EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: NEW EVELOPMENTS IN THE VUCA ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The article analyzes the essence, principles, implementation possibilities, and impact of performance management on companies. The general objective of the paper is to research the theoretical and methodological foundations for developing employee performance management in the context of a new business environment—the VUCA environment—illustrating the opportunities and threats to achieving organizational performance. The study examines the latest trends in performance management development, taking into account the recent changes that have affected the activity of economic agents. It further explores the performance management cycle, the main factors influencing performance, as well as the effects of performance management on companies' activities. The research methodology is complex and comprehensive, given that in writing the paper we used various research methods such as analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, scientific abstraction, and content analysis, which supported us to advance in our research and obtain relevant results. As a result of the research conducted, we can highlight that in the context of the new VUCA environment, companies must reassess their organizational objectives, carefully analyze the factors influencing organizational performance, and develop the necessary competencies for their employees so that the company can achieve a high level of performance by effectively leveraging the potential of its employees.

Keywords: performance, performance management, employees, VUCA environment, competency, competitive advantage.

JEL Classification: M12.

1. Introduction

The concept of performance management has undergone one of the most important developments in the field of human resource management. Performance-based pay and evaluation systems, developed in a rudimentary manner and implemented hastily, often failed to deliver the results that organizations expected from them. Performance management was built on old systems of merit assessment and management by objectives.

Performance management is a strategic and integrated process that delivers sustained success to organizations by improving the performance of the people who work within them and by developing the capabilities of individual contributors and teams. It is strategic in the sense that it addresses the broader issues faced by organizations that aim to operate efficiently within their environment, while also guiding the overall direction the business intends to pursue in order to achieve its long-term objectives.

Performance management is integrated in two ways:

- *Vertical integration* – integrating or aligning business, team, and individual objectives with core organizational competencies;

- *Horizontal integration* – integrating various aspects of human resource management, particularly organizational development, human resource development, and reward systems, in order to establish a coherent approach to employee management and development.

Essentially, performance management is a process shared between managers and the teams they lead. The concept is based on the principle of management by contract rather than

by command, although this does not exclude the need to include high performance expectations in such contracts.

2. Research methodology

The general objective of this study is to investigate the theoretical and methodological foundations for developing employee performance management in the context of a new business environment—the VUCA environment—illustrating the opportunities and threats associated with achieving organizational performance.
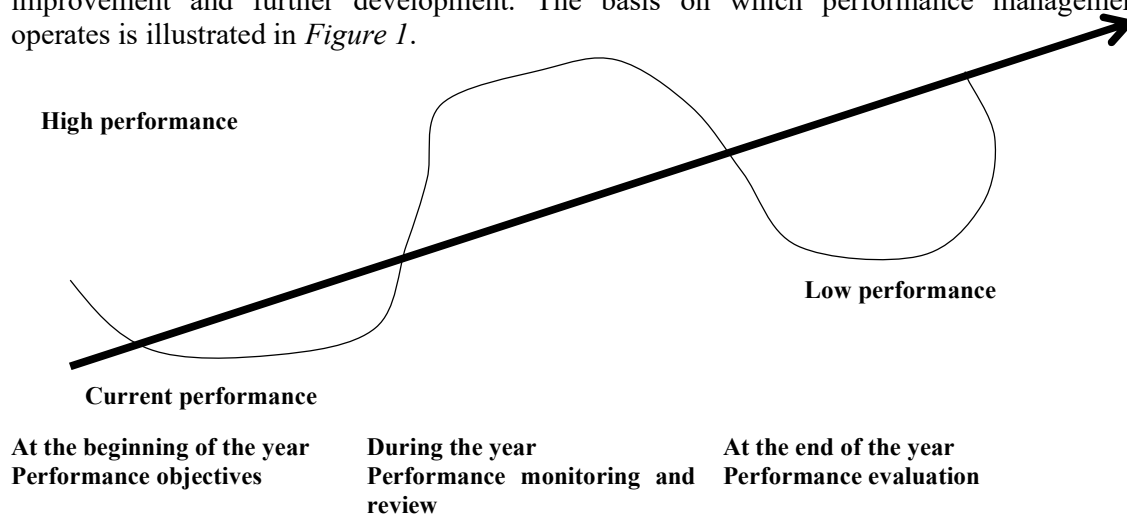
This paper aims to analyze the importance and fundamental role of employee performance management in creating and strengthening competitive advantages. In order to achieve the general objective of the research, the following specific objectives have been established:

O1: researching the conceptual foundations of employee performance management;

O2: identifying the essence and characteristics of employee performance management in the new business environment – the VUCA environment;

O3: identifying opportunities for strengthening employee performance management in the VUCA environment.

As research methods, we focused on using a broad and varied methodology that enabled us to obtain relevant results and achieve both the general objective and the specific objectives. In developing this study, we concentrated on employing the following research methods: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, abduction, content analysis, graphical methods, and tabular methods.

3. Content

Performance management is based on agreement on objectives, knowledge, skills, and ability (competency) requirements, performance improvement, and personal development plans. It involves joint and continuous review of performance in relation to these objectives, requirements, and plans, as well as the agreement and implementation of plans for improvement and further development. The basis on which performance management operates is illustrated in *Figure 1*.
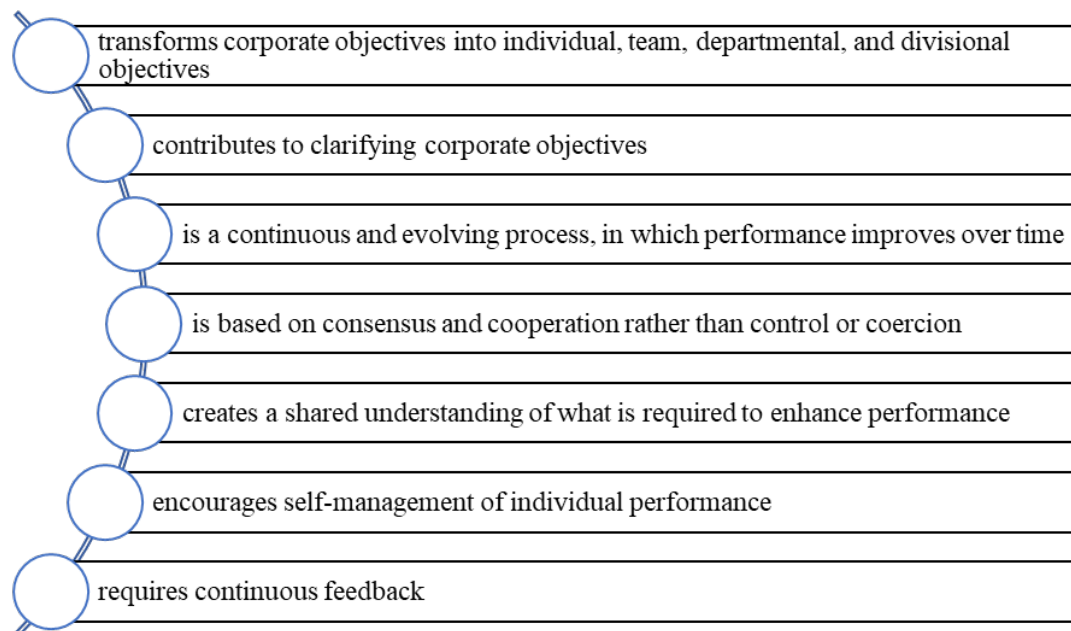

High performance

Low performance

Current performance

At the beginning of the year	During the year	At the end of the year
Performance objectives	Performance monitoring and review	Performance evaluation

Figure 1. The stages of performance management

Source: adapted from Armstrong, M. *Performance Management: Key Strategies and Practical Guidelines*. USA: Kogan Page Limited, 2000, p. 15.

Performance management is a means of achieving better results from the entire organization, or from teams and individuals within it, by understanding and managing performance within a framework focused on planned objectives, standards, and competency requirements. It is a process for establishing a common understanding of what needs to be achieved, and an approach to managing and developing people in a way that increases the likelihood of achieving these outcomes in both the short and long term.

The fundamental purpose of performance management is to establish a culture in which individuals and groups take responsibility for the continuous improvement of business processes and for their own skills and contributions. The principles of performance management are represented in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2. The principles of performance management
Source: adapted from Armstrong, M. *Performance Management: Key Strategies and Practical Guidelines*. USA: Kogan Page Limited, 2000, p. 17.

Analyzing the fundamental principles of performance management, it becomes evident that the concept is primarily concerned with improving performance in order to achieve organizational, team, and individual efficiency.

Furthermore, performance management also focuses on employee development in order to support them in achieving organizational performance. Performance improvement is only achievable if there are effective continuous development processes in place. This approach addresses both the core capabilities of the organization and the specific competencies of individuals and teams.

In the same context, performance management raises concerns about meeting the needs and expectations of all stakeholders in an organization: owners, management, employees, customers, suppliers, and the general public. In particular, employees are treated as partners in the enterprise whose interests are respected, who have a say in matters that concern them, and

whose opinions are sought and listened to. Performance management should respect the needs of individuals and teams as well as those of the organization, recognizing that these will not always coincide.
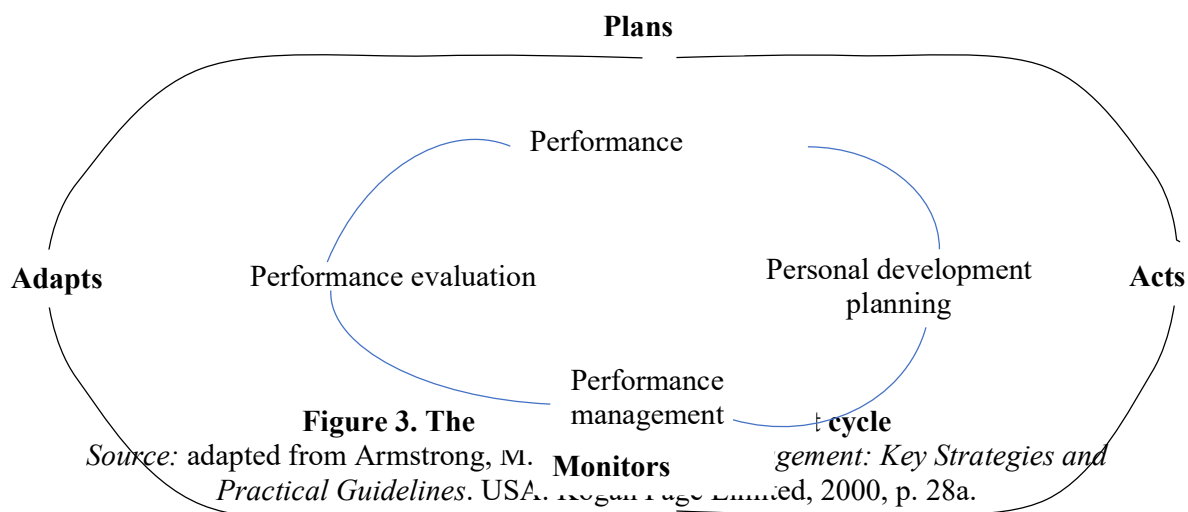
Finally, performance management addresses concerns about communication and employee engagement. At the same time, it fosters a climate in which continuous dialogue takes place between managers and their team members to define expectations and to share information about the organization's mission, values, and goals. This establishes a mutual understanding of what must be achieved and provides a framework for managing and developing people to ensure that this will be achieved.

Researchers Fletcher and Williams suggested four fundamental principles of effective performance management, namely:

1. Performance management should be administered by direct management rather than the human resources department;

2. Emphasis should be placed on shared corporate objectives and values;

3. Performance management must be tailored to each individual organization;

4. Involvement of all staff is required, not just part of the management team (Fletcher & Williams, 1992).

Although each organization that seeks to implement performance management should develop its own version tailored to its specific needs, it is useful to have a conceptual framework within which to develop and operate organizational processes. Such a framework supports the decision-making process regarding the most appropriate approach and, once that decision has been made, provides guidance to managers as well as to the individuals and teams they oversee concerning the performance management activities to be carried out.

Performance management can be described as a continuous cycle of self-renewal, as illustrated in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3. The Performance management cycle
Source: adapted from Armstrong, M. *gement: Key Strategies and Practical Guidelines*. USA. ...ed, 2000, p. 28a.

The performance management cycle includes several defining elements, such as:

1.   *The performance agreement* – defines expectations: what an individual needs to achieve in terms of objectives, how performance will be measured, and the capabilities

required to deliver the desired results. This could be described as the *performance planning stage.*

2.   *Personal development plan* – outlines the actions employees intend to take to develop themselves in order to expand their knowledge and skills, increase their capacity levels, and improve their performance in specified areas. This is the *performance development stage.*

3.   *Performance management* – the stage in which measures are taken to implement the performance agreement and personal development plan as individuals continue their daily work and planned learning activities. This includes a continuous process of providing feedback on performance, conducting informal progress reviews, updating objectives, and, where necessary, addressing performance issues.

4.   *Performance evaluation* – the formal stage in which performance is reviewed over a period, covering achievements, progress, and issues, serving as the basis for a revised performance agreement and personal development plan. It may also lead to *performance evaluations.*

In his works, researcher Aguinis (2013) presents the *performance management cycle*, which includes four main stages:

1.   *Performance planning* – in the performance planning process, the organization sets clear, measurable and relevant (SMART) objectives for the performance to be achieved by its employees. At the same time, company management must design a process for aligning individual goals with organizational goals that will support the process of achieving and enhancing organizational performance.

2.   *Performance monitoring* – this stage focuses on the continuous monitoring of team activities necessary to achieve performance targets. Moreover, company management must provide effective feedback to all company employees in order to strengthen team spirit towards achieving organizational performance. Also, at this stage, adjustments must be made, as appropriate, to employee behavior and activities in order to achieve the pre-established performance level.

3.   *Performance evaluation* – this stage involves the actual evaluation of the results achieved by the company's employees, which can be done through employee interviews, quantitative or qualitative assessments designed to support the process of achieving organizational performance.

4.   *Performance development* – this stage focuses on identifying development and coaching needs through various professional training courses, mentoring sessions, etc. (Aguinis, 2013).

Examining the specialized literature, we can identify several key factors that influence the effectiveness of performance management within an organization, namely:

1.   *Clarity of organizational objectives and their alignment with business strategy* – well-defined organizational objectives contribute to ensuring that employees clearly understand and are able to achieve them (Armstrong, 2020).

2.   *Managerial skills of leadership* – company leadership is the fundamental pillar of achieving organizational performance by employees, through motivating and monitoring employees in their efforts to achieve performance (Lussier, Achua, 2016).

3.   *Compensation and recognition system* – a fair, equitable, and transparent remuneration system contributes to increasing employee motivation and involvement in achieving and increasing performance levels (Dessler, 2020).

4. *Organizational culture* – an organizational culture that promotes transparency and meritocracy supports the process of improving employee performance (Schein, 2010).

5. *Adoption of modern technologies* – the use of modern technologies in the employee performance evaluation process enhances trust in the performance management system (Stone, 2013).

6. *Employees involvment in setting organizational objectives* – involving employees in the process of defining organizational objectives increases their commitment to achieving these objectives (Aguinis, 2013).

7. *Providing continuous feedback and coaching* – in order to achieve performance, employees require continuous feedback in order to monitor, adapt, and correct their performance in achieving organizational objectives (Pulakos, 2009).

Analyzing the variety of factors influencing performance management, we can highlight a two-dimensional influence on its effectiveness: an organizational influence, which largely determines performance standards, objectives, and strategies for achieving performance, and an individual influence, which depends on the capacities, skills, and abilities of individuals in their pursuit of performance.

Schematically, the two-dimensional influence on achieving effective performance management is illustrated in *Figure 4*.
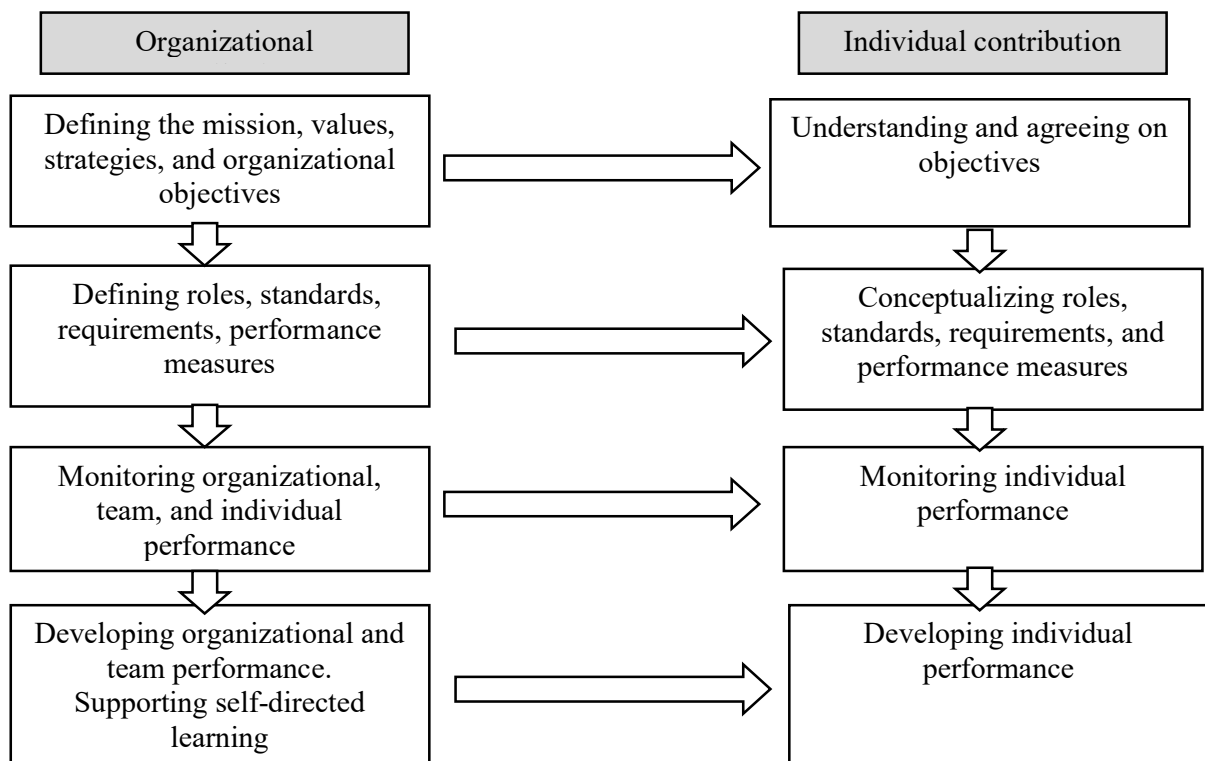
Figure 4. The two-dimensional influence of performance management
Source: developed by the author

Companies have realized that they must develop unique dynamic capabilities that strengthen their competitive advantages in order to survive in a constantly changing market environment. Consequently, they focus on human resource development, particularly on enhancing employee performance, which becomes a source of strategic advantage (Wright & Snell, 2009).

Researchers Narcisse and Harcourt (2008, p. 1152) state that "employee performance appraisal is one of the most emotionally charged activities in business life – evaluating a person's contribution and ability" (Narcisse & Harcourt, 2008). On the other hand, researchers Boxall and Purcell (2011) indicate that implementing a well-defined process for evaluating employee performance plays a crucial role in ensuring the effective functioning of a company (Boxal & Purcell, 2011).

Furthermore, Rynes et al. (2000) argue that the main challenge for companies is to evaluate the performance of their employees and consider how it can become more efficient and "valid" (Rynes, Barber & Varma, 2000). In other words, how can companies implement performance evaluation practices to improve their ability to distinguish high-performing employees from those with lower performance?

Therefore, it is essential that companies are aware of their employees' capabilities in order to be able to manage them effectively and, in turn, align them with the company's overall business strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2011).

However, researchers Murphy and Cleveland (1991) report that many important factors regarding the research and development of a performance evaluation model are still often overlooked, which may explain why an integrated model for performance evaluation has yet to be established (Murphy & Cleveland, 1991). Furthermore, as Nguyen et al. (2015, p. 567) state, "although there have been many studies examining the impact of various factors on employee performance, very few have investigated more than three factors simultaneously" (Nguyen, Dang & Nguyen, 2015).

In the same vein, Mathis and Jackson (2011) and Armstrong (2012) argue that both internal and external environmental factors of the company, such as managerial support, employee training culture, organizational climate, and environmental dynamism, are interconnected with workplace conditions, including communication, autonomy, and the work environment. Moreover, they emphasize the second category of factors, namely those related to employees themselves, such as intrinsic motivation, proactivity, adaptability, skill flexibility, commitment, and qualification level (Mathis & Jackson, 2011; Armstrong, 2012).

In the same context, many researchers (Pulakos, 2004; Armstrong, 2012) argue that managerial support is an important condition for improving employee performance (Pulakos, 2004; Armstrong, 2012). As Morrison and Phelps (1999) point out, when employees perceive that management supports their work-related efforts, improved workplace performance is more likely to occur (Morrison, Phelps, 1999). In addition, Parker et al. (2006) found that managerial support is positively correlated with employee-related factors such as commitment and proactivity (Parker, 2006).

Similarly, Lepak et al. (2006) found that organizational climate influences employee attitudes and behaviors and, consequently, their performance levels (Lepack, 2006), while Chatman et al. (2014) report a relationship between organizational climate and adaptability, while Erkutlu (2012) argues that it also affects employees' level of proactivity.

Finally, researchers Boxall et al. (2007) emphasize that organizational culture influences employee behavior, while Roos and Van Eeden (2008) argue that it is closely related to employees' motivation levels.

At the same time, researchers Dermol and Cater (2013) state that acquiring new knowledge and skills through training leads to improved professional performance. In addition, Hale (2002) and Armstrong (2012) emphasize that training improves employees' knowledge and skills so that they can successfully cope with new daily challenges related to their job and, therefore, improve their performance at work.

Furthermore, Song et al. (2011) found that training culture is related to professional autonomy.

In the same vein, Ketkar and Sett (2010) report that environmental dynamism affects company performance (Ketkar & Sett, 2010). In other words, in a dynamic environment, the workplace itself and its performance acquire unique characteristics. Finally, according to Crant (2000), employees operating in a dynamic work environment characterized by increasing job demands are prone to develop behaviors that lead to increased performance (Crant, 2000). Panayotopoulou et al. (2003) state that environmental dynamism is a factor influencing employees' adaptive capacity (Panayotopoulou et.al., 2003), while Papalexandris and Nikandrou state that "the instability of the general economic environment in which European companies operate creates difficulties in defining the necessary skills that the workforce should possess" (Papalexandris & Nikandrou, 2000, p. 400).

Noe et al. (2006, p. 162) define job autonomy as the extent to which "the workplace allows the employee to make decisions about how to perform their work" (Noe et al., 2006, p. 162). They also state that job autonomy is positively associated with employee performance. More specifically, the researchers emphasize that job autonomy reflects the degree of freedom and independence that employees have in making decisions about how to accomplish their tasks. Thus, employees with higher levels of job autonomy demonstrate greater flexibility in their work as they are able to choose how to perform their tasks more effectively, thereby, enhancing their performance (Morgenson et.al., 2005). Moreover, Parker et al. (2006) found that job autonomy is also positively correlated with employee commitment and proactivity (Parker et al., 2006). Furthermore, Dysvik and Kuvaas (2011) report that there is a relationship between professional autonomy and employee performance, which is moderated by intrinsic motivation (employee-related factors) (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2011).

Regarding the work environment, Kopelman et al. (1990) report that the work environment significantly influences the productivity and performance of employees (Kopelman et.al., 1990). Furthermore, Fawcett et al. (2008) argue that the work environment affects employees' ability to be proactive and productive (Fawcett et. al., 2008). Concerning workplace communication, Price (1997) suggests that workplace communication is linked to commitment and motivation (Price, 1997), while Chen et al. (2006) found that workplace communication is associated with commitment (an employee-related factor) (Chen et al., 2006). In addition, Bush and Frohman (1991) report that workplace communication represents an essential factor that can lead to higher levels of company performance (Bush & Frohman, 1991).

In the same vein, Armstrong (2012) argues that workplace communication is a crucial factor, which is related to the overall performance of employees (Armstrong, 2012).

In the context of the new business environment, employees are required to continuously update of their skills, abilities, values, behaviors, and attitudes. The VUCA environment,

characterized by increased uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, requires employees to aquire new competencies relevant to this environment, which would enable them to effectively fulfill their tasks under such conditions. The new competencies required of employees for effective performance in the VUCA environment are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. The new competencies required of employees for effective performance in the VUCA environment

New competencies	Characteristics
Adaptive strategic thinking	It involves the employee's ability to take a holistic view of tasks and quickly adapt to new changes.
Emotional intelligence	It involves the employee's ability to efficiently manage their own emotions under stress, uncertainty, and ambiguity.
Learning agility	It involves the employee's willingness to learn from new experiences and to rapidly apply skills in new contexts.
Decision-making under uncertainty	It involves developing the employee's ability to make rational and timely decisions in uncertain conditions.
Flexible leadership	It involves the ability to lead diverse and virtual teams effectively.
Critical thinking	It involves complex thinking focused on generating creative solutions.

Source: Adapted from Johansen, B. (2017). *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

From the analysis of the data presented in the table, it can be observed that within the VUCA environment, company employees must adapt rapidly to new changes, demonstrate analytical spirit, critical thinking, promptness in action, and the ability to deal with complexity. All these competencies are characterized by a high level of complexity, requiring a continuous development of employees' potential.

Table 2 provides a synthetic overview of the changes in employee competencies in the classic model, on the one hand, and in the VUCA environment, on the other.

Table 2. Changes in employee competencies in the VUCA environment

Key aspects	Classic environment	VUCA environment
Knowledge	Greater emphasis on technical and formal knowledge.	Emphasis on leveraging employees' continuous learning
Hard skills	Focus on basic professional skills.	Emphasis on dynamism and rapid updating in response to emerging changes.
Soft skills	Low level of utilization: limited communication, collaboration, and empathy	High level utilization of skills: effective communication, collaboration, empathy.
Career guidance	Specialized guidance in a specific field.	Multifunctional orientation, characterized by high adaptability.

Leadership	Leadership focused on authority, excessive control.	Leadership based on collaboration, empathy, and performance.
Decision-making	Bureaucratic, highly controlled process.	Decentralized, rapid, and adaptive process.
Adaptability	Low adaptability.	High adaptability.
Innovation	Low promotion of innovation at the organizational level.	Intense promotion of innovation at the organizational level.
Digital Tools	Basic tools.	Advanced digital tools.

Source: Adapted from Bennett, N., & Lemoine, G. J. (2014). *What a difference a word makes: Understanding threats to performance in a VUCA world.* Business Horizons, 57(3), 311–317.

Analyzing the content of *Table 2*, it is evident that, in the context of new changes that have significantly influenced the business environment, employees must develop new competencies adapted to these changes. Thus, if in the classic model, business processes were more rigid, autocratic, narrow and formalized, then the new VUCA environment requires employees to master new competencies to achieve organizational performance, such as rapid adaptability, continuous learning, decentralization and advanced digital skills. Consequently, in order to increase their performance, employees are obliged to adapt in real time to the new context and to be able to identify new decision-making pathways aimed at maximizing outcomes.

Along with the evolution of the business environment, the methods of evaluating employee performance have also evolved. Thus, if from the beginning companies implemented classic methods of evaluating employee performance, currently, as a result of the VUCA environment and the multiple changes that have occurred in the business environment, companies are compelled to implement new methods of evaluating employee competencies. These approaches aim to enhance employee motivation, increase job satisfaction, and improve the overall performance outcomes of employees.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be noted that alongside the evolution of the business environment and society as a whole, researchers' concerns regarding employee performance have also evolved. These changes have affected not only the requirements regarding the competencies assessed in performance evaluations but also the evaluation methods applied in this regard. Initially, simpler methods were used, often based on single-criterion or simplistic evaluations. However, in the current VUCA environment, characterized by uncertainty, dynamism, ambiguity, companies have transitioned to modern evaluation methods. These contemporary approaches involve continuous evaluations, adapted in real time, and include continuous feedback to employees in order to maximize their performance outcomes.

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