

# Performance management process changes on the work identity of employees during COVID-19



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**Orientation:** Performance management is a vital process across multiple businesses and is proven to be an integral element in navigating employees through the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic while determining possible influences on the work identity of employees during this period.

**Research purpose:** The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of performance management process changes on the work identity of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Motivation for the study:** There is little research available that discusses performance management and work identity. As such, this research works towards closing this gap by understanding the influence of performance management process changes on the identity of employees.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative approach was followed through an interpretivist research paradigm. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 participants. The participants took part in semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory was followed, and the constant comparative method was used.

**Main findings:** The performance management process changes had no influence on the work identity and work role of participants. Instead, the pandemic itself and the way in which the organisation supported its employees while they navigated the pandemic had an influence on the work identity and work roles of employees.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Organisations can adopt the research findings to enhance employee work identity and performance throughout future changes that affect the organisation.

**Contribution/value-add:** This article offers insights into the lack of literature available that discusses performance management and work identity collectively.

**Keywords:** performance management; work identity; COVID-19; performance ratings; qualitative research.

## Introduction

In March 2020, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Since then, the impact of the pandemic had severe effects on the South African economy. According to Dlodla (2020), South Africa forecasted a decline of 7.2% in gross domestic product growth – it is the lowest in 90 years. The trend of financial losses was not the only trend that emerged in 2020 because of the pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 had an extreme impact on working life (Lilja et al., 2022), which brought many organisational challenges (Meadows & De Braine, 2022).

Coronavirus disease 2019 forced most of the global workforce into a different setting, triggering ongoing remote work and, as a result, changing the way employees performed their work (Tortella et al., 2020). Prior to the pandemic, remote work was not a norm; however, the pandemic meant that organisations that had based their business models on traditional office spaces had no other option but to shift their business models to remote work with many continuing this way long after the pandemic peaked (Hyken, 2021). In times of uncertainty, a major concern for many organisations was the maintenance of acceptable levels of employee performance (Saleem et al., 2021).

According to Hamid et al. (2020), the fear of becoming infected with COVID-19 impacted the performance of employees, regardless of whether they worked from home or the office.

Naturally, an impact on the way the employees perform their roles means an overall impact on achieving performance goals. The shift from onsite to remote work meant fewer daily connections between managers and employees, resulting in the need for businesses to develop new action plans for managing the performance of each worker (Moses et al., 2020). As many advantages as there are in remote working, there are many downsides, including inaccurate performance evaluations (Aczel et al., 2021). Performance evaluations are a key part of the performance management process. According to Tardi (2019), performance management is defined as a corporate management instrument that supports managers with the effective monitoring and evaluation of the work of their subordinates. With the challenges that the pandemic brought, year-end reviews had the potential to create additional stress on employees (Chowdhury & Williams, 2020). As a result, many businesses changed their performance management processes with some opting to skip the appraisal process altogether, while others chose to suspend them for that period (Chowdhury & Williams, 2020).

As a result, there is not a clear view as to whether the changes brought on by the pandemic influenced the way employees performed their roles and ultimately their work identities. Work identity is a multi-faceted and multi-layered self-concept that shapes the roles of the individual within the workplace setting (Bothma & Roodt, 2012). If work identities were changed, it is necessary to review the mechanisms employed during the pandemic that supported employees and their performance and adapt them to navigate future changes with greater ease. In addition, there are few studies, even before the pandemic, that examined the performance management process and its link to work identity. Work-based identity has been shown to have a positive impact on employee performance (Bothma & Roodt, 2012). It is because of this gap, prior to and during the pandemic, that the researcher elected to study these concepts in combination. If these concepts can be viewed in a holistic sense and understood collectively, then perhaps organisations can effectively navigate future times of crisis and rapid change.

## Research purpose and objectives

Work identity and performance are two elements that could have been influenced significantly owing to the workplace changes that have been brought about by the pandemic. As such, the purpose of this study was to answer the question, 'How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the performance management process in a company that drives high performance?' In order to answer this question, the main objectives of the study were to determine potential changes in the performance management process as a result of the pandemic, determine any changes in the level of employee performance, understand any influence of these changes on the work identity of employees and determine any adjustments in the work roles of employees.

## Literature review

### Work identity

A person's work identity refers to a:

[W]ork-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational, and other identities that shapes the roles a person adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing his or her work. (Walsh & Gordon, 2008, p. 47)

Lloyd et al. (2011) further stated that work identity develops within the complex negotiation between personal resources, attitudes and values on the one hand and work processes and settings on the other hand. Thus, the self-concept fulfils a central function in shaping the individual's role at work during social interactions in the workplace setting (Lloyd et al. 2011). Self-concept refers to an organised system that forms how individuals feel about themselves and other individuals, as well as their social relationships (Leary & Tangney, 2012).

Studies have shown that work identity predictors are job resources (Bester, 2012; De Braine & Roodt, 2011) such as organisational support and growth opportunities (De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020). Job demands were also shown to predict work identity (Bester, 2012). Organisational trust and change also predict work identity (Van Tonder, 2019). Furthermore, work identity is shown to predict work engagement (Bester, 2012) and normative commitment (Phungula et al., 2022).

### Work role performance

Traditionally, work role performance is evaluated according to the level that tasks were carried out by the employees in alignment with their specific job description (Griffin et al., 2007). Further to this, Griffin et al. (2007) proposed that there were nine dimensions of work role performance that classified three types of behaviour, namely, proficiency, adaptivity and proactivity behaviours on the individual, team and organisational levels. In addition to this, Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that team behaviours within the organisation are critical to team effectiveness, resulting in some organisations adopting a pay-for-performance plan within teams to motivate employees to engage in work role performance. To fully understand the concept of work role performance, it is necessary to understand the work role itself.

According to Murphy and Jackson (1999), work role refers to the role responsibilities an individual has to perform at work. This is elaborated by Zhu (2013), who suggested that the core concept of role theory is the 'role', referring to the script that regulates actors' behaviour. In social psychology, the concept of a role can assist people in creating an understanding that social behaviour can be determined by people's positions in social relations, similar to that of the role of the script for actors (Zhu, 2013).

A critical factor of role performance itself is role ambiguity. Role ambiguity can be defined as the perception of the

individual employee about their own role, meaning that should the employee lack a clear understanding of performance expectations and required behaviour, the employee will experience role ambiguity (Huang, 2019). According to Mañas et al. (2018), role ambiguity has proven to have a fundamental role in extra-role performance. This is further reinforced by Caillier (2014), who stated that when employees are unsure of their performance requirements, they will put less effort not only into the performance of their jobs but also into producing behaviours that exceed the expectations as set out in their performance contract. With this consideration, it is necessary to determine any potential changes that employees may have experienced in their work roles and furthermore the performance of those roles as a result of the changes brought upon by the pandemic.

### **Performance management process and the performance appraisal**

Performance management is an ongoing process of identifying, measuring and developing the performance of individuals and ensuring the alignment of this performance to the strategic goals of the business (Aguinis, 2019). Performance management is further defined as a set of measures that increases the level of resources to achieve goals with effectiveness and efficiency. The performance management system is designed to drive high performance across the business to achieve company-defined goals (Osmania & Maliqi, 2012). This is done through strategising, setting goals and incentivising the achievement of those goals through mechanisms such as bonus schemes, allowing employees to be incentivised by rewards that speak to their intrinsic and extrinsic needs. As a result, it is suggested that performance management has the potential to drive work identity while driving high employee performance.

The purpose of performance management is to measure and manage the output employees (Brown et al., 2019). This process can be broken down into three simple steps, namely, planning, reviewing and evaluating (Waseem et al., 2013). It is a complex, multi-faceted process of how the employees are tracking their goals and competencies and how employees performed throughout the annual cycle. Naturally, the achievement or failure to achieve these goals would then be reviewed as part of the appraisal process.

The use of performance ratings as part of performance appraisal has become popular over the last 30 years; however, the practice of a formal employee evaluation extends as far back as the third century (Karak & Sen, 2019). Although one would imagine the application and criteria have changed since then, the aim of identifying the best workers and highlighting the workers who need more support remains the same. According to Rahahleh et al. (2019), performance appraisal is a major element that motivates employees to achieve their performance goals.

Although this study had a specific focus on the performance management process, it is critical to determine factors that drive or motivate performance. According to Sekhar et al. (2013), motivation is linked directly to the individual within the organisation, acting as a catalyst for all workers to enhance their current performance and to produce better work than they would ordinarily. There is also the added necessity of goal setting as a mechanism of motivation. According to Locke and Latham (2002), performance goals have a significant prevalence in employee behaviour and performance. Performance goals can be found in the majority of modern businesses when driving performance and must be specific, attainable and accepted in order to be effective (Lunenburg, 2011).

Naturally, goals will be found in the performance appraisal process. According to Rahahleh et al. (2019), performance appraisal is a major element that motivates employees to achieve their performance goals. Performance appraisals can induce anxiety in employees and, for some, may hold little room for value and be highly de-motivational (Colquitt et al., 2016).

## **Research design**

### **Research approach**

A qualitative, interpretivist exploratory study was best suited to the research as it supported the researcher's aim of understanding the experience of employees as a result of COVID-19, the performance management system changes it has brought and how employees viewed their role post these changes.

### **Research strategy**

The research followed a case study research strategy because the research aimed to understand the influence of performance management process changes on the work identity of employees during COVID-19 from one regional office of a financial services global organisation.

### **Research method**

#### **Research setting**

Data were gathered from participants from a financial services global organisation with sites in multiple locations including the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. A specific focus was made on one regional office in South Africa in order to provide a focus on employees in the researchers' location for ease of access.

#### **Research participants and sampling methods**

A purposive non-probability sampling technique was followed. Inclusion criteria for participants selected were as follows: The participants should have been employed in the organisation prior, during and post the pandemic. The participants were required to be on a bonus incentive scheme and were employed on professional or managerial

job levels within the organisation. Professional participants refer to specialist individual contributors, while managerial participants refer to people managers. Any employees who did not meet these criteria were specifically excluded with the addition of commission-based earners, as the commission structure was a standard result of performance and guaranteed, while bonuses were not. A total of 15 participants were selected to participate in the study to allow for a substantive sample of both professional and managerial participants. The participants were from a variety of functions such as HR, Information Technology and Marketing, to name a few.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researcher was previously employed within this workplace; the use of previous networks afforded the researcher the opportunity to gain entrée into the organisation. In order to avoid any potential bias, the researcher selected participants who had not been direct peers or stakeholders for more than 2 years. The researcher's role was that of a research instrument affording the researcher the privilege of facilitating discussions that required the sharing of each participant's unique view and story. Prior understanding of the research setting provided a basic context of the work environment and allowed the researcher to ask more probative questions with a background understanding of internal processes.

### Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants. The interviews were conducted *via* Microsoft Teams with the use of pre-determined interview questions. Examples of some interview questions were:

- 'When you found out that performance ratings were being removed from the performance management process, how did that make you feel?'
- 'Without the numerical value associated with your performance, did you feel that you would be rewarded for work that you did? Did this influence your performance levels? Did this influence the way you felt about your role at work?'

**TABLE 1:** Biographical data of research participants.

Age	Race	Gender	Job level	Length of service
43	White	Female	Manager	7 years, 7 months
39	Indian	Female	Manager	12 years, 11 months
44	Black	Male	Manager	9 years, 4 months
43	Mixed race	Male	Manager	14 years, 1 month
34	White	Male	Manager	5 years, 4 months
43	Black	Male	Professional	3 years, 11 months
43	Black	Female	Professional	13 years, 9 months
52	White	Male	Professional	8 years, 5 months
42	Asian	Male	Professional	9 years, 4 months
30	Black	Female	Professional	5 years, 7 months
36	Indian	Female	Professional	5 years, 10 months
43	Mixed race	Female	Professional	20 years, 6 months
42	White	Female	Professional	6 years, 2 months
33	Black	Male	Professional	3 years, 4 months
54	Mixed race	Female	Professional	17 years, 2 months

### Data recording and preparation

All interviews were recorded with Microsoft Teams, and the researcher was responsible for transcribing each interview.

### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Member checks were conducted, and this helped to ensure credibility. All changes that occurred in the research were accounted for dependability. An audit trail of all decisions made in the research ensured confirmability.

### Data analysis

The study made use of grounded theory (GT) to analyse the data collected. According to Chun Tie et al. (2019), GT is a methodology that is structured, yet flexible. The use of GT in this study is relevant because, although there is significant theory that delves into work identity and performance, there is little known about the direct linkage of the two topics. Each interview was exported into ATLAS.ti as primary documents where the coding process began which involved prescribing descriptive names to each code.

The constant comparative method as described by Stern (1995) was used. Through this method, the data in this study were reviewed several times, resulting in the identification of key constructs (Thomas, 2013).

Open coding was used to code throughout the primary documents, and this allowed the researcher to create a code for specific pieces of text. Post the review of the data several times, 275 codes were found across all 15 interviews. There were a total of 20 codes with a code grounding of 7 that were considered prevalent constructs. From the 20 codes, 8 code groups were created.

### Reporting style

The research refers to fundamental extracts that were shared during each interview. Each extract was intended to ground findings within the theory; as such, the results were reported in a manner that provided a response under a particular theme that was prevalent to a particular research question asked. Findings were substantiated by existing theory where applicable.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Ethics Committee at the School of Management in the College of Business & Economics at the University of Johannesburg to conduct the research (Ethical Clearance Code – IPPM-2021-581).

### Obtaining permission

Written permission was obtained from the organisation to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The researcher had previous working relationships with the organisation, although this afforded the researcher the opportunity to



request permission to conduct the study. Participants were contacted directly by the researcher via email.

### Confidentiality and anonymity

The organisation required that the information pertaining to the organisation and the research participants be safely stored and that all identifying factors be removed from the research. As such, any statements by participants that directly indicate who they are were removed from any documentation required in the research.

### Ensuring no harm

All participants were provided with an alias to ensure that their identity remained unknown to all aside from the researcher. Each participant was reminded that they could withdraw from the study should they wish to do so.

### Ensuring informed consent was received

The informed consent form detailed the research topic and what could be expected throughout the research process, along with the rights of each participant. This was signed by all participants.

## Results

Findings will be presented under three headings that describe the potential influence of COVID-19 on the performance process, performance and the work identity and work roles of employees. These findings stem from the eight codes: performance of employees, performance management process, work identity, performance support from organisation, motivator of performance, COVID-19 changes, performance prior to the pandemic and performance during the pandemic.

### COVID-19 pandemic influence on the performance management process and the performance of employees

In order to effectively present key findings, key discussion items will be discussed under the following sub-headings: the COVID-19 influence on the performance management process and the COVID-19 influence on employee performance.

#### The COVID-19 influence on the performance management process

When asked to describe the performance management process prior to the pandemic, 10 out of 15 participants stated that the process made use of goal-setting, manager check-ins, year-end reviews and, finally, performance ratings. The key change made to the performance management process was the removal of performance ratings by the organisation. Seven of the 15 participants expressed that the rating system prior to its removal influenced their performance. When asked if they felt that the removal of the rating would influence their performance going forward, seven participants felt that the removal of the rating had no influence at all. In addition, 5 out of 15 participants felt that the removal of ratings wasn't a significant change. However, 11 out of 15

participants felt that they would still be appropriately rewarded for their performance without the rating. The majority of research participants not only were comfortable with the removal of the ratings but also believed they would certainly receive what had been promised for good performance. In view of the performance management process as a whole, participants felt that the process helped them to identify with their work but that it was heavily influenced by manager feedback and manager expectations.

#### The COVID-19 influence on employee performance

When participants were asked to describe what they considered high performance to be, prior to and during the pandemic, there was a variety of responses that seemed to link directly to what the priority was for the participant at that time. It was found that 6 out of 15 participants defined high performance as completing tasks within set timelines, with an additional four participants who believed that high performance required exceeding manager expectations. Participant 3 stated:

'High performance was going above, you know, not delivering the norm and it means that being that go to person.' (44 years old, Male, Manager)

#### COVID-19 pandemic influence on work role and work identity of employees

The 15 participants were asked to describe their work role. It was, however, defined as a function by the participants rather than a role that is being performed. The work role is simply what they do each day at work.

Participant 11 described their work role as a:

'[C]ompliance role. Just checking whether people are doing what they're supposed to be doing and they are adhering to various laws, rules and regulations which are applicable to the organisation.' (36 years old, Female, Professional)

In addition, Participant 5 described their work role as:

'Working in the data space, I listen to customer complaints and see which records needed to be fixed.' (34 years old, Male, Manager)

Notably, 14 out of 15 participants felt that their work role was a reflection of their personal identity further indicating that the work role is not perceived as a performance, but rather as a key element of their whole individual make-up.

Participant 7 stated:

'I only have one identity and that comes across in all the different roles in my life, whether that be at work, at home a wife, mother, daughter, same person.' (43 years old, Female, Professional)

To further add to this theme, Participant 12 stated:

'I'd say yes, you work doing what you love or what you like, the whole idea of when you do work, choose a career that you like.' (43 years old, female, professional)

Participant 2 stated:

'The role reflects my identity. As such, I think every person has their own identity. I think my identity is pretty much the same whether it would be in this role or another role. I don't think my identity would change.' (39 years old, Female, Manager)

Many of the participants felt that because of the pandemic and having to work remotely, they have brought more of their personal identity to work.

Participant 10 shared:

'I think I've had to put myself out there a lot more. And maybe it's because everything is remote now, or maybe it is because you have to partner more with global or you know you're building new stakeholder engagements the whole time.' (30 years old, Female, Professional)

Participant 3 stated:

'Yes it did, for me, being myself without having to force myself to be out there has just let me do my work and then I'll do my best without having to do this extra face you know, kind of thing.' (44 year old, Male, Manager)

Participant 9 further added:

'Absolutely, I mean, look at me now and this is how I am at home with no makeup, wearing a t-shirt, wearing my hoodie in my warm shoes.' (42 year old, Male, Professional)

Out of the remaining participants who felt that they brought less of themselves to work than they did before the pandemic, there was a noteworthy statement shared by a participant:

'I think that it's changed me. But I wouldn't say individuality, because I think we are so corporate bound that what you might be describing as individualism is actually, you know, a corporate trait.' (33 years old, Male, Professional)

Despite the work being a clear extension of the individual identity for most of the participants, 11 out of 15 participants expressed that either prior to, during and beyond the initial stages of the pandemic, they were required to conform to some extent to fit into the company or departmental culture.

Participant 9 stated:

'Especially moving from an individual contributor where I was responsible for just me, myself and I. And then obviously for the broader team, and I had to adjust, especially because in my younger days because I was quite open to share my perspectives.' (42 years old, Male, Professional)

When asked if the performance management system helped them to identify with their work role, 13 out of 15 participants confirmed that it did support their identification with their work role.

Participant 11 stated:

'Yes, it did because you with those set criteria and goals you were able to even see where you fall short that if. Let's say for example I was expected to move regulatory compliance findings

from 100 to one or zero by the end of the year, you knew that, oh I did not achieve.' (36 years old, Female, Professional)

Participant 7 indicated:

'Very much. I mean, you know, in my last performance cycle, you know I over-performed.' (43 years old, Male, Professional)

Finally, participant 13 stated:

'It almost forces one to.' (42 years old, Female, Professional)

With regard to the overall influence of the pandemic on participants, 11 out of 15 participants shared that their role as individuals and as workers was fundamentally influenced by the pandemic.

Participant 7 shared:

'Yeah, I think you know, it's made me a lot more at ease. I've learned to understand how much more I'm capable of when I'm not under pressure of time and those kind of things.' (43 years old, Female, Professional)

However, participants indicated that they had to conform to the environment at one point or another, with many stating that during the pandemic, they had been able to bring more of their true selves to work each day. With regard to their work roles, participants indicated a fundamental change in their work roles and individual roles as a result of the changes that the pandemic brought.

## Discussion

### The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance management process and performance of employees

In response to the question, 'How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the performance management process in a company that drives high performance?', it was found that the pandemic resulted in the removal of performance ratings from the performance management process in the organisation. The study found that the pandemic forced the organisation to find alternative ways to drive employee performance remotely by adjusting the performance management process.

This is supported in a study by Gaskell (2020), who suggested that prior performance management metrics and methods were no longer useful when assessing the performance of a remote workforce. Furthermore, the pandemic meant an ongoing need to eliminate bias in the performance system, but also to consider the challenges that employees managed at home while navigating their work and personal responsibilities (Mackenzie et al. 2020). The performance rating was at the centre of people processes dictating talent management practices, the promotion cycle, and rewards and recognition. It has been argued that talent management practices can enhance work identity (Barkhuizen & De Braine, 2021). As a result, the organisation needed to take meaningful precautions in order to effectively navigate a

change that would affect these processes. Literature suggests that a change must be perceived as a positive change by employees in order to enhance their willingness to align with the change, despite the rapid nature of the change (Van Tonder, 2019). Based on the findings from the study, it would appear that the change was not perceived negatively as a whole. This is simply because the performance management system continued to drive effective performance engagements between managers and subordinates. This may have been as a result of a well-managed performance system.

It was found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not necessarily influence the performance output of employees in terms of what their deliverables were as described by the participants. However, there was an influence on how employees actually performed their work. Employees were required to move to a remote work setting, which resulted in an overlap between work and personal responsibilities, in turn resulting in a need to juggle those responsibilities as best they could. However, there was no influence on the work output of employees simply because participants were able to find flexibility in managing both work and personal tasks. This is in contradiction to literature that has suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects negatively influenced the work performance of employees (Hamid et al., 2020; Popa et al., 2022). Literature confirms the major impact that the pandemic had on working life (Lilja et al., 2022) as employees had to adjust to a work-from-home setting, along with their families, with little opportunity to create boundaries between work life and family life. Interestingly, participants did not present any issues with the delivery of their performance, but rather the challenges that they had to navigate while performing their work roles. Moses et al. (2020) suggested that there was a need for workers to adjust to the new way of working while needing to be caretakers for their families. This is supported in a study by Tortella et al. (2020), who suggested that COVID-19 triggered remote work, changing the way employees actually performed their work. In addition to navigating this adjustment to a new way of working, there was the added strain of being separated from work peers and supervisors, which meant a need to determine new ways of ensuring teams could continue to collaborate. The study found that the organisation offered significant support to employees throughout the pandemic, such as ongoing flexibility and emotional support mechanisms.

The result of a divided workforce meant a critical need to keep employees connected, engaged and aligned with business priorities (Moses et al. 2020). Literature suggests that in order to maintain employee performance throughout the pandemic, the mental health of employees would need to be nurtured (Sasaki et al. 2020). Negative life events such as the pandemic have the potential to be detrimental to employees as individuals, not only through ongoing fear of contracting the virus but also by separating employees from their workplace support mechanisms. COVID-19 resulted in limited access to psychological support on account of remote work and social distancing, further inhibiting social identity

continuity within the workplace (Krug et al., 2021); however, these participants received organisational support that helped lessen the negative experiences of the pandemic and remote work. Participants were offered added flexibility in working hours so that employees were no longer bound to deliver during set working hours but could instead work over extended hours within the day. They were also required to take mandatory away-from-keyboard time and were given adequate technological tools to perform their work. In addition, employees no longer had the stress of performing to achieve a performance rating. Despite not having the performance rating as a core element of performance, the organisation remained passionate about employee performance and ensured that employees had clear transparency about their performance. Employees and managers were still required to connect on performance and barriers to performance regularly, thus creating supportive working relationships, despite working apart from one another. This is encouraged by Gok et al. (2015), who shared that employees with good supervisor support identified more with the organisation, further influencing an improvement in their job satisfaction and, as a result, their performance.

### **The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work identity and work roles of employees in a company that drives high performance**

The research study found that performance management process changes had no influence on the work identity and work role of participants. Instead, the pandemic itself and the way in which the organisation supported its employees while they navigated the pandemic had an influence on the work identity and work roles of employees. Consequently, organisational support is shown to predict work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020). Notably, the study found that participants felt that there was a fundamental change in their work roles during and after the pandemic, as they brought more authentic versions of themselves to work owing to the ongoing flexibility, emotional support and additional mechanisms provided to them at this time. Literature confirms that people have their own identities, personally and in workplace settings (Knez, 2016). However, being one's authentic self at work speaks to the integration of the individual's multiple identities within the work context, rather than a singular identity (Kock, 2020). As such, employees who felt that they could be their authentic selves at work no longer separated who they were at home from who they were when they came to work. With this, employees bring their own resources – such as PsyCap: their resilience, optimism and self-efficacy – into the workplace (Van Rensburg, 2020), which was very needed as a result of the pandemic.

Work identity is considered a social identity, and as a result, a key element in navigating the changes brought on by COVID-19 meant a need for social identity continuity. Social identity continuity has been defined as the sense of continuity between a group's past, present and future, which has

protective benefits for its group members (Selvanathan et al., 2022). Coronavirus disease 2019 was a major life event for many, resulting in a separation from social support structures and access to psychological support owing to remote work, negatively affecting social identity continuity within the workplace (Krug et al., 2021). Social identity continuity offers a sense of identification with and belonging to social groups, with positive benefits for individual health and well-being (Cruwys et al., 2014). It offers additional psychological resources through social groups at work (Krug et al., 2021). Although employees were separated from one another, company efforts created a mechanism that increased access to these resources, thus ensuring social identity continuity. The organisation played a significant role in maintaining social identity continuity for its employees by creating support opportunities through the provision of technological tools enabling employees to continue to perform their work, flexible working options, mental health support and the adjustment of people processes to provide further support throughout the pandemic. This phenomenon was also evident in other COVID-19 pandemic studies (Meadows & De Braine, 2022; Krug et al., 2021). Literature confirms a strong link between job resources with work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Literature further suggests that the availability of job resources will lessen the burden of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). With regard to job demands, employees were bogged down by their workload while managing an overlap with their priorities at home. This aligned with a study by Lilja et al. (2022), who confirmed that workload and monitoring were identified as clear job demands that increased work-home interference and, as a result, the well-being of employees. Throughout the pandemic, social support and job autonomy were established as clear job resources that assisted employees in dealing with challenges while working remotely (Wang et al., 2020).

### **The influence of the changes in the performance management process on the work identities of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic**

In response to the main question of the study, 'How have changes in a performance management process influenced the work identities of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?', the researcher has the following observations: It may not necessarily have been the performance management changes that influenced the work identities of employees, but rather the response of the organisation while supporting employees throughout the pandemic. Changes to the performance process were effectively managed and implemented to support employees through this time rather than to create room for additional stress. Literature suggests that the performance management process, although positive, can have negative effects as it can induce anxiety in employees (Colquitt et al. 2016). Furthermore, many employers were already moving away from a traditional performance appraisal process prior to the pandemic (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). Arguably, the pandemic may have simply been an opportunity to adjust a process that was already being reconsidered. Literature further suggests that

the effectiveness of the performance management system was not necessarily in the appraisal, but rather in the ongoing feedback and support to employees when driving their performance. This can be done through the definition of effective criteria removing ambiguity, ensuring the alignment of all decision-makers in performance criteria and consistent practices (Mackenzie et al., 2020). With regard to the positive sentiments towards the effectiveness of the performance management process, the study found that the majority of participants felt that the process, even with changes, helped them to identify with their work. A study by Bothma and Roodt (2012) suggests that when organisations foster strong work identification among their employees, it results in stronger performance output. This ultimately has a positive impact on the organisation's performance in general. Therefore, the work identity of the employee and the work role that they perform are critical elements driven by the performance management system. As a result, the organisation successfully managed to provide mechanisms that could create a strong work identity, simply on account of organisational support being a proven predictor of work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020).

### **Practical implications**

Organisations should provide appropriate support mechanisms in the midst of disruptive change such as the COVID-19 pandemic looking at meaningful tools such as flexible work arrangements and well-being programmes to support employees in establishing strong work identities. This should be embedded through the use of internal tools that support and drive performance meaningfully through the support of the organisation.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher conducted all interviews through Microsoft Teams. Although there were significant data gathered, the research was not able to gauge possible non-verbal cues that may have added to the data set.

The research was conducted in South Africa with South African participants. The researcher would recommend extending this research beyond South African borders. The setting in which the research took place was within a global organisation with various locations across the globe.

In addition, the researcher would like to recommend future studies in a work environment that has provided little support to employees in terms of performance and individual well-being. This would provide a holistic view of all elements that could influence performance and work identity.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the organisation by forcing the organisation to adjust its people processes to



accommodate a revised work-from-home model. This meant the removal of performance ratings from the appraisal process. In addition, the pandemic did not necessarily influence the performance output of employees with regard to their deliverables. However, it did have an influence on how employees actually performed their work in their new remote setting while balancing work and family responsibilities. This was done by ensuring predictors of work identity, such as support for job resources and organisational support, were present in the organisation.

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### Authors' contributions

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to the restrictions imposed as a result of privacy and ethics and are available from the corresponding author, R.D., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

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