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**Social representations of the challenges linked to the Anthropocene: a qualitative study of managers<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this research study was to identify the perception that managers have of the main challenges facing their company, and their impact of on human resource and career management practices. The focus was on the place of the ecological transition among these challenges. The structural model of social representation was used as theoretical framework. Thirty managers of 20 organisations in the industry and cultural sectors based in France answered a semi-structured interview. The data was analysed through consensual thematic analysis. The results show that the COVID-19 pandemic and the digitalisation of society were firstly mentioned. The ecological transition is mentioned by just over half of managers. The discussion deals with the current mindset of managers regarding the Anthropocene crisis.

The current context of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) calls for companies to change their work organisation and production models (Guichard, 2022; ILO, 2020). The ecological transition<sup>i</sup>(ET) entails the creation of new activities and the need for new skills (Moncel & al., 2022). The French Agency for Ecological Transition estimates that 600,000 jobs will be created by 2030, while other estimates point to around 2 million jobs (Moncel et al., 2022). According to the International Labour Organisation, this ET would lead to the creation of 25 million new jobs worldwide (ILO, 2019). These changes must be

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anticipated in order to plan measures to be taken, as many jobs will also be transformed (Ghemouri Krief & Mériaux, 2022; Shifproject, 2022). The ET has a systemic dimension which re-examines production, consumption, transport and work organisation patterns. This requires greater awareness by many stakeholders, particularly production company managers (Moncel et al., 2022), but also employees, who must acquire new knowledge and skills through initial and continuing education.

At the same time, companies—as the major agents of these changes—are experiencing an identity crisis which is slowing down the implementation of this transition (Segrestin & Hatchuel, 2012; Coutrot, 2018). Indeed, over the last few years, the gap between the intentions and goals of companies and those of employees has widened. While before the 1970s, companies used to reflect technical ingenuity, the professional community and an arena for negotiating and skill-building, since the 1980s, they have entered an era of financialization which re-examines their original mission as producers of common goods, collective living spaces and constructors of professional identities (Hudson, 2012; Marazzi, 2010). Corporate capital revenues have been exceptional since the 1980s (Piketty, 2022), but this growth has often been at the expense of companies' capacity for innovation and social justice. This identity crisis is characterised by the fact that some companies are uncertain about which direction to take, caught between suffering employees on the one hand and perpetually dissatisfied shareholders on the other (Coutrot & Perez, 2022; Segrestin & Hatchuel, 2012). This situation has led to “chaos management” (De Gaulejac, 2011), characterised by instability, disarray and tensions, giving rise to a paradoxical situation for employees. Work remains central to individuals but also a source of dissatisfaction and malaise (Blustein, 2019). This phenomenon increased with the COVID-19 health crisis. Since the pandemic, employees are more likely to perceive an ethical conflict in their work and think that this work damages the environment (Beatriz et al., 2021). Implementing decent and sustainable working conditions within the context of the ET (Blustein et Flores, 2023; Di Fabio, 2017; Kjellstrom et al., 2019; United Nations, 2015) appears crucial for both companies and individuals. How do company managers perceive these changes and what human resource strategies do they envisage to support them? After discussing the role of managers' social representations in corporate change management, we will present the results of a qualitative study on the representations of 30 company managers from Human Resources (HR) and professional sectors.

### **The managers and the ecological transition in companies**

Company managers have a particularly important role to play in reducing the carbon footprint of the labour market, in redesigning their production models and developing new forms of work organisation to achieve decent work for all (ILO, 2020). Three areas of work organisation were identified as key for adapting companies to the climate crisis (Renouard et al., 2020). On the one hand, work organisation must give new meaning to the business plan, focusing it on social and ecological sustainability. This involves a change in culture and a re-examination of the business venture as only serving the interests of its partners. On the other hand, greater attention should be paid to the subjective value of the work, in particular to the sense of purpose and belonging fostered by the job (Blustein & Flores, 2023; Coutrot & Perez, 2022). Finally, individual isolation at work needs to be reduced, collective activities should be developed and relational quality should be enhanced. Ensuring that all professional activity becomes compatible with respect for planetary boundaries also involves the relocation of production activities. The role of training is crucial in this context, which involves “*the de-compartmentalisation of knowledge and practices, a systemic approach, cooperative, ethically-oriented action [...] learning the skills associated with the ecological and social transition is a challenge in the training of young people, but also for workers of all ages who are voluntarily or involuntarily going through a career change*” (Renouard et al., 2020, p. 282). These requirements must bring about new HR and training practices based on the analysis of real work situations (Frisquet et al., 2022). These observations emphasize that the transformation of company practices towards sustainable development must examine the perspectives and attitudes of company managers, but until now few studies have explored the subject. The ET requires that managers change their perspective on work organisation. According to Ghemouri Krief & Mériaux (2021), this must lead them to “*develop new expertise to continuously organise and facilitate the dialogue of parties involved in the company and to bring forth decisions that align with its broader interest*” (p. 135), as it's about integrating individual sustainability (for the workers themselves) and collective sustainability “*for the environment within the conditions of the company's performance*” (p. 138).

### **The role of managers' social representations (SR) for the development of new organisational strategies**

SRs enable us to grasp the evolution and points of resistance in the schools of thought of a category of strategic players for the future society. Social representations express a form of social thought, a type of common sense knowledge that influences attitudes and behaviours

(Moscovici, 2000). Each one is composed of highly diversified elements of social cognition (opinions, attitudes, stereotypes, values, concepts, and practices) (Jovchelovith, 2007). SRs have been defined as “*a form of knowledge socially developed and shared with practical designs and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group*” (Jodelet, 1989, p. 36). They constitute fundamental attributes of groups and contribute to defining their identity (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). They allow the transformation of the unfamiliar or "vague" into something familiar, through the process of anchoring.

*« They are formed through reciprocal influences, through implicit negotiations, in the course of conversations in which people are oriented towards particular symbolic models, images and shared values. In doing so, they acquire a common repertoire of interpretations and explanations, rules and procedures which can apply to everyday life, just as linguistic expressions are accessible to everyone »* (Moscovici, 2000, p.151).

Once the social object is associated with familiar elements, individuals transform it to make sense of it for themselves through the process of objectification. The way individuals perceive themselves, perceive others, and their respective positions in a social field thus influences how they represent certain social objects (Deschamps & Moliner, 2008). From the perspective of the structural approach (Abric, 2001), social representations are also composed of certain “non-negotiable” elements associated with the specific meaning of an object, belonging to the central kernel. Other “peripheral” elements constitute differentiations based on groups or indicate potential evolutions. Social representations can transform under the influence of events that are particularly involving for the group (Abric, 2001). These events, by modifying the environment (especially when they occur in an irreversible manner) in which the group operates, lead to an adaptation of old practices or the emergence of new ways of doing things (Abric, 2001). Individuals construct a certain world view that enables them to communicate, assert themselves, or develop certain actions (Moscovici, 2000). In an organizational setting, social representations allow us to grasp corporate cultures, identity dynamics, and shared knowledge about work. The SRs of senior managers are fuelled by information, scientific knowledge, common sense and advice provided by consultants (Ma et al., 2020). Since the 2010s, the ET has been associated with a set of incentives to modify management and production practices within the framework of Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility (CSER). Thus, the ET and its set of soft laws, including CSER, can be seen as an irreversible event for managers, even if explicit constraints on companies are still limited. To explore the SRs of business managers regarding the current major societal changes involving the ET, often referred to by the term Anthropocene, exploratory qualitative research

was undertaken. The main objective was to uncover how these changes were concretely anticipated and translated into actions in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM) by managers. We expected that the question of the ET and the evolving relationship with work would be events systematically taken into account by managers to define HRM strategies.

## **Method**

For this data collection, Ethical approval has been obtained from our University Ethics Office. All participants have been given requested information related to consent. Un formulaire d'information et de consentement présentant la recherche, les modalités de recueil, de traitement et d'accès aux données a été soumis aux participants, selon les règles établies par l'Union européenne (RGPD, règlement général de protection des données<sup>2</sup>). Par ailleurs, ce projet a fait l'objet d'une déclaration auprès de la déléguée à la protection des données au Cnam. Les participants étaient notamment informés de l'enregistrement des entretiens, de la retranscription anonyme de ces derniers. The data can be accessed by contacting the first author.

## **Participants**

Thirty managers working in France, across 20 local, national or international organisations, were interviewed. Twelve of these organisations are from the industrial sector (packaging, textile, mechanical construction, luxury, cosmetics, aerospace), and eight are in the cultural sector (press, performing arts, sports, cinema). Four are non-profit organizations, and two are public institutions. Most are medium-sized organisations (Table 1). The sectors were chosen based on their strategic importance in France (Shifproject, 2022). Participants were recruited through OPCOs, specialised organisations responsible for assisting companies in managing skills (OPCO: Skills Operators, acronym in French).

## **Insert Table 1**

The participants held various roles, including General Management (GM), Human Resources Management (HRM) or Assistant Direction (ADHR), as well as positions responsible for skills development and training in the two professional sectors (SD) (Table 2). The group comprised 19 women and 11 men.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnil.fr/fr/reglement-europeen-protection-donnees>

## **Insert Table 2**

### **Measures**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2022. The interviews took place either in person or remotely, depending on participants' availability, and were recorded. The interviews were conducted in a semi-directive mode (Cartier, 2011). The interviewer endeavored to:

- follow and support the interviewee's reflexions,
- encourage to deepen their thinking,
- encourage the interview to progress,
- identify the meaning of the situation for the person.

More over, interviewers endeavored to help interviewees develop their thinking by using both exploratory interventions (reminders, refocusing, requests for information and clarification) and expressive interventions (echo, reflection, reformulation).

The interviews followed an interview guide with two major themes, introduced by an open-ended question. The first theme focused on the major challenges that the sector and the company face. This theme was introduced with the question: *What are the major challenges that your sector of activity and your company will face in the coming years?*

The second theme explored the impact of these major challenges on HRM practices and employees' careers. This theme was introduced with the question: *What are the consequences of these challenges on employees and their careers?*

### **Procedure**

The interviews were fully transcribed and subjected to a consensual thematic content analysis (Hill et al., 2005). This inductive analysis method involves several steps. In the first step, researchers worked in pairs and read two or three interviews with the aim of identifying an initial set of themes and sub-themes. In the second step, the results were compared and

discussed to reach a consensus that validated a shared understanding, leading to a common analysis chart. Six researchers were involved in defining the content analysis chart, categories, and sub-categories. In the third step, this chart was systematically applied to each interview. The accuracy of the analysis was ensured by engaging two coders for each interview. An analysis chart consisting of 6 themes was produced. The three themes related to the first question are as follows:

- The impact of COVID and the health crisis (six sub-themes)
- Digital-related changes (three sub-themes)
- Changes linked to external factors (three sub-themes)

Regarding the second question, the three themes identified are:

- Training (seven sub-themes)
- Forward Planning of Employment and Skills (GPEC, acronym in French) (two sub-themes)
- Recruitment (three sub-themes)

These three themes were broken down into a chart of 12 sub-themes.

### **Results**

The results present the analysis relating to these six themes.

#### **The major challenges faced by companies**

The analysis chart and respondent demographics are presented in Table 3 below.

#### **Insert Table 3**

The first challenge mentioned refers to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the interviews taking place nearly two years after the end of the pandemic, all managers unanimously highlighted its lasting impact.

#### ***The multiple lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic***

The 30 interviewed managers noted the strong impact of the health crisis on work organization. This crisis contributed to the acceleration of remote working implementation, as expressed by an industry HRD: “*With COVID, things sped up, and now almost all organisations have remote working agreements*” (P4, industrie, métallurgie); ou un



responsable de l'Opco de la Culture *“Avec la crise sanitaire, on n'a pas mesuré l'impact du télétravail dans nos travaux mais on imagine qu'il y a des compétences spécifiques sur le volet managérial et spécifiques pour ceux qui sont amenés à télétravailler”* (P26).

This led to new challenges in personnel management. The development of remote working created a significant disruption in employees' work rhythms for 19 managers, leading to the emergence of more autonomous entities, as a project leader dans le spectacle vivant expressed: *“I think with these new work structures, we'll be much more focused on collaboration and project-based work than we were before”* (P29, Culture). Nineteen managers mentioned the new-found difficulty in getting employees to work in teams due to a lack of communication: *“On se rend compte de plus en plus qu'on est dans l'individualisation...pendant cette période-là le salarié regarde son confort personnel et il y a moins de hauteur de vue qu'on doit avoir pour avoir cette cohésion. C'est très important pour nous de maintenir une culture et elle s'acquiert beaucoup au bureau lors des moments de convivialité, d'échange informels avant ou après une réunion, l'émotion qu'on fait passer au cours d'une réunion... c'est plus compliqué en visio ou à distance”* (P23, Culture, Sport). Une difficulté clairement exprimée par un responsable RH dans l'industrie *“Alors bien sûr on doit aussi travailler ensemble ça sera de plus en plus compliqué parce qu'on va travailler de plus en plus à distance [...] on va travailler ensemble mais on travaille seul. Donc il faut voilà il y a quand même de l'organisation à mettre et c'est, ça sera pas évident je pense, faudra que le collectif reste prioritaire par rapport à l'individuel, mais ça c'est pas évident”* (P10, Industrie, Plasturgie). This situation is seen as shared and concerning par un responsable de la branche: *“We know there are weak signals (regarding teamwork), we identify that it's a potential risk factor, at least a factor of social and organisational tension within companies”* (P12, Industry). Fifteen managers emphasized that the pandemic contributed to the rise of individualism and a loss of meaning at work, with employees becoming less engaged in their work: *“It's a realization of the importance of things and the relativity of things. Work is important, but what's around it is equally important; we should also focus on the essential values of family”* (P15, Industrie Nucléaire). Cet équilibre peut être positif s'il est géré par les entreprises *“Grâce au télétravail il y eu de plus en plus des parents qui peuvent ramener leurs enfants à l'école et ça, ça change une vie, ça donne un confort de vie. Les gens sont beaucoup plus disposés une fois ils sont au travail. Les entreprises doivent gérer ça parce qu'il y a des attentes différentes d'un collaborateur à un autre”* (P27, Culture). Thirteen managers highlighted that the pandemic increased work constraints due to decreased raw materials,

budget restrictions, and project development obstacles. Thirteen managers also pointed out that the pandemic had consequences on workforce recruitment: *“For us, you should know that for 18 months we were frozen by COVID, we froze our recruitment”* (P1, Industry Aéronautique).

### ***Changes related to digitalisation***

Twenty-seven respondents indicated that they had observed the development of new professional practices, involving the use of platforms, social networks, television channels and digital automation at various levels within the company. These changes take various forms.

Twenty-five managers emphasised that these developments led to increased competition due to new products for sale, especially online. However, they also serve as a means to enhance customer relationships, as explained by a HRM: *“So we are always developing our business, international, domestic, eSports, cryptocurrency revenues... We are always keeping an eye on current events and on other European leagues”* (P22, Culture, Sport).

Fourteen managers highlighted that these tools significantly changed certain professional tasks. A ADHR of a Parisian theatre explained: *“We have employees who are responsible for raising and lowering battens where we hang scenery, using a system of ropes and weights to counterbalance the weight of the load [...] and this job will disappear [...] because we will have an automated fly system managed by computers [...] there’s a significant transformation of skills”* (P20, Culture, Spectacle vivant). It was also mentioned that these tools gave rise to new professions: *“There will be new professions [...] around digital technology, communication, marketing and also live production”* (P21, Culture, Sport); ou *“des métiers liés à l’éducation et là, plus particulièrement des formateurs et des animateurs”* (P19, Culture, gestion documentaire). Mais pour un responsable de l’Opco de l’industrie, *“On voit en ce moment, beaucoup de tension sur des métiers ... des savoir-faire traditionnels, que ce soit dans la métallurgie, le travail du métal dans la mécanique industrielle où les procédés de production ont évolué mais le savoir-faire reste souvent assez proche. [...] Au niveau du cœur de production, il y a des évolutions, on se rend compte que de manière générale, il y a toujours des exceptions, de manière générale, les métiers cœur de la production industrielle, opérateurs, techniciens, vont malgré tout rester assez stable sur leur cœur historique même si je le répète... des outils, des procédés nouveaux peuvent apparaître”* (P12, Industrie)

The third sub-theme addressed by all interviewees related to the need to face challenges linked to external factors.

### *Changes arising from external factors*

Three

external factors significantly changed the operations of the organisations under study.

Twenty-eight managers mentioned economic changes, involving various events that impact businesses (such as the Paris Olympics): *“With the Olympics, we’ll need to recruit 4,000 people, so we’ll have to work on transferable skills”* (P28, Culture). The increase in the cost of materials and inflation was also discussed.

Seventeen managers highlighted the impact of the ecological crisis. One manager explained (P26, Culture, Edition), *“Another emerging topic for us is the energy transition, but it’s slow to start. Ten years ago, we conducted a carbon assessment of the company [...]. It’s a topic that’s truly part of our DNA, but now we want to move to a new stage... we want to see how each department in the company embraces the ecological question.”* This situation can also be seen as an opportunity to develop new markets: *“It’s becoming an opportunity for companies to align with the ecological transition as an economic opportunity.”* (P12, Industry); ou d’adapter les produits : *“ce qu’on fait c’est qu’on on augmente les fils biosourcés, c’est ce que je vous ai dit tout à l’heure donc des fils un peu plus écologiques, est ce que ça va prendre ? Oui ça prend je pense parce que quand vous regardez dans les magasins il y a de plus en plus quand même”*. (P6, Industrie, textile); *“Après en ce qui concerne les nouveaux moteurs écologiques etc. bon déjà il faut le temps de les fabriquer, après il y aura un temps de maintenance derrière”* (P1, Industrie, maintenance aéronautique); *“quand un bureau d’étude d’ingénieurs conçoit un produit, ils doivent dans la conception de leur produit, penser à qu’est-ce que le produit va devenir une fois il ne sera plus utilisé, comment on peut le recycler, et quelle empreinte carbone on va laisser avec ce produit en fin de vie”* (P13, Industrie).

Fourteen managers mentioned political changes, particularly the conflict in Ukraine: *“We’re in a very special situation with the war in Ukraine, where we’re facing supply issues”* (P7, Industrie, Métallurgie). These political issues have various impacts on supplies, and the costs of products are seen as constraints experienced by managers who must respond to these events. *“Il y a beaucoup de craintes qui se manifestent autour des marchés de l’énergie [...] Il y a un énorme sujet qui est très prégnant chez nous qui est celui de la transition énergétique...”*

*qui est vraiment le sujet d'actualité qui percute tant des grandes branches comme les industries électriques et gazières, pétrolières qui sont au premier rang ... mais aussi un tas de branches qui sont constituées d'entreprises qui fabriquent des produits dont les clients sont ces mêmes entreprises industrielles” (P12, Industrie).*

The second part of the results focuses on the discourse analysis in response to the second theme about the effects of these challenges on Human Resource Management.

### **Human Resource Management practices to adapt to these changes**

The content analysis chart and respondent demographics are presented in Table 4 below.

#### **Insert Table 4**

How do managers perceive the human resource management of their company in light of these developments? Three strategies are discussed.

#### ***Actions related to company training***

Twenty-five interviewed managers emphasized the importance of professional training, which is seen as a major priority to allow the company to adapt.

The objectives pursued through training are diverse. Twenty-one managers believe that training should facilitate group work to counter the isolation generated by the COVID-19 period. Par exemple, cette manager de l'industrie du luxe *“De manière générale quant à la compétence technologique ou technique, on peut toujours l'acquérir, enfin moins nous dans nos métiers d'artisanat d'art, mais de manière générale on peut trouver des formations qui correspondent. Par contre, l'agilité, la transformation, la capacité à s'investir durablement, penser collectif, voilà tout ça, ce sont des choses qu'on enseigne moins et du coup qui sont essentielles pour nous, pour notre réussite” (P9, industrie, luxe).* Similarly, twenty-one managers believe that training should raise awareness about corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues, particularly regarding psychosocial risks, quality of work life, gender equality and anti-discrimination efforts: *“Après là où il va falloir qu'ils prennent un peu ... et ça a forcément un impact déjà c'est sûr. L'environnement parce que les jeunes générations regardent ça aussi énormément maintenant donc tout ce qui est Responsabilité Sociétale des Entreprises, c'est sociétal et environnemental. Nous personnellement, on est dans le plastique, le plastique ça pollue. Finalement on le voit dans les pubs, on le voit. Voilà il y a un fond de vérité. Après on sait qu'on travaille beaucoup sur les plastiques recyclés...” (P2, Industrie, Plasturgie)..* Twenty-one managers view training as a means to speed up employees'

adaptation to their job roles after recruitment. For 18 managers, it's essential that training be practical rather than theoretical and be conducted through work simulations.

Fifteen managers explained that training served to transmit the company's culture to the employees, comme cette entreprise de l'édition *“C'est-à-dire qu'il y a dix ans on avait fait un bilan carbone de l'entreprise, [...]c'est un sujet qui est vraiment porté dans notre raison d'être et notre ADN mais aujourd'hui on souhaite passer une étape nouvelle pour voir comment chaque service au niveau de l'entreprise, s'approprie la question de la transition écologique. Donc là, avec la responsable formation, on est en train [...] d'élaborer un programme ambitieux”* (P17, Culture, Edition). Who is the target audience for these training programmes? For 15 managers, these programmes are primarily aimed at executives and supervisors, particularly in middle-management, as explained by a manager. En effet, un des problèmes auquel la formation doit répondre est *“Comment travailler quand on est en télétravail. [...] Notamment en management, c'est la question de comment on anime une équipe en télétravail. Il y a des managers qui l'ont fait, il y en a d'autres pour qui c'était plus compliqué, donc il y a une harmonisation des pratiques à faire, une montée en compétences* (P16, Culture, gestion documentaire). Certains vont: *“We're implementing a management cycle for managers that takes place over a year, with 1-2 days every two months focused on a specific theme or skill we want to develop among managers.”* (P23, Culture, Sport). The training programmes are also directed at high-potential employees: *“I'm in favour of helping people develop, but they also need to put in the effort to develop. The company shouldn't always be responsible for their development”* (P8, Industrie, Nucléaire). Thirteen managers believe that the training programmes should be cost-effective while also being personalised.

### ***Challenges with Forward Planning of Employment and Skills***

The second sub-theme, discussed by 18 managers, addresses skills management for the future. Among these, 16 managers feel the need to manage the issue of changing attitudes, expectations, and motivations of employees towards work. Par exemple, une responsable de salle de spectacle explique le problème de carrière des techniciens de plateau : *“pour essayer d'avoir un parcours professionnel qui inclut à un moment donné des missions supplémentaires de management et de supervision d'équipe sur un niveau de poste... Comme on a beaucoup de métiers, on a beaucoup de managers intermédiaires avec 3-4 personnes dans leurs services. Souvent c'est des gens qui étaient experts métiers sans forcément avoir des compétences professionnelles en termes de gestion d'équipe. Donc on a beaucoup insisté à les former à la gestion d'équipe”* (P30,Culture, spectacle vivant); ou dans l'industrie *“On*

*essaie du moins et d'accompagner beaucoup les managers dans leur métier de manager. Tout simplement parce qu'avant on avait des managers ... alors je peux prendre le management intermédiaire sur les chefs d'équipe par exemple, vu qu'ils avaient avant tout les compétences techniques, mais qui avait peut-être pas cette dimension de management qui fait qu'il a fallu qu'ils apprennent un petit peu avec le télétravail un nouveau métier* (P2, Industrie, plasturgie).

Some managers complained that today's employees don't have the same expectations as in the past and that work is no longer the central element of their lives. *“There’s less commitment. Not 100%, but I’d say at least 80% of people prioritise themselves and their well-being, their rights, before considering their duties. [...] “Yes, in the end, I think I no longer want to work at the weekend because I got used to spending weekends at home for a year...”* (P29, Culture, Spectacle vivant).

A certain imbalance between personal and professional life in favour of personal life is noted: *“For the young executives who are recruited, the people we recruit, well, we won’t say work is secondary, but it’s not the core... it’s not the heart of their life, that’s outside of work”* (P14, Industry, Plasturgie).

Un autre responsable constate : *“La frontière de ce qu'on appelle la conciliation entre la vie professionnelle et la vie personnelle, va être encore plus compliquée. [...] Il y a 30 ans il fallait absolument pas décrocher etc., fallait trouver une entreprise etc., et 30 ans après on est à tout l'inverse quoi, l'entreprise doit faire en fonction d'eux... c'est plus la même chose quoi”* (P6, Industrie, Luxe).

Finally, 13 managers discussed the challenge of anticipating replacements, retirement departures, and absenteeism: *“That is to say, today, for the past two years, there have been a lot of requests, and what blocks us is that we are not able to meet the demand because we don't have the people”* (P7, Industry, Métallurgie).

### ***Recruitment focused on job attractiveness in a scarcity context***

Twenty-one managers emphasised that good working conditions can be a lever to facilitate recruitment. *“People are becoming more demanding. When I recruit supervisors, they ask, ‘What are the hours? Do you have paid time off?’ The world has changed; we didn't have these kinds of questions before.”* (P10, Industry, Plasturgie).

Twenty managers mentioned the labour shortage in their sector. This shortage affects certain professions and roles such as operators, support functions and specialised technicians.

Respondents from the industrial sector mentioned the low attractiveness of the sector: *“Will future generations accept to work in factories? Even though we communicate about the factory, there are regular company tours to show that the company is not as it used to be...”*

(P6, Industry Textile). They mentioned the problem of geographical distance from production sites to metropolitan areas: *“Alors pas forcément parce qu'en fait de par notre localisation on n'a pas forcément ce genre de compétences dans [la région] malheureusement ça n'attire pas donc du coup ce qui est fait, c'est que nous on recrute des personnes qui ont avant tout un savoir-être.[...] alors oui qui ont une appétence quand même pour le domaine industriel mais pas forcément qui ont une expérience point pour point sur ce qu'on fait, pas du tout puisque nous on prend le temps de former on a des programmes qui vont parfois jusqu'à 6 mois”* (P15, Industrie, aéronautique).

The cultural sector struggles with the specificity of the skills and versatility required: *“We realise that in our professions, there's an increasing need for versatility, and in the end, the foundation that remains when changing jobs is these famous transferable skills that allow us to develop and transition from one job to another.”* (P26, Culture).

## **Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic, digital transition, climate and energy crises and significant events like the 2024 Paris Olympics are leading companies to adapt their human resource management practices. The results show that the COVID-19 pandemic, generally considered the first major crisis of the Anthropocene<sup>[4]</sup>, appears as the event that has caused the greatest disruptions in managers' SRs, particularly regarding their perception of work execution. The pace of work has changed and become more fragmented, leading to greater isolation among employees. The consequences of this pandemic are associated with a change in employees' relationship with work (Coutrot & Perez, 2022). Moreover, the digitalisation movement in society is seen within companies as an opportunity for new products and markets, but also as increased competition and the possibility of alternative production methods. The COVID pandemic and digitalisation of society have emerged as major events that have altered managers' perceptions of several aspects of the company (Abric, 2001; Moscovici, 2000). Several external factors are also mentioned. Economic and financial factors are perceived as more important than those related to the ET. Regarding the challenges mentioned, managers from both sectors, industry and culture, have equivalent positions. However, a difference arises concerning the ET (table 3). It is mentioned by 17 respondents, of whom 12 are managers from industry, and they approach this theme by associating it with questions of energy scarcity and development opportunities. In the cultural sector, on the other hand, this issue is perceived as more secondary, with only 5 managers mentioning it. Overall, the statements primarily refer to the regulations induced by this crisis, which appear primarily as

a new constraint to manage, rather than a collective and profound awareness that might be expected (Renouard et al., 2020). Indeed, the ET will have a significant impact on jobs and work, requiring the development of new skills (Martin-Pascual, 2023; Moncel, et al., 2022).

Regarding emerging approaches to solving these societal challenges in the field of HRM, managers overwhelmingly mention the path of employee training. Companies are calling for training aimed at developing non-technical skills, particularly teamwork. Non-technical skills, indeed, appear central to employees' adaptation to societal changes, as companies need employees with multiple non-technical skills (autonomy, adaptability, creativity, teamwork, etc.) (Moncel et al., 2022). These elements can help develop a systemic approach to work organization, reconsidering complementarity, and giving meaning to work (Renouard et al., 2020). More specific training for post-recruitment job adaptation is also mentioned. Raising awareness about themes related to CSR has also emerged as an important theme. On this point, no interviewee mentioned that the company was engaged in an assessment of its CSR practices. These training programmes are primarily intended for supervisors and middle management, and not for workers and technicians, who were not mentioned. The limitation of training to executives is a recurring problem for the most vulnerable individuals who receive less training than others (Fournier, 2006). This attitude by managers poses a risk that the least qualified employees in the company may not be able to adapt to necessary restructuring, and become marginalised. Workers and employees should be supported by on-the-job training activities, allowing for the identification and enhancement of their skills and the development of new ones to support their transferability to new work situations. Finally, companies have highlighted that training should be personalised. Once again, personalisation is questioned (Renouard et al., 2020) in the current context, as it is the ability to work collectively that needs to be emphasised. The comparison between the two sectors (Table 4) highlights differences in terms of proposed training courses and recruitment questions. In the industrial sector, 15 managers offer post-recruitment job adaptation training, compared to four in the cultural sector. Recruitment seems to cause more significant challenges in the industrial sector (greater labour shortages, problems retaining employees and importance of working conditions) than in the cultural sector, which primarily seeks versatile employees.

This table shows that the companies questioned use training as a tool for partial adaptation to context changes. However, training is not seen as a powerful lever for changing the representations, attitudes and behaviour of the employees who may engage in them, as part of a new approach to the company, its mission and objectives. The training programmes are not



really designed as having to support the need for new skills and new professions linked to the major challenges of society, in particular the ET.

In terms of recruitment, and in line with a 2020 survey conducted in France on 15,000 companies where only 10% were considering recruiting individuals in the ET sector (Moncel et al., 2022), it can be noted that the surveyed managers did not mention any specific intentions regarding the recruitment of individuals trained in ecology.

Finally, regarding forward planning of employment and skills, 16 managers mentioned the need to think about ways to consider what they often see as a drop in employee motivation, but instead reflects a loss of meaning in work (Coutrot & Perez, 2022). No insights on a concrete solution to this problem is expressed by the managers. The anticipation of labour needs is initially associated with retirement and replacement issues, labour shortages and flexibility requirements. The surveyed managers appeared to remain focused on a short-term management of skills and job evolution (Segrestin & Hatchuel, 2012). No instances were mentioned of companies engaging in collective reflection on these challenges. In general, managers do not seem to have fully grasped the significant structural and functional changes prompted by the ET. They appear to be reacting rather than working pro-actively to anticipate and redirect the company's strategy to address these changes. The current social representations of managers do not reveal a broad collective awareness leading to observable changes in practices within this social group. Thus, in terms of representations, it appears that the ET is in an anchoring phase (Moscovici, 2000) within the industrial sector. Indeed, this crisis is beginning to be discussed in the industrial world, but in the cultural sector, the topic remains marginal.

### **Limitations and futures directions**

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, data collection was limited to two professional sectors. It would be useful to carry out further studies on the SRs of managers in other sectors which are particularly concerned by the ET (for example the transport sector). This would then lead to more targeted measures to support organisational change. Another limitation is linked to the fact that only one or two people were interviewed in each company. It would be interesting to interview more managers in each company in order to develop case studies specific to the company, which would provide a more complete picture of each company's specific features, and therefore more specific intervention actions for occupational and organisational psychologists.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to explore the SRs of managers in relation to the challenges faced by their company and their consequences on HRM practices. The managers of the companies in our sample report facing significant changes (such as the development of remote work and digital technologies, supply chain issues and the ecological transition) that pose challenges related to recruitment, workforce adaptation, replacement and skills. The ET does not currently appear to be particularly central. Work psychologists and career counsellors have an important role to play in guiding the transformation of HR representations and practices towards a sustainable and equitable society. They can create conditions for necessary dialogue between managers and employees. For instance, they can facilitate discussion spaces for managers and employees to engage in deep reflections on the company's role in society, the identification of social and environmental impacts of technical solutions. (Renouard et al., 2020). Such actions are likely to restore meaning to individuals' actions and shift mindsets (Coutrot & Perez, 2022; Segrestin & Hatchuel, 2012). As facilitators of organisational change, they can contribute to shifting managers' perceptions in order to build a sustainable workplace (Di Fabio, 2017). They can inform managers about the existence of alternative organisational approaches. For instance, they can aid in fostering a collaborative mindset by connecting their company with others. Thus, they can serve as connectors to promote the network of 17,000 companies and 3,500 associations from 160 countries in the United Nations Global Compact. This Global Compact calls upon organisations worldwide to align their practices and strategies with 10 principles derived from key United Nations documentation, in the areas of human rights, labour rights, environment and anti-corruption. The ambition of this global pact is to enhance the global impact of businesses by adhering to these principles and achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) through responsible businesses and ecosystems that drive change. In France, the "Mouvement Impact France" comprises leaders and entrepreneurs who place ecological and social impact at the heart of their companies, promoting a "peace economy." Psychologists and career counsellors can support managers in shifting their mindset to actively engage in a more just and sustainable post-industrial society.

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<sup>i</sup> This term was borrowed from Moncel et al. (2022).