



Source: University of Bocconi

Boosting knowledge & trust for a sustainable business

Electronic Conference Proceedings

Extended Abstracts

University of Bocconi

June 30th and July 1st 2022

Electronic Conference Proceedings of Sinergie - Sima Management Conference
Boosting knowledge & trust for a sustainable business, Milano, June 30th and July 1st 2022
University of Bocconi – Milano

ISBN 97888947136-0-2

The Referred Electronic Conference Proceedings are published online on
<https://www.sijmsima.it>

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Via Interrato dell'Acqua Morta, 26
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Boosting knowledge & trust for a sustainable business

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Electronic Conference Proceedings

Extended Abstracts

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Humanism in Leadership, Business, and Society: Olivetti's exemplary case

STEFANIA CAMOLETTO* MARIA DELLA LUCIA* ERICA SANTINI[^]

Framing of the research. *Over the past 50 years, business strategy and organisational design have been strongly enriched to address global challenges. Concepts like CSR, corporate social responsiveness, business citizenship, and business ethics have emerged and strengthened, paving the way for practical and conceptual improvements in business management (Waddock, 2004). CSR's definition of operational measures in the workplace - safety, professional training, internal communication, work-life balance, social reporting, sanitary assistance, leisure services, employees' involvement - shows convergence with corporate welfare measures (Mallone, 2013). However, recent evolutions have moved towards strategic-oriented approaches in CSR (Farmaki, 2019), integrating responsibility in the company's value chain. The transition from an inside-out to an outside-in perspective strongly connects CRS to the business ecosystem and systemic approaches such as the Triple Bottom Line approach (Elkington, 1997), the Blended Value approach (Emerson, 2003), and the ecosystem of Shared Value (SV) (Porter and Kramer, 2011; Kramer and Pfitzer, 2016). "Creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges" (Porter and Kramer, 2011, p. 4) puts forward explicitly that shared value is a new socio-economic frontier connecting profit and social progress in the enterprise. The ecosystem of SV (Kramer and Pfitzer, 2016) connects profit and societal progress in the business ecosystem and the related societal needs, environmental challenges, and social policies and processes. This evolution brings about a change in the mindset of businesspeople, economists, politicians, and legislators, blurring existing frontiers between private and public spheres. This change determines a more general transition towards the paradigm of sustainability where business and social concerns are re-integrated within both private and public, individual, and collective strategies (Elkington, 1997).*

The debate on true sustainability argues that companies' behaviours and management priorities must rest on effective and efficient solutions to increase the value of common goods (Dyllick and Muff, 2016), e.g. the creation of social and environmental value (Hall et al., 2010; Shevchenko et al., 2016; Gold and Schleper, 2017). The business ecosystem brings a variety of sources and the multifaceted nature of SV: the collective-impact efforts of multiple stakeholders to enhance value co-creation (economic) and reduce value co-destruction (environmental and social) (Camarinha-Matos et al., 2010; Ramezani and Camarinha-Matos, 2020; Dyllick and Muff, 2016). Literature underlines the difficulties in managing multiple stakeholders' needs in reaching true sustainability (Shevchenko et al., 2016) due to drastic changes in their business model. Size, innovation attitude, readiness to change, and the ability to offset stakeholder pressure might support or lock the transition. New approaches must be adopted to unlock change factors.

Purpose of the paper. *Inspired by the hints mentioned above and institutional requirements, several streams of research are exploring how to support firms to move from an inside-out to an outside-in perspective to face current global challenges. Humanistic management (HM) has become promising research, practice, policy, teaching, and education as an alternative business and development approach (Author et al., 2021). HM literature has grown out of the recent strand of studies drawing together the concepts of business ethics, conscious capitalism, cooperative capitalism, social business, social entrepreneurship, and sustainability. HM represents a novel values-based paradigm where individuals engage in long-term relationships and materialise their freedom through value-based social interactions instead of maximising their immediate utility (Melé 2016; Pirson, 2017). At the heart of HM, there is the unconditional support of the dignity of every human being that becomes a core organisational goal (Spitzeck, 2011) affecting both the inside and outside management perspectives. Approaching business change from the HM lens opens questions on change management through leadership and the impact of this transformation on the business ecosystem (Lawrence and Pirson, 2015; Shevchenko et al., 2016). Despite HM has born with a strong individual-level emphasis within the business context, it has developed over the decades to include the multi-level nature of responsible managerial actions (Laasch et al., 2020; Pirson, 2020) - from the humanizing of business (meso level) to the humanism in economies and societies (macro and supra levels). At the organizational level, responsible leaders are oriented to the development of human virtue to its fullest extent thus affecting employee welfare and commitment (Miska and*

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Mendenhall, 2018), grounding leaders' legitimacy for corporate activities and corporate responsibility for systemic consequences. At the business ecosystem level, responsible practices and routines foster trust, company image and reputation, but also political legitimacy (Pirson, 2015; Gomes et al., 2022).

Entering the debate, this paper explores the interplay between leadership, innovation of firm's business model and business ecosystem by examining an exemplary single case study (Yin, 2014) in Italy. Olivetti, based in Ivrea nearby Turin and operated between WWII and the 1960s, specialised in the electronic industry. The company has been led by a progeny of enlightened founders and leaders - Camillo Olivetti, the founder and, more prominently, the son, Adriano Olivetti. This case is not original, as it has been already analysed from both CRS and corporate welfare perspectives (Colombo and Gazzola, 2014; Gallino, 2014; Gallino and Ceri, 2001; Strati, 2020). However, we use this case "in the context of making a conceptual contribution [and employ it] as an illustration" (Siggelkow, 2007, 21) from the novel perspective of humanistic management.

Methodology. An inductive longitudinal research design (Gioia et al., 2013) is used to analyse this exemplary single case study (Yin, 2014) that spans seven decades, from the start-up phase of the company, i.e., 1896 when Camillo Olivetti founded "C. Olivetti & C." - the first Italian factory of typewriters - to the death of Adriano Olivetti in 1960. Qualitative data were collected from newspapers and Adriano Olivetti's major writings to evaluate whether and how the leader's and company's conducts may be directly or indirectly connected to humanistic management elements - dignity, ethics, and legitimacy (Pirson and Amann 2010). By exploiting several historical documents, we map out the evolution of Olivetti's managerial approach allowing the "detection and scanning of, and response to, the social demands to achieve social legitimacy, greater social acceptance and prestige" (Garriga and Melé, 2004, p.58). This exploratory effort aims to draw attention to the modernity of Olivetti's thought, laying the foundations for a cutting-edge reflection on humanism entering the multilevel perspective of organisational management, i.e., leadership, business management, and business ecosystem. This multilevel approach to humanistic management supports shedding light on the opportunities and challenges of the transforming process of capitalism.

Results. Olivetti's original theorisation holds the seeds and foreruns innovative academic literature on the firm's role in the economy and society. Olivetti company showcases the reconciliation between its profit and its social functions in the economy and society. In 2018, the UNESCO committee recognised the value of Olivetti's vision by awarding the town of Ivrea for the industrial and Avant-guard town planning, marked by the presence of the Olivetti company (UNESCO, 2018). Due to its modernity, Olivetti can be considered an exemplary case of humanistic management in practice. The dignity, ethics, and legitimacy key to humanistic management are recognised in its leadership, business management, and positive impact on its ecosystem.

Leadership. Adriano Olivetti, Camillo's son, promoted modernisation and corporate reformism aimed primarily at improving the dignity of workers within corporate performance. "Until the technical progress [...] was not achieved and the financial success that was the main consequence allowed it, I was not induced to deal with the relations between the workers and the factory", Adriano stated (Olivetti, 1953, p.13). To overcome conflicts coming from "alienation", Olivetti - in his well-known discourse soon after the re-opening of the factory in June 1945 - stated that workers, entrepreneurs, and the community should be intertwined by a "reciprocal understanding" being at the core of mutual respect. Employees had to know "the effects and the aims of their work, to understand where the factory goes and why it goes [...], to give a deeper sense to the job and to make workers conscious about individual and collective aims of their work".

Olivetti's vision seems to take shape primarily from the need to embody and convey democratic and social issues. His writings clearly show the idealistic, unique and in some respects "utopian" nature of this thought. Social responsibility was not a "declared" means to increase the company profit, but rather a means to boost progress and the moral, social and collective well-being. Therefore, Olivetti's leadership unveiled a corporate philosophy with an extraordinary "culture" that displays great "humanity" (Gallino and Ceri, 2001).

Ethics become the foundation of Olivetti's actions and responsibility towards the workers and community. From the beginning of the twentieth century, both Camillo and Adriano Olivetti introduced several social services for the company's employees - maternity and infancy assistance, such as nurseries and summer camps, and to the reduction of working time at equal pay with the introduction of the 5-day work week (Olivetti, 1968). Other social services - that stood out for their variety and quality - were also provided to the local community - free technical and architectural consultancy for the surrounding villages of Ivrea. The introduction of these services fostered legitimacy and trust in Olivetti's social actions (Berta, 1980).

Business management. After his degree in chemical engineering and a working period in the US, Adriano Olivetti (1901-1960) gradually took the company's lead, becoming general manager and effectively head of the company in 1933. From the early 1930s, Olivetti showed an active interest in corporate welfare programs to improve the living, social and cultural conditions of its workers. Its ambition to create a humanistic corporate environment is mirrored in the Burzio Fund (1932), the Care Card (1949) and the corporate welfare plan (1950), along with related projects.

The Burzio Fund, which connected Camillo and Adriano's management direction, was created as a commemorative Fund in honour of Domenico Burzio. This first technical director contributed decisively to the company's growth. Camillo settled Domenico Burzio's Fund as an immediate assistance organism to deal with employees' concerns when they met poverty, health, and family care problems. The "Care Card", drawn up between 1949 and 1950 by the Management Council, is the manifesto embedding the commitment of the company for the social responsibility, explicitly taking distances from any paternalistic intent and other companies' recent initiatives (Cesari, 2016; Astarita, 2000; Berta, 1980). The related corporate welfare plan, implemented by Adriano in the 1950s, was highly

sophisticated: the family was considered the first and essential unit of communitarian relations in the workplace and out-of-work (Olivetti, 1946). "It was necessary to create a fair and human authority that could reconcile wealth in the interests of all [...] and thus demonstrate that the factory was a common good and not a private interest", Olivetti (1956, p.11) declared.

Olivetti's welfare plan also embedded a cultural project inspired by the principles of beauty, democracy, efficiency, and safety for any enterprise's stakeholder, as Adriano pointed out explicitly in his literary works (Olivetti; 1945, 1946, 1960). For example, the first company's advertising office, opened in 1928, later employed some of the most quoted European artists and intellectuals distinguishing Olivetti's longstanding commitment to aesthetics.

Trust and reputation supported the Olivetti company to enjoy unprecedented growth following the war. Adriano Olivetti opened the "New Canaan" in the United States (1952), a research laboratory on electronic computers and founded the "Società Generale Semiconduttori" (General Society of Semiconductors), to independently develop the transistors, core devices of the new electronic technologies (Pisa, 1957). The entrepreneurial success of Adriano Olivetti was formally consecrated by the "National Management Association" of New York (1957), awarded him a prize for "the avant-garde action in the field of international business management" (*Rivista aziendale Notizie Olivetti*, January 1957, n.43, p.38).

Business ecosystem. Adriano Olivetti's unconditional respect for the dignity of every person was the foundation for interpersonal interactions both within and outside the business. Issues related to the surrounding environment, public administration and political fields were embedded into the company's management. "I saw that every problem of the factory [...] became an external problem and that only who was able to coordinate internal problems with external ones would have managed to find a correct answer for everything" (Olivetti, 1952, p.11).

Levering his personal experience as a chief of industry, Olivetti acted and was formally entrusted with several responsibilities. The Olivetti's Cultural Centre, the Spille d'Oro Association, and the Olivetti Recreational Sports Group (established in 1947) showcase the cultural plan and related services designed to benefit the company's social ecosystem. The former provided an organic set of studies, information, and recreation tools through the factory library (61,000 volumes and 3,000 periodicals in 1961), cultural events and debates, art exhibitions, film screenings. Later (the '50s and 60's), conferences, concerts, and shows took place near the factory, even during lunch break hours. The Spille d'Oro Association (1946), which grouped employees with more than 25 years of seniority, aimed to support long-term relations between the company's employees through sporting, cultural activities, group travelling, voluntary works, and entertainment. This Association had the main scope to protect the well-being and interests of older workers and retirees. Olivetti Recreational Sports Group included infrastructures and planned activities related to improving physical and psychological fitness, fun, and social engagement of the company's workers and their families.

The ever-increasing expansion of the factory allowed Olivetti to embark on the ambitious plan to restructure and renovate the entire town of Ivrea, which involved building schools, housing, roads, recreation facilities. Olivetti's renovation urban plan was one of the pillars of a multi-level and comprehensive project for the development plans of different urban and rural areas (Ivrea, Matera and Pozzuoli) that he developed as President of the National Institute of Urban Planning from 1952 until he died.

Adriano also proposed a path-breaking political solution to face societal development problems based on each local community's specificities. The new political-administrative and economic structure should have been based on "communities" to achieve administrative efficiency and harmonious productive activities. According to him, understanding communities' needs and establishing a sense of community was central in supporting a shared vision of action based on the individual's ambitions, inclusivity, and collective well-being. In this regard, he proposed the idea of a "natural" local community that had to be "neither too large nor too small [...] but in proportion to mankind". This community-based administrative and economic structure was required to reveal local "expressions of life" (Olivetti, 1960, p.60) and to strengthen local "communitarian ties between workers and farmers". Traditional geographical unities (like the neighbourhood, the diocese, the precinct, and the constituency) make it possible to create an ideal harmony that had "its foundations" in nature and history and the life experiences of the individuals. By looking at the risks of social polarisation, Adriano Olivetti was supporting that the new models of development should have been consistent with the "the optimal dimension of local auto-government" (Olivetti, 1960, pp.37-51), for example, a consortium of municipalities able "to strengthen common bonds of solidarity between farmers and workers" (Olivetti, 1960, p.45).

Adriano engaged in political activism founding the Movimento Comunità (1948), a social, cultural, meta-political movement that in the 1950s became a proper political party. He also settled a newspaper and a publishing house to further his social-political ideas and those of the philosophers and other social scientists he was inspired by. In 1956, Olivetti became the mayor of Ivrea, and in 1958 he presented himself for political elections with the Community Political Party. He obtained two seats in Parliament.

Research limitations. This exploratory single case study is mainly based on the entrepreneur's viewpoint within its specific context, i.e., historical, cultural, and geographical. Overcoming the sole entrepreneur viewpoint requires triangulation through in-depth interviews with key actors, such as local politicians, local entrepreneurs, and scholars from Centro Studi Olivetti of Ivrea. In addition, the analysis of the context in terms of social and cultural capital must be considered to evaluate whether and how it has affected both the leader's and the firm's choices over time. Further research should also deal with the exploration of HM in contemporary multiple case studies that span a variety of contexts and stakeholders within the firms and their business ecosystem.

Managerial implications. *A paradigmatic shift in leadership and business is needed to address global social and environmental challenges. The Olivetti case study allows understanding how the communitarian enterprise depends on the local community's solid cooperation acting as the main "stakeholder" taking part in localised productive processes and creating a communitarian shared value. The entrepreneurial style was combined masterfully with the local society's needs, historical vocations, and know-hows, supporting collective goods and shared values. The Olivettian oeuvre, which cannot be considered just a simple "historical" model of enlightened capitalism, can represent a concrete model of business responsibility for local development. The implementation of development models inspired by "communitarian" strategies is easily associated with the quadruple-helix model of social innovation (Carayannis et al., 2019). The economic, political, and educational systems are strictly intertwined and encompassed within the needs and norms of society and the embedded firms. Literature underlines the difficulties companies face to reach true sustainability (Shevchenko et al., 2016). This paper demonstrates that dignity, ethics, and legitimacy allow us to connect leadership, business management, and corporate responsibility for systemic consequences (sustainability), attempting to promote human flourishing, adding value to society at large, and helping to alleviate social problems through business and economic activities.*

The originality of the paper. *While Olivetti's case study is not novel, adopting a humanistic management approach to analyse it is original and promising. Its strength lies in bridging different streams of research, including CRS, CW, true sustainability, and SV. In so doing, HM may set the ground for a transition towards alternative business and development models. The contemporary relevance of human dignity may interpret and manage the weaknesses of traditional approaches and cope with challenges and new scenarios, including the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Olivetti's case study is accurate humanistic management in practice: Olivetti's philosophical viewpoint crosscut the enterprise and its socio-economic and institutional ecosystem, forerunning the debate on the future of capitalism: the mission of the enterprise, the impact on the economy and society, the social state, and (dignity in) labour policies.*

Keywords: *CSR; true sustainability; humanistic management; Olivetti; humanistic leader; humanism in business*

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