprise.

L'*empowerment* est essentiellement une collaboration tripartite qui profite aux salariés, à leurs managers de proximité et à l'entreprise et qui encourage la réussite et la durabilité. Les collaborateurs sont pleinement responsables de leur rôle, les managers de proximité leur permettent de s'approprier pleinement ce rôle et les systèmes organisationnels les aident à être responsables de leurs propres performances et de l'efficacité de l'organisation, le tout dans un contexte où la mission et la vision de

l'organisation sont alignées sur les plans et les objectifs liés aux individus, aux groupes et aux services de l'entreprise.

Méthodologie

Le chapitre méthodologique explique la position épistémologique du chercheur et justifie les décisions qui ont conduit à choisir certaines méthodes de recherche plutôt que d'autres, en montrant la cohérence des choix effectués, les contraintes imposées par l'entreprise et le processus d'amélioration qui a assuré la rigueur dans les différentes phases du travail de thèse. Les principales questions éthiques abordées sont discutées en détail.

La position épistémologique du chercheur repose sur l'idée qu'il existe de multiples réalités subjectives et socialement construites. Par conséquent, l'expérience d'*empowerment* peut être comprise à travers l'interprétation de ces réalités, en mettant de l'ordre dans la multiplicité des perspectives qui peuvent parfois même être en désaccord les unes avec les autres. Ce travail de thèse propose une explication de ces différentes perspectives dans un contexte commun. L'approche du développement de la théorie part des informations recueillies auprès des managers de proximité qui pratiquent l'*empowerment* et des collaborateurs qui en bénéficient. Ce ne sont donc pas les propositions théoriques qui inspirent le chercheur dans la formulation des théories de l'*empowerment*, mais les expériences concrètes de ceux qui participent aux relations d'*empowerment*. Les études de recherche précédentes ont été toutefois utilisées pendant la phase d'analyse, ce qui rend l'approche de développement de la théorie quasi-inductive ou abductive. Cette thèse utilise un modèle de recherche qualitative en combinaison avec une stratégie d'étude de cas. L'objectif est d'explorer la relation d'*empowerment* entre les managers de proximité et leurs collaborateurs de la génération Z dans un contexte professionnel où l'entreprise, avec ses règles et ses procédures, est également considérée pour le rôle clé qu'elle joue dans le soutien ou l'inhibition de l'expérience d'*empowerment*.

Des entretiens semi-structurés ont été utilisés comme méthode de recherche pour collecter des informations à partir de sources primaires, tandis que une analyse thématique a été réalisée par le biais d'un appariement de modèles. Le pilotage des entretiens a permis d'améliorer à la fois le processus et le contenu de la recherche.

Résultats et discussion : perspective structurelle

Le premier chapitre dédié à la discussion des résultats analyse comment les managers de proximité soutiennent le processus d'*empowerment* de leurs collaborateurs de la génération Z, en montrant les mesures structurelles qui peuvent être mises en œuvre par les managers de proximité. Les règles et procédures de l'entreprise en matière de gestion des performances, d'utilisation des médias sociaux au travail et de télétravail, en plus de la communication interne, sont examinées en tant qu'éléments organisationnels susceptibles d'améliorer le climat d'*empowerment* et de renforcer ainsi les actions des managers de proximité.

Les situations analysées montrent que l'approche formelle de la gestion des performances est utile pour fixer les objectifs, mais que c'est par le biais de discussions individuelles que l'*empowerment* peut se développer, car c'est à ce moment-là qu'un retour d'information peut être fourni rapidement ; il est également possible d'améliorer le soutien à l'*empowerment* en permettant aux collaborateurs d'utiliser les médias sociaux au travail et en étendant les possibilités de travail hybride, par exemple en travaillant de n'importe quel endroit du monde et à n'importe quelle heure.

Résultats et discussion : perspective psychologique

Le second chapitre dédié à la discussion des résultats analyse les aspects psychologiques de l'*empowerment* que les employés de la génération Z expérimentent au travail.

La relation entre le manager de proximité et le collaborateur est essentielle pour soutenir l'*empowerment* car, en général, le manager de proximité est la personne qui peut transférer le pouvoir de manière permanente, donner du feedback et établir une relation de confiance avec son collaborateur.

Le collaborateur de la génération Z fait l'expérience de tous les aspects psychologiques de l'*empowerment* indiqués par Spreitzer (1995), mais il semble être laissé seul dans la recherche du sens de son travail individuel par rapport à des objectifs plus larges de son entreprise ou de la société. Cet aspect pourrait donc avoir des conséquences négatives sur l'ensemble de l'expérience d'*empowerment* psychologique.

Développement d'un modèle explicatif

Le chapitre suivant propose un modèle conceptuel pour expliquer comment l'*empowerment* a lieu dans l'entreprise observée. L'*empowerment* psychologique des collaborateurs de la génération Z est le résultat d'un ensemble de facteurs, auxquels contribuent à la fois les actions formelles et informelles des managers de proximité et les interventions organisationnelles de la fonction RH.

Un plan de développement et d'évaluation des compétences nécessaires pour favoriser l'*empowerment* des collaborateurs de la génération Z est proposé pour aider les managers de proximité dans la transition vers ce nouveau rôle.

Dans le cadre de l'entreprise examinée, aucune intervention structurelle radicale n'est envisagée pour promouvoir l'*empowerment*, telle qu'une modification de la structure organisationnelle. Dans tous les cas, il existe des comportements et des activités que les managers de proximité peuvent envisager pour soutenir l'*empowerment* psychologique des jeunes employés et il existe diverses règles et procédures d'entreprise qui peuvent être reformulées par la fonction RH pour renforcer davantage le climat d'*empowerment*. La communication interne doit également être repensée pour montrer un lien plus étroit avec le travail de tous les salariés. Travailler sur la notion de sens est une tâche qui incombe à la fois aux managers de proximité et aux personnes chargées de la communication.

Les implications des relations professionnelles fondées sur l'*empowerment* sont nombreuses, tant pour les managers de proximité que pour la fonction RH. Les managers de proximité doivent accepter la transformation de leur rôle de contrôleurs de ressources en accompagnateurs alors qu'au niveau des RH, divers aspects liés au recrutement et à la sélection, à l'apprentissage et au développement, à la gestion des talents, à la rémunération, aux relations avec les employés, à l'analyse des ressources humaines, à l'expérience des employés, à la diversité et à l'inclusion doivent changer.

Conclusions

L'*empowerment* est un mot qui a été souvent utilisé dans le monde de l'entreprise. Cependant, il semble parfois être mal interprété ou ne pas être apprécié à sa juste valeur. Ce travail de thèse analyse les expériences d'*empowerment* dans une

entreprise Fortune 500, qui ressemble à de nombreuses autres entreprises multinationales pour de multiples raisons lorsqu'elle est observée dans le cadre des 7S de McKinsey. L'analyse a porté sur les comportements et les activités des managers de proximité, les aspects psychologiques de leurs collaborateurs de la génération Z et le climat d'*empowerment* favorisé par l'entreprise. L'approche méthodologique utilisée est celle de la recherche exploratoire. L'objectif était de comprendre les expériences d'*empowerment* des jeunes employés, plutôt que de tester une théorie ou des hypothèses. À partir de l'analyse des entretiens réalisés, un modèle conceptuel a été créé et utilisé pour fournir un plan de développement et d'évaluation des actions structurelles des managers de proximité et pour évaluer les implications managériales de l'*empowerment* pour la fonction RH. L'utilisation d'une stratégie d'étude de cas a permis d'explorer la dynamique relationnelle dans un contexte de travail multinational typique où les différences et les similitudes au sein de plusieurs équipes et domaines d'activité offrent une image complète des implications managériales de l'*empowerment*.

Le chapitre conclusif présente les principales conclusions et recommandations découlant de l'analyse qui a été effectuée. Après avoir exposé les conclusions générales de la thèse et les implications pour la théorie et la pratique de l'*empowerment*, une ouverture est opérée quant aux opportunités de recherche sur les expériences d'*empowerment* qui peuvent découler de cette étude et aux observations de ce que le chercheur a appris au cours du processus de recherche.