

**From health-related Corporate Welfare initiatives to Employee
Engagement: unveiling the role of Employee Legitimization**

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Short abstract

The present study aims at unveiling the determinants of the process which leads an employee to legitimize a health-related Corporate Welfare (CW) initiative, thus increasing his or her work engagement. The work is based on 276 answers coming from a survey to test the proposed model. The results obtained demonstrate that different sets of health-related CW initiatives favor employee engagement if they meet the legitimization of the employees. Thus, employers willing to promote initiatives of CW targeting the health of their employees should adopt an employee-centric approach that considers their perceptions and interests, as such factors significantly affect the success of the initiatives themselves. Overall, the results sustain the high potentiality of these kinds of initiatives given the great commitment people show towards health and the positive opinion they have about CW, especially in the light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

National healthcare systems worldwide are struggling to keep pace with the ever-rising demand for care, primarily due to the growing aging population (+3% in the past 10 years¹) and an increase in people dealing with chronic diseases (more than 24.5M in 2019, +6% than 10 years before²) (Statista, 2020). Italy is no exception, and these concerns have been further exacerbated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted the limits of the current national healthcare system, *Sistema Sanitario Nazionale* (SSN). This reasonably implies the need to rethink the healthcare industry as a priority. Digital technologies represent an undoubted opportunity to make the SSN more sustainable, effective, and resilient. However, in such a scenario, it is worth investigating the role of a set of vital actors, widely present but still often overlooked when considering key roles in healthcare: companies. Huge potential lies in corporations that could take care of their employees, enhancing the health status of million people, thus supporting the healthcare system. Indeed, nearly one out of two Italian companies promote Corporate Welfare (CW) initiatives, where employees' health is a primary and

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/785104/elderly-population-in-italy/>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/573014/number-of-people-affected-by-chronic-diseases-italy/>

growing concern (Welfare Index PMI – Rapporto 2020). Traditionally, from companies' perspective, taking care of their employees has mainly been a way to ultimately increase their workplace engagement, thus increasing job performances. Indeed, employees with a good health status are more likely to experience job motivation and gratitude (Gubler et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2018), and in general, companies providing CW programs are proved to increase their value and attractiveness (Bhaskaran, et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). However, one legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic could be the possibility to look at a larger picture, gaining awareness of the valuable contribution that also companies could make in supporting people's health, possibly reshaping their roles. The consequence of this reflection is a possible repositioning of the role of companies concerning health and society. Hence, companies might have the opportunity to benefit society, with relief for the healthcare system, whilst still pursuing their primary goal of organizational success (Cleveland et al., 2015).

2. Relevance of the research

To deepen the core topic of the present study, namely Corporate Welfare, it is useful to perform an analysis that encompasses the more general concept of welfare, the theoretical and academic research in this field, and some real and recent experiences taken from existing companies.

Welfare refers to a set of services such as health care, education, employment, and housing, that modern states guarantee to their citizens, to reduce social inequalities. As a matter of fact, welfare underlies a socio-political meaning and thus, usually, it implicitly refers to the notion of “welfare state”. By considering the European context, there are several versions of welfare states differing from the allocation of resources according to the intervention areas, that are healthcare, social assistance, and pensions. The focus of this study is on Italy, an example of a Mediterranean welfare state, whose overall spending is unbalanced towards pensions rather than social assistance and healthcare. Therefore, in such a context, it is clear the importance of health-related CW initiatives and the potentially helpful and game-changer role that companies can play to face, at least partially, the numerous challenges that the Covid-19 outbreak has further exacerbated and that require a rapid response.

At this point to deepen the knowledge of the notion of Corporate Welfare (CW) defining its meaning and boundaries, a systematic literature review has been performed to better understand both the achievements registered in this field and the research areas not yet explored. Not

surprisingly, it turns out that employees' health plays a crucial role among the CW objectives. In particular, the success of such initiatives is accomplished whenever the employees achieve and maintain a good state of health, recognizing it as a means for an improved and more balanced lifestyle. To this end, health awareness programs, fitness plans, gym memberships, medical check-ups, and screenings are all examples of CW practices targeting employees' health conditions.

By deepening the topic of CW, it is possible to identify several initiatives and distinguish them in two macro-areas, adopting the employees' health concerns as the discriminating criterion:

- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): set of programs, generally aimed at improving employees' lifestyles.
- Employee wellbeing: a set of initiatives, focusing mainly on the employees' psycho-physical health as mentioned above.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

For a company, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is defined as the commitment towards the environment, society, philanthropy, and many other aspects not directly related to business objectives. Through CSR programs, firms can benefit both internal and external stakeholders, while indirectly boosting their own reputation and values. In this framework, it is possible to find the initiatives in favor of the employees. The papers selected during the literature review process mainly tackle this latter aspect of CSR, some adopting a critical perspective - positive or negative - while others neutrally describing the initiatives.

Among those authors sustaining the usefulness of CSR programs, some argue that the implementation of corporate actions in favor of employees, environment, community, and human rights, turns out to improve the company's financial performances (Myšková, & Hájek, 2019) as well as the firm's overall value (Bhaskaran, et al., 2020). Moreover, others support the idea that CSR can be seen as a signal of the company's quality, which ultimately increases the customers' satisfaction and organizational attractiveness (Zhang et al., 2020).

On the other hand, by leveraging a positive impact on the employee's job and life satisfaction, CSR may also lead to paradoxical outcomes such as «workaholic behaviors» intended as excessive work-addition to the detriment of the private life (Brieger et al., 2019).

Other authors provide additional insights about the initiatives belonging to the CSR field, focusing both on the welfare ownership and the design of CSR initiatives.

Firstly, it is particularly interesting the debate about the relationship between public and private responsibility with respect to the role of welfare guarantor. For instance, the apparent conflict

between CSR and a strongly developed welfare state can be overcome through a set of well-designed accommodation policies (Midttun et al., 2015). Others argue that public welfare has taken over a lot of responsibilities that were, in the first place, managed by corporations, highlighting how their role and responsibility for the employees' welfare has changed over time (Fellman, 2019).

Still other papers focus their attention on the design of a CSR program, highlighting best practices to make them effective. Some of the studies, indeed, are centered on how companies should take care of the psychological sensitivity of the employees when designing CSR initiatives, as a human perspective does not preclude the achievement of economic results (Cleveland, et al., 2015). Some, instead, support the idea that CSR does succeed only if it comes together with a wide and profound cultural change that improves the engagement and health awareness among the company (Kyle et al., 2019).

Employee wellbeing

The increasing concern of companies towards their employees, seen as key resources, is reflected in actions specifically aiming at employee wellbeing. As for the CSR-related papers, the literature review highlights the characteristics of the employee wellbeing topic, occasionally pointing out the strengths as well as the criticalities of the related initiatives.

Some factors are influencing the participation and involvement of employees, such as organizational program support, employee co-payment, and firm size. But what really makes the difference is a corporate culture based on health which maximizes the effectiveness of such initiatives (Lier et al., 2019). Besides the abovementioned factors focused on the company's choices, the employee's engagement depends also on individual characteristics such as personal ones (Boerger, 2018), mindset, values, and socioeconomic conditions (Lin et al., 2015), (Smith, 2017).

Also, the context plays a key role regarding both the expected outcome and the range of application of the Corporate Welfare initiatives (Lin et al., 2015), (Smith et al., 2017). Referring for instance to low-medium income countries, there are examples from Mexico and India of programs funded thanks to the contribution of employers and employees themselves, together with the central government that directly drives how corporations consider their wellness programming responsibilities (Wipfli et al., 2018). More generally, CW is seen as a matter of retention and recruitment strategy and as a source of economic wealth. To this extent, some argue that the economic advantage represents the main objective of investment in Corporate Welfare (Harvey, 2019).

A point of strength in the wellbeing programs consists in the active involvement of the employees when designing the initiatives themselves. Indeed, some authors argue that the companies should move beyond the traditional corporate wellness initiatives, which consider the employees just as passive actors (James & Zoller, 2018). Together with direct employees' involvement, proper and effective communication plays a crucial role in boosting the participation and interest among employees, which ultimately ensure the success of the initiatives avoiding possible tensions (Pronk, 2015), (Lin, et al., 2020), (Yassaee, et al., 2019). Wellbeing initiatives especially target the health dimension of the employees, since their fitness status represents a key success factor for the company (Pronk, 2015). A workforce with increased health status, indeed, can be more productive at work by developing job motivation, capabilities, and gratitude. (Gubler, et al., 2018). In addition to that, it has been proved that corporate wellness programs favor both job satisfaction and even employees' self-esteem. (Hao et al., 2018). In some cases, as shown by the *Formula Benessere* by Ferrari, the ultimate goal is even more holistic, as the program attempts to promote and educate the culture of healthy lifestyles. In this way, besides the short-term positive outcome on health, this program fosters a drag effect which increases, year by year, the adherence by the employees. (Biffi et al., 2018). Even among CW initiatives, digitization is making its way. In particular, more and more companies, recently, rely on the adoption of digital platforms and technologies as means to deliver corporate wellness initiatives. (Bég & Hauser, 2017). An example of this trend is the successful initiative based on the promotion of health awareness among employees carried out by telephonic coaching programs (White et al., 2015). Moreover, the introduction of digital supports represents an extremely powerful means because of the huge amount of valuable data obtained from workers. Nevertheless, due to the increasing privacy concern, companies must employ the big data collected ethically and responsibly (Ajunwa et al., 2016).

As a final consideration, evidence shows that employees' wellbeing initiatives, in particular those programs focused on physical activities, are effective and have a positive response, especially for the least active employees. (Mason et al., 2018).

Despite the multiple benefits coming from corporate wellness programs, some authors put light on the relative risks and negative implications. For instance, in the implementation of employee addressed initiatives, there is the risk of unlawful and potential discriminating behaviors, depending on the health status of the employees (Plump & Ketchen, 2016). Moreover, the negative implication might be related to the nature of the initiative itself. Companies may use these initiatives to face and cover misconduct. In such cases, higher crash risk is likely to be observed especially because companies tend to disclose less, thus increasing the suspect in

external actors. In addition, this phenomenon gets even worse if the employees find out the real purpose behind the wellbeing programs (Ben-Nasr & Ghouma, 2018).

From the review, CW and in particular health-related CW initiatives represent a hot topic. Indeed, several crucial elements to consider in designing and promoting a CW initiative have been highlighted by past research, although an explicit linkage with the legitimization of the proposed initiatives is often lacking. Few past research, indeed, addressed the role of legitimacy when promoting this kind of initiative, while it has been found that the success of practices addressed to employees is affected by their perception of the underlying intentions (Schaefer et al., 2019). The present study aims to enrich past literature by evaluating such intentions considering their degree of adequacy and appropriateness concerning the socially constructed system of norms and values (Suchman, 1995). Thus, employees' legitimization is crucial when considering initiatives touching their personal and private spheres. The relevance of the present research relies on its attempt to deepen how to make a health-related CW initiative successful, ultimately bringing benefit to all, and not only, the actors involved.

3. Contribution

The present study provides both contributions to the existing literature and managerial implications that can be followed by companies aiming to achieve a key role in healthcare promotion and awareness, especially after the Covid-19 outbreak.

On the one side, the current study contributes to the literature by understanding that the legitimization of different types of health-related Corporate Welfare initiatives significantly depends on the strategy the company adopts to justify them, and the way it communicates them. Furthermore, the Employee Legitimization plays a crucial role in the working context as it increases the Employee Engagement. Concerning the whole Legitimization Process of a health-oriented CW initiative, that starts from the legitimization and leads to the engagement, several variables have been demonstrated to directly affect such process, either positively or negatively. From a managerial perspective, the research highlights the importance of choosing the right Legitimacy Strategy to maximize the Employee Legitimization and thus the Employee Engagement. One of the main levers to increase the involvement of the employees, indeed, is the positive acceptance they give to the proposed initiative. Therefore, the employer should adopt a caring, respectful, fair, and always ethical behavior in order to see the proposed initiative legitimized, and thus the employees more engaged in the working context. An

employer should also be aware of the fact that such initiatives can be more or less successful also depending on the characteristics of both the company and the employees.

Contribution to theory

The value-added of this study consists in an innovative approach which, relying on *vignettes*, enables to deepen different types of initiatives in parallel. During the literature review, indeed, several studies focused on a specific initiative and its implications, without providing such a multilevel perspective. The proposed model, which will be explained in the next section, distinguishes among three types of Legitimacy Strategies, and five different examples of health-related CW initiatives, called scenarios. As it will be further discussed, Legitimacy Strategy refers to the way an initiative is communicated to employees, and its underlying intentions. To make an example, the same initiative may be undertaken by employers with very different underlying purposes which, in turn, may produce different feelings and reactions among the employees, thus affecting the expected outcome of the initiative itself. This study refers to CW initiatives from employees' perspective, providing a valuable and original contribution to past research. The development of an innovative scale to measure the Legitimacy Strategy represents another valuable contribution as it allows to extend the literature stream about legitimacy from Suchman (1995). Overall, the relationships among the studied constructs represent an original contribution to the literature about CW, engagement of employees, and Attribution Motives Theory. As already stated by Schaefer, S.D. et al. (2019) the underlying intention of a proposed initiative significantly conditions the expected outcome of the initiative itself. The present study can be considered as a further achievement in unveiling the determinants that makes a CW initiative successful.

More generally, given the limited number of studies addressing the topic of legitimization applied to a CW initiative, specifically in the Italian context and concerning the Covid-19 outbreak, the present research enables to enrich the knowledge in this field, paving the way for future developments.

Managerial contribution and policy implication

The current study allows deriving some managerial implications that an employer might consider when designing and implementing an initiative of Corporate Welfare promoting the health of the employees. The results obtained indicate that, overall, the interviewees attribute high importance to health, and have a particularly positive evaluation for the CW initiatives.

Starting from this premise, an employer willing to implement a program like the ones considered in this study is likely to meet, in general, the interests of most of the employees.

An employer should consider that different types of initiatives gain more legitimization from the employees according to the strategy adopted. All the details about the suggested best practices will be fully discussed in the conclusions section.

All in all, an employer should tailor the right strategy to improve legitimization for any kind of initiative. To conclude, when a company implements an initiative, it should take into account that the desired engagement, as proved by this study, requires a prior legitimization by the employees, which is driven by the fairness, and compliance of roles perceived by the employees when the employer promotes that kind of initiative. In this sense, we can derive further considerations already detected during the literature review phases, mainly related to the centrality of the employees seen as human beings. For this reason, employers not only have to consider the employees' perception of the intentions, but also have to act ethically and respectfully towards the employees.

4. Method

The present research encompasses several methodologies, namely systematic literature review, non-systematic literature review, empirical context analysis, model development, and model validation. The approach followed to conduct the analysis can be considered a strength of this work, as it allows to study, in parallel and from the addresses' perspective, the process that leads an employee to legitimize different types of health-oriented CW initiatives (Legitimization Process).

Systematic literature review

The systematic literature review (SLR) started with the identification of keywords (Corporate Welfare, Corporate Wellbeing, Corporate Wellness, Employee Welfare) to use during the research of relevant and recent publications dealing with the CW topic. The results have been refined and selected according to their pertinence to the present study as well as to the reliability and reputation of the sources. The eligible papers have then been fully read, grouped, and studied according to their contents. Hence, SLR ensures an unbiased and always replicable top-down process (Figure 1).

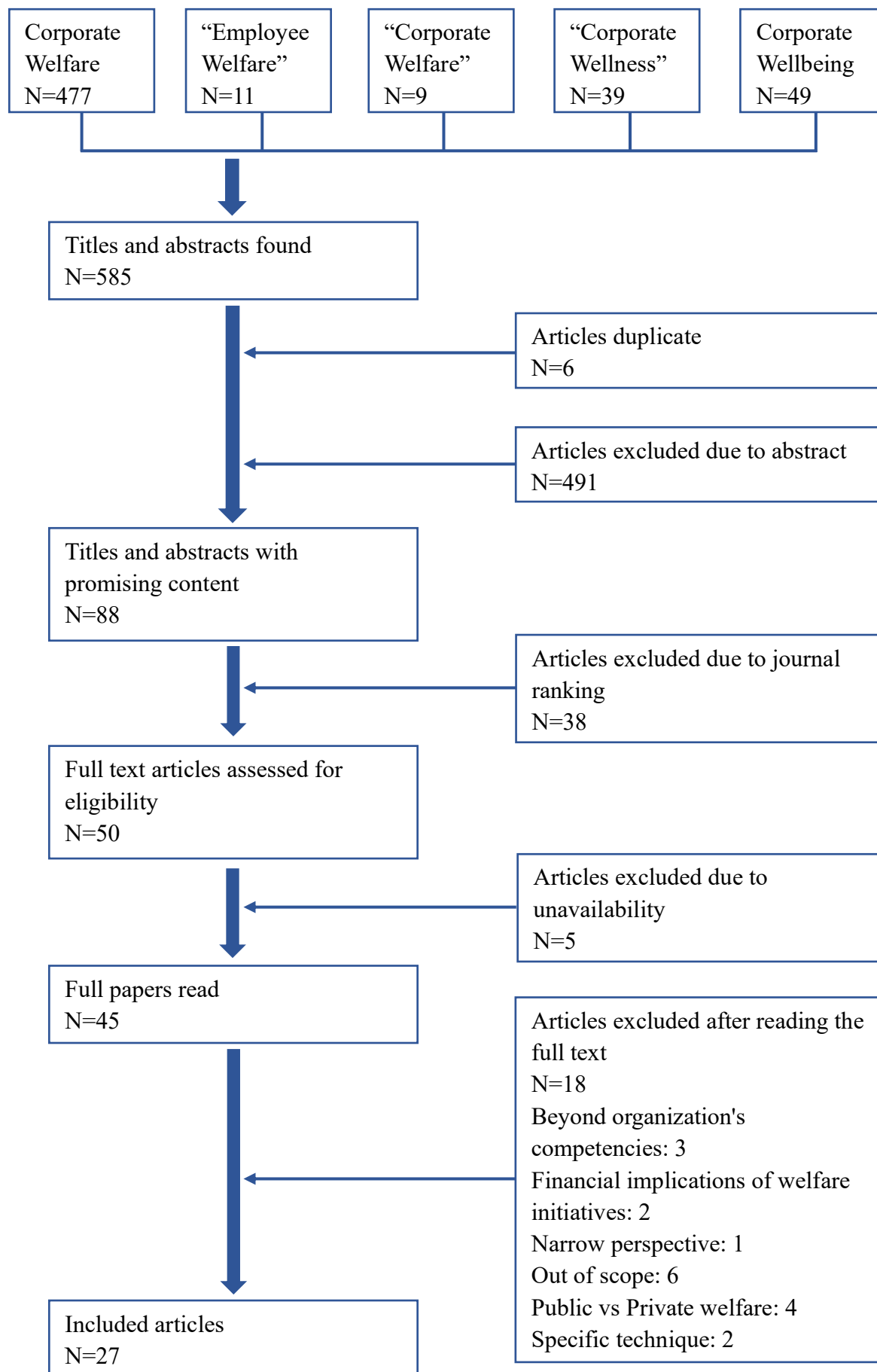


Figure 1. Funnel of the systematic literature review selection process

Non-systematic literature review

A non-systematic literature review has been performed in order to gather useful information following an unbounded bottom-up approach. Indeed, from the systematic literature review and from different insights proposed by scholars, it is worth, with respect to a CW initiative, to deepen the topic of legitimacy considering the multiple communicated intentions by the employer, the perception of the employees, and their consequent acceptance (Ungureanu et al., 2019). To this extent, several sources and theories, in particular, the Legitimacy Theory by Suchman (1995) and the Attribution Motives Theory starting from Weiner (1985), allow to properly investigate the legitimization mechanism, deeply understanding the dynamics and factors involved. The former provides an explanation about the criteria the employee may use to legitimate or not a given initiative, the latter, instead, relates the true underlying intention with the actual perception and thus the outcome of the initiative itself.

In the specific case of this research, we refer to the legitimacy topic in a broader sense, as «generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions» (Suchman, 1995). By adapting Suchman's definition to the Corporate Welfare context, the implemented initiatives can be defined as legitimate whenever the employees consider them aligned with a set of personal criteria and shared values.

Suchman describes three types of organizational legitimacy, and then, he examines strategies for gaining, maintaining, and repairing legitimacy of each type. In his work, the author defines three levels of organizational legitimacy, which are defined *pragmatic legitimacy*, *moral legitimacy*, and *cognitive legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995).

- Pragmatic legitimacy: it relies on self-interested thinkings and reasonings of an organization's most close and immediate audience. In this sense, an employee is brought to legitimate a given initiative if it meets shared interests. Hence, according to this kind of legitimacy, self-seeking and utilitarian criteria always prevail in the evaluation of the initiative and the consequent acceptance.
- Moral legitimacy: it displays a positive normative assessment of an organization and its activities. Different from the previous pragmatic legitimacy, in this case, moral legitimacy is built upon the judgment of whether an activity is «the right thing to do». As a matter of fact, such evaluation is strongly influenced by the audience's socially constructed value system. Thus, an initiative is vested with moral legitimacy whenever the addressees recognize that the activity promotes societal welfare, according to the

commonly shared values. Even if the moral legitimacy is founded on an altruistic grounding, this does not necessarily imply a complete absence of interests from the audience.

- Cognitive legitimacy: it is based on cognition rather than on interests or evaluation. In other words, this kind of legitimacy is created when an organization seeks objectives that society assesses as immediately understandable and justifiable or even taken for granted. When an initiative is taken for granted, it is beyond dissent, thus the risk of being rejected is minimized. According to this definition, the addressee accepts an organizational action because it is seen as inevitable, necessary, or well-founded.

Moving to the Attribution Motives Theory, when considering the employee perception of an initiative, one generally refers to a process starting with a preliminary framing of the first impressions, going on with a phase of causal attribution, and finally ending with the sensemaking. In this regard, the psychological and cognitive level of an individual is actively involved when he or she approaches a corporate social responsibility initiative (Gond et al., 2017). Different purposes can be found behind a corporate initiative; in other words, companies may undertake it for many reasons, ranging from the more utilitarian to the apparently less interested to even altruistic ones. One should be careful to keep the real intent and the communication of the initiative separate. Indeed, the rhetoric around the initiative promotion can effectively influence the true meaning of the CW program and, as a consequence, the employees' level of commitment related to the initiative itself.

Several researchers developed studies showing how the motives attribution affects the behavior and attitude of employees towards a generic corporate initiative. For instance, if employees feel that HR practices reflect a managerial philosophy, according to which employees are seen as a cost to be minimized, the level of commitment and satisfaction will be negatively affected. Vice-versa, if employees perceive that they are seen as a strategic asset to be enhanced, the initiative will be likely to be successful (Nishii et al., 2008). In this regard, many authors divide the motives attribution into two main classes: the initiative perceived as genuine on the one hand, and the initiative perceived as purely interested and opportunistic on the other. More in detail, the first class is generally labeled as substantive or intrinsic, while the other is symbolic or extrinsic. It has been shown that the attribution of CSR as symbolic usually leads, at best, to no positive individual outcomes, or even to negative results at worst (Donia & Tetrault Sirsly, 2016). Other contributions, instead, focus on the relationship between the attribution motive and the specific expected outcomes. For instance, the attribution motive may strengthen, if

substantive, or weaken, if symbolic, either environmental behavior or the work engagement and creativity of the employee. If the initiative reflects a sincere effort and a benevolent nature of the corporation, the participation is expected to be high and so are the success and the expected return. On the contrary, in case the activities hide a strategic purpose, such as the reputation or the mere profit enhancement, the effect is likely to be the opposite (Afsar et al., 2020) (Chaudhary & Akhouri, 2018).

Empirical context analysis

Besides the theoretical background, a further element supporting the present study is represented by a contextual analysis. It investigated several examples of real CW applications to become aware of what has been done so far by the best companies in matters of commitment towards their employees. Such analysis also helped to better contextualizing the findings of the literature review. To conduct the analysis, Fortune's «100 best companies to work for» have been considered. It consists of an annual chart of the first 100 best companies according to the benefits and perks offered to their employees. Fortune's «100 best companies to work for» represents a significant starting sample to pre-select the companies that are particularly committed towards their employees. The final objective, indeed, was to obtain the most relevant and diversified companies' examples in this field. Not surprisingly, the health-related perks were largely offered by companies, especially the initiatives devoted to the improvement of a healthy lifestyle both from a mental and a physical perspective. Representative types of initiatives include creating a corporate culture that promotes employee's wellbeing, creating healthy working environments, promoting physical health relying on fitness centers, and providing employees with digital technologies and wearables to increase self-awareness on personal health status.

Model development

Starting from both theoretical and contextual information collected, the research develops an empirical model (Figure 2) which tries to explore those aspects and dynamics about CW that have not been fully explored yet. The developed model can be considered an example of a parsimonious model where the factors included are just the essential ones to effectively describe the hypothesized relationships among constructs variables.

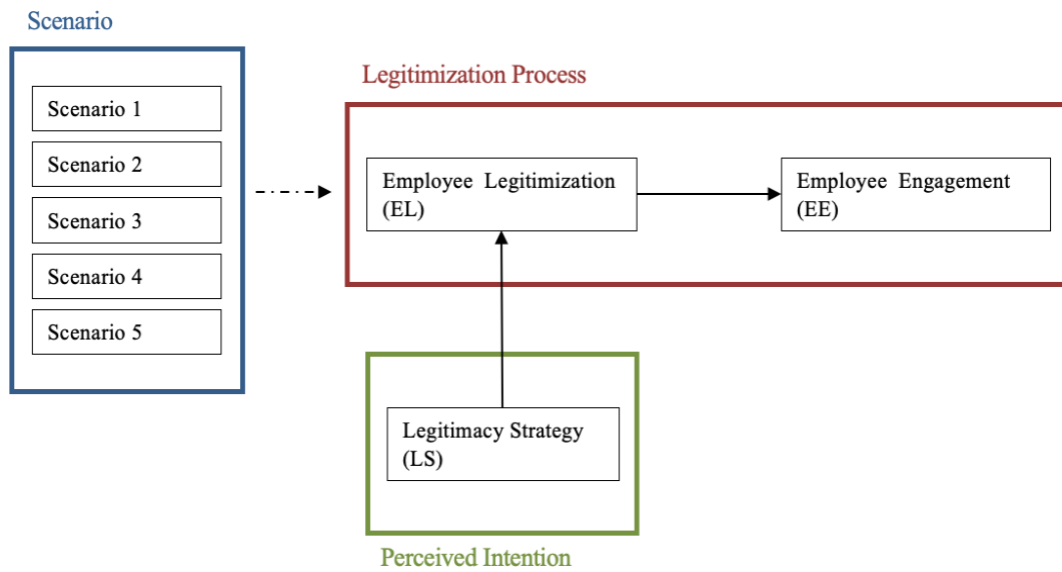


Figure 2. Proposed model

The five considered scenarios reflect five types of health-related CW initiatives, sorted by the commitment the employer shows towards the employees' health and identified mainly thanks to the context analysis. For instance, scenario 1 includes basic informational campaigns via newsletter, while scenario 5 refers to wearable devices with activity tracking and analysis of collected data. As the intensity of initiative increases, so does the amount of shared data, and employers progressively enter the personal and private sphere of employees (Table 1). There are initiatives, indeed, which are simply limited to the basic health promotion, while others imply the continuous employer dedication to successfully affect the employees' health. In this sense, if, in the first case the company's commitment is limited to a message, in the other such message is combined with a set of tools and actions enabling the employees to accomplish the desired health improvement.

CW Scenario	Commitment Level	Initiatives Examples
1. Basic informational campaign	Low	Newsletters, fliers, posts on bulletin points.
2. Active awareness programs	Medium low	Speeches, seminars, expert talks.
3. Proactive initiatives	Medium	Gym memberships, healthy menus, gym classes, bike sharing.
4. Medical checkups and screenings with the support of a specialist	Medium high	Blood tests, routine analyses, medical examinations.
5. Wearable devices with activity tracking and analysis of collected data	High	Smart watches, smart t-shirts, smart belts.

Table 1. Examples of CW initiatives according to their commitment level

The other blocks of the model should be considered as directly referred to a single scenario, one at a time. The model, indeed, has a fivefold nature, according to which the Legitimization Process and Perceived Intention are studied parallelly in each scenario.

By projecting the previous considerations and sources related to the Legitimacy Theory and Attribution Motives Theory in the model, it is possible to distinguish three different levels of intentions:

- Legitimacy Strategy level 1 (LS1): it encompasses self-interested initiatives aimed at improving an economically oriented variable that tangibly favors the company's performances, such as productivity. For example, the promotion of health through workplace wellness programs can be seen as a means to fight «illness-related loss of productivity due to absence from work (absenteeism) and reduced performance while at work (presenteeism)» (Mattke et al., 2013).
- Legitimacy Strategy level 2 (LS2): it refers to initiatives that aim at promoting the benefits of a good health status, namely something commonly recognized as positive and desirable. For example, it is the case of initiatives promoting employee wellbeing with the final aim to create a shared culture of health among the employees for nutrition.
- Legitimacy Strategy level 3 (LS3): it includes initiatives immediately and easily comprehensible, or even taken for granted in the corporate context. In the LS3 we can find, for instance, initiatives that are either part of a benefits package or expression of a company's mission. Or again, an initiative addressed to the employees to allow the development of some bigger company's project. It could be the case of a big tech firm that provides its employees with wearable devices to be tested before the official launch.

In a nutshell, different levels of legitimacy perceived by the employee's point of view, have a moderating impact on the Employee Legitimization. If the employees knew that the initiative was primarily born as a way to increase (e.g.) productivity, their attitude would be likely to differ from the one towards an initiative intended to deliver a genuine commonly shared message.

The following table shows some possible intentions at the base of a CW initiative divided according to the levels defined above (Table 2).

Level	Intention
LS1	1. Increase productivity 2. Reduce absenteeism 3. Reduce presenteeism 4. Reduce turnover
LS2	5. Improve physical state of health 6. Improve nutritional habits 7. Prevent critical medical conditions 8. Achieve mindfulness
LS3	9. Meet the expectations in terms of corporate benefits 10. Strengthen the company's strategic value proposition 11. Enable a bigger project

Table 2. Examples of possible intentions behind each level of legitimacy strategy

The core construct of the model is represented by the Employee Legitimization (EL) referred to as the mechanism - the Legitimization Process - according to which an employee accepts and legitimizes a proposed Corporate Welfare initiative. EL consists of an individual process that considers multiple factors, such as fairness, ethics, compliance with the relationship employee-employer, and care and respect for the employee. While the Legitimacy Strategy (LS) refers to the reasons why an initiative is implemented by the employer in the first place, the EL deals with the legitimization employees give to the proposed initiative. The LS comes chronologically before the EL. In other words, the LS comes first as it refers to how an initiative is born, whereas the EL involves the employee's reaction following the implementation of the initiative, for the LS level specifically chosen for it. As one may notice, there is an additional difference related to these two constructs: the LS, indeed, considers the legitimacy socially conferred, while the EL is determined by the sole personal evaluation of the initiative.

Relying on two previously validated scales and adapting them to the current framework it is possible to comprehend and describe the Employee Legitimization process, as defined above. More in detail, Orsila et al. (2011) allow to further study the items related to the specific factor “care and respect for employee”, while Hanzaee & Rahpeima (2013) particularly focus the attention on the so-called «obligation to employees», that are the firm's duties in the employees' regards.

The output of this model is represented by the construct named Employee Engagement. It concerns the cognitive, emotional, physical, and psychological dimensions of the employee with respect to the working context and environment (Christian et al., 2011) (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

The concept of Employee Engagement is quite complex, and it could be easily confused with other apparently similar topics such as job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment. To better understand the distinction among such concepts, we can refer to the paper by Christian et al. (2011). Here, job satisfaction is presented as an attitude that often defines a positive or negative evaluative judgment one makes about one's own job or job situation (Weiss, 2002). In this sense, job satisfaction does not entail any individual experience resulting from the work itself, but it is a description of a job condition or characteristic.

Job involvement, instead, is a «cognitive or belief state of psychological identification» (Kanungo, 1982). Specifically, job involvement refers to the degree to which the job situation is central to an individual's identity (Kanungo, 1982), thus it does not only refer towards job tasks but rather to which extent the job is in line with the employee's needs.

Finally, organizational commitment is achieved when an employee is emotionally attached to his or her own organization thanks to shared values and interests (Mowday, 1998).

In the light of what was reported above, Employee Engagement encompasses many aspects coming from all the above-mentioned definitions. Thanks to its completeness of meaning, we select and analyze the Employee Engagement as the ending point of the proposed model. To this extent, several possible scales can be adopted for the assessment and measurement of the different levels of engagement in the workplace. The most suitable for this model defines work engagement as «a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption» (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Hence, to measure the three components, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption, identified by Schaufeli, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) can be employed, and the selected items are reported in Table 3.

Dimension	Item
Vigor	At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well. At my job I feel strong and vigorous.
Dedication	I am enthusiastic about my job. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.
Absorption	Time flies when I am working. I get carried away when I am working.

Table 3. UWES measurement scale and selected items

Despite the few constructs, a considerable number of hypotheses have been formulated (20), 4 for each scenario, as reported in Table 4.

Scenario	Hypothesis id	Description
1	1.H1	The LS1 decreases the EL in the CWS1.
	1.H2	The LS2 increases the EL in the CWS1.
	1.H3	The LS3 increases the EL in the CWS1.
	1.H4	The EL has a positive effect on the EE in the CWS1.
2	2.H1	The LS1 decreases the EL in the CWS2.
	2.H2	The LS2 increases the EL in the CWS2.
	2.H3	The LS3 increases the EL in the CWS2.
	2.H4	The EL has a positive effect on the EE in the CWS2.
3	3.H1	The LS1 decreases the EL in the CWS3.
	3.H2	The LS2 increases the EL in the CWS3.
	3.H3	The LS3 increases the EL in the CWS3.
	3.H4	The EL has a positive effect on the EE in the CWS3.
4	4.H1	The LS1 decreases the EL in the CWS4.
	4.H2	The LS2 increases the EL in the CWS4.
	4.H3	The LS3 increases the EL in the CWS4.
	4.H4	The EL has a positive effect on the EE in the CWS4.
5	5.H1	The LS1 decreases the EL in the CWS5.
	5.H2	The LS2 increases the EL in the CWS5.
	5.H3	The LS3 increases the EL in the CWS5.
	5.H4	The EL has a positive effect on the EE in the CWS5.

Table 4. List of formulated hypotheses

Model validation

To collect the data needed to test and validate the model, an online survey, delivered via social channels (Facebook, LinkedIn) has been developed. The questionnaire has been designed on the Qualtrics platform, considering precise characteristics including anonymity and ease, to minimize the risk of biased responses. Moreover, to account for all the five alternative scenarios studied in the model, many versions of the survey have been designed. For sake of simplicity, each respondent is asked to take only one of them, according to a preliminary and non-controllable criterion, ensuring a homogeneous distribution of the five versions among the population sample. This methodology follows a *vignettes approach*, that gives the opportunity to enhance the realism of the investigation, to improve the reliability of the measurement, and to increase the involvement of the respondents while filling the survey (Alexander & Becker, 1978). Moreover, to obtain the highest number of complete answers possible, the survey has been meant to be completed in less than 10 minutes. Nevertheless, the final answers have been selected according to specific filters to guarantee the overall quality and reliability of responses. The following table (Table 5) shows the constructs and all the related items. For sake of simplicity, the *x.* stands for one among the 5 scenarios. Indeed, as previously reminded, the structure can be replicated in all the versions.

Construct	Item	Measurement item
Employee Legitimization (EL)	x.EL1	Thanks to this initiative, I would feel that my company considers my wants and needs.
	x.EL2	Thanks to this initiative, I would feel that my company makes decisions respecting employer-employee roles.
	x.EL3	Thanks to this initiative, I would feel that my company commits to improving my private and working life.
	x.EL4	Thanks to this initiative, I would feel that my company acts ethically towards me.
Employee Engagement (EE)	x.EE1	Thanks to this initiative I would feel healthier and more active during work activities.
	x.EE2	Thanks to this initiative I would feel more enthusiastic about my job.
	x.EE3	Thanks to this initiative I would feel more involved in my job.
Legitimacy Strategy (LS)	x.LS1	I would legitimize this initiative more if it were born as a means to improve my working productivity.
	x.LS2	I would legitimize this initiative more if it were born as a means to promote and share a healthy lifestyle.
	x.LS3	I would legitimize this initiative more if it were born as a well-established initiative within the company.

Table 5. Constructs items and measurement items related to the proposed model

5. Description of results

The proposed model has been transferred into a structural equation model (SEM), and the related analyses were performed through the software STATA 15.1, setting the significance level at 5%, and relying on 276 high-quality responses.

The structure of the questionnaire underwent an ex-ante and ex-post analysis to avoid CMV (Common Method Variance). This latter concept refers to the variation in responses caused by instruments rather than the actual inclination of the respondents. To avoid biased responses due to how the survey is structured, ex-ante remedies on our questions design and questionnaire administration have been applied. Interviewees, indeed, were ensured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. After having gathered all the responses, an ex-post analysis, namely the Harman test, making use of the IBM SPSS Statistics, has been performed. This tool allows computing the total variances of the common factors to assess if CMV can or cannot be ignored. Harman test returned a CMV far lower than 50%, meaning that the structure of the survey can be validated.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the Composite Reliability (CR) for all constructs included in the SEM have been computed. The values are higher than commonly accepted

thresholds (equal to 0.50 and 0.70 respectively) indicating a good validity for each construct, in all the five scenarios (Cabrera-Nguyen, 2010).

Overall, the relationship between the EL and EE is always positive ($\beta > 0$) and significant ($p \leq 0.050$ for the first scenario and $p \leq 0.001$ for the other four), proving that, in every scenario, an initiative needs to be legitimized by the employees to produce engagement. In addition, at least one of the three Legitimacy Strategies turns out to be significant in each of the five scenarios, even if the LS may differ according to the five initiative types (Table 6).

Scenario	Hypothesis	Path	Standardized β	p-value ³	Testing Result
1	1.H1	LS1 \rightarrow EL (-)	-0.1000	0.496	Not supported
	1.H2	LS2 \rightarrow EL (+)	-0.0181	0.919	Not supported
	1.H3	LS3 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.4559	0.007**	Supported
	1.H4	EL \rightarrow EE (+)	0.2949	0.018*	Supported
2	2.H1	LS1 \rightarrow EL (-)	0.0623	0.625	Not supported
	2.H2	LS2 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.5596	0.000***	Supported
	2.H3	LS3 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.0054	0.969	Not supported
	2.H4	EL \rightarrow EE (+)	0.4896	0.000***	Supported
3	3.H1	LS1 \rightarrow EL (-)	0.3961	0.000***	Supported
	3.H2	LS2 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.3530	0.003**	Supported
	3.H3	LS3 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.1828	0.153	Not supported
	3.H4	EL \rightarrow EE (+)	0.7322	0.000***	Supported
4	4.H1	LS1 \rightarrow EL (-)	-0.0183	0.859	Not supported
	4.H2	LS2 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.2664	0.043*	Supported
	4.H3	LS3 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.4225	0.001***	Supported
	4.H4	EL \rightarrow EE (+)	0.6120	0.000***	Supported
5	5.H1	LS1 \rightarrow EL (-)	0.3364	0.001***	Supported
	5.H2	LS2 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.1074	0.234	Not supported
	5.H3	LS3 \rightarrow EL (+)	0.4367	0.000***	Supported
	5.H4	EL \rightarrow EE (+)	0.4221	0.000***	Supported

Table 6. Path analysis and hypotheses testing results of model constructs

More in detail, in the first scenario only the LS3 is supported by the testing results (1.H3) (p -value ≤ 0.010 , standardized $\beta = 0.4559$), meaning that an initiative increases its legitimization by the employees if it is part of the taken for granted benefits offered by a company. Moreover, the higher the legitimization, the higher the engagement experienced by the employee in the working environment (1.H4) (p -value ≤ 0.050 , standardized $\beta = 0.2949$).

Moving to the second scenario, initiatives like expert talks about health-related topics, are proved to be legitimized if communicated as means to improve the employees' lifestyles, according to the LS2 (2.H2) (p -value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.5596$). Once again, in this

³ p-value representation: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.010$, * $p \leq 0.050$

scenario, the legitimization generates engagement among the employees at work (2.H4) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.4896$).

Surprisingly, in the third scenario, a proactive initiative such as gym membership, which aims at improving employees' productivity (LS1), has a positive impact on legitimization (3.H1) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.3961$). In this framework, in line with our hypothesis (3.H2), the same conclusion can be drawn by considering a strategy based on health promotion (LS2) (p-value ≤ 0.010 , standardized $\beta = 0.3530$). As already stated, hypothesis 3.H4 is strongly supported (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.7322$).

As far as the fourth scenario is concerned, only hypothesis 4.H1 does not find statistical evidence. All the others, instead, confirm the expectations according to which a medical screening is legitimized if it is supposed to promote a healthier lifestyle among the employees (4.H2) (p-value ≤ 0.050 , standardized $\beta = 0.2664$) or, mainly, if it is seen as a taken for granted benefit (4.H3) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.4225$). It is not surprising that, even in this case, the EL leads to the EE (4.H4) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.6120$).

Finally, when considering the initiatives based on the distribution of wearable devices for health purposes, the LS1 and the LS3 have a significant and positive impact on the EL. While in the second case the relationship is in line with our hypothesis 5.H3 (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.4367$), in the first case (LS1) it shows an unforeseen positive influence (5.H1) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.3364$). Even in this last case, the Employee Engagement is positively affected by the Employee Legitimization (5.H4) (p-value ≤ 0.001 , standardized $\beta = 0.4221$).

Conclusions

In general, employers willing to promote health-related CW initiatives should adopt an employee-centric approach that considers employee's own feelings and interests, as such factors significantly affect the success of the initiatives themselves. Hence, employers not only have to look at the employees' perception of the intentions (LS) but also must act ethically and respectfully towards the employees.

The result of this study provides insightful findings, which might be useful for employers in real-life applications. More in detail, basic informational campaigns (scenario 1) are more legitimized if they are proposed as taken-for-granted benefits offered by the company to the employees (LS3). Indeed, this kind of initiative is widespread, and it is not surprising that the addressees take it for granted within a company. Things are different when considering expert talks or seminars inside a company (scenario 2), which should leverage on a healthy culture (LS2) to obtain more legitimization. In this less widespread scenario, the employer should

demonstrate a benevolent interest towards a commonly shared topic, namely health, to raise the employees' acceptance. When offering to employees a gym membership (scenario 3), in addition to the LS2, an employer can also exploit a more productivity-based strategy (LS1) that relies on a reciprocal utility benefit exchange. A company willing to offer medical screenings to its employees, instead, should promote such programs as a way to spread health awareness (LS2). As an alternative, the legitimization for such initiatives can be increased by promoting them as something completely expected within that working context (LS3). Finally, the legitimization for initiatives involving wearable devices is maximized through the LS1 or the LS3. A device tracking and monitoring the life activity of an employee (scenario 5), indeed, seems to be justified only if there is a pragmatic intention behind its adoption, or if such device is commonly used at work.

Hence, differently from the expectations built upon the literature review findings, an initiative of CW based on health promotion is not always legitimized if it is presented by leveraging on the health importance. In other words, presenting an initiative as a means to develop a culture of health (LS2) does not necessarily lead to an increased Employee Legitimization. This result is particularly surprising in light of the high attention towards health topics shown by the sample. Moreover, it is noteworthy that for some types of initiatives, such as gym membership and wearable devices, an effective strategy to improve the Employee Legitimization can be based on the pragmatic intent from the employer, which relies on a utilitarian exchange from both parties (LS1).

However, the proven positive relationship between the Employee Legitimization (EL) and the Employee Engagement (EE) in all the scenarios suggests that a company that commits to behave ethically and respectfully towards its employees, is paid off because it can foster the dedication and the enthusiasm of the employees at work. Hence, the core idea behind this study has been confirmed by the results obtained.

In addition, the survey allows exploring the experience that Italian companies have concerning the CW topic. The analyzed answers indicate that the least spread type of initiative is represented by wearable devices supporting employees' health (the fifth scenario), suggesting that there is still much space for improvement. Moreover, results show that initiatives involving the practice of physical activity have a greater impact on the employees who care less about their health habits, in line with previous research (Mason et al., 2018). Combining this consideration with the positive opinion employees have about CW (95% of respondents), the potentialities of a further and systemic development of health-related CW programs become even greater. Companies, indeed, could improve the health of their employees, especially those

who are less concerned about it, ultimately bringing benefit to the whole healthcare system enhancing its resiliency and capacity to deal with the increasing needs of the population

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