

THEMED ESSAYS

“Prepared to Face the Unexpected”: Dynamic Enterprises in Italy as a Model of Resilience

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Abstract

Businesses that demonstrate organizational flexibility, characterized by dynamic problem-solving skills, in-house production processes, and a robust human capital, appear to be successful and resilient in times of crisis. Drawing on my fieldwork in medium-sized manufacturing companies in Emilia, Northern Italy, from June to November 2021, I investigate ideas and characteristics that shed light on good practices, key ingredients of the success of such companies, and possible future models of resilience. I employ participant observation and provide evidence taken from conversations or episodes observed, especially in one of the companies. Although greater structuring is often sought and considered the resolution of many existing problems, *non-structuring* is, at the same time, convenient in many circumstances. People are essential components in this dynamic organizational model, and their commitment in the organization goes far beyond contractual obligations. Their motivation stems from personal satisfaction as well as from a sense of responsibility and strong personal commitment.

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Introduction: "Reality Exceeds Imagination"

"Reality exceeds imagination. It is better to be prepared to face the unexpected than to try to foresee it." This is what Riccardo, the CEO of a group of manufacturing companies, taught me in one of our conversations. Solutions are often not readily available, but must be found on the spot, with a lot of flexibility and with the confidence that, in some way, problems can always be solved. This is a key aspect of what I consider to be an alternative model to rational economic standards of organization; a model through which certain companies might prove more resilient to different types of crises.

This essay, based on observations in the manufacturing sector, presents the argument that businesses which tend to be flexible in their organization and are characterized by dynamic skills in problem-solving are more successful and resilient than others in times of crisis. The so-called "crisis" appears to have become the new normal: with globalization and the interconnectedness of economic activity, circumstances can change rapidly, exposing vulnerabilities in organizations that would otherwise seem to be quite distant (Kirby 2010).

It has already been underlined that, in an environment marked by growing unpredictability and rapid transformation, businesses must be agile in adapting to swiftly shifting markets (Harvey 1990; Sennett 1998, 2007; Castells 2000; Krause-Jensen 2010). Organizational flexibility has been considered a universal yet somewhat vague concept. Flexible modes of production have often been criticized because they frequently entail increased job insecurity for workers and partially outsourced production processes. The flexibility that I observed is of a different kind, characterized by inherent qualities rather than appearing to be a strategically imposed feature. As a result, companies embodying such a flexibility appear more resilient and better suited for rapidly shifting markets.

In this essay, I draw on my fieldwork in Emilia, a region in the north of Italy, from June to November 2021. An association of businesses put together an interdisciplinary team, with the idea of researching the key ingredients of the success of certain Italian companies; that is, what they do well and why. My fieldwork was conducted in companies with different types of manufacturing production (electric generators, automotive motorcycle fuel caps, lights, and locks) and distinct histories. While my participant observation took place in different companies, I

focused particularly on one of them (a manufacturing company here called Company X) from which most of the ethnographic examples in this essay are drawn. Founded in 1994, Company X produces electric generators of small dimensions and lighting towers and has an annual turnover of approximately 60 million euros and 110 employees. In the companies, I was able to observe the work and take part in daily activities such as meetings with people inside and outside the company. I was able to speak both with the managers of the company and with the employees in production, as well as observe the interactions and activities.

The purpose of this essay is to describe some key aspects that characterize these companies. These aspects represent some of the main ingredients of the success of the companies. The purpose, however, is not to provide regulatory behavioral schemes by which a company can somehow achieve the same kind of success. The key ingredients are, in fact, closely linked to the context, the people involved, and the history of the company. Yet, they will nonetheless provide significant insights into successful practices. For each ingredient presented, I will provide examples taken from conversations or episodes that I observed and experienced in the companies.

The interest of this essay lies at the intersection of anthropology and business. I investigate ideas and characteristics that shed light on good practices and possible future models of resilience. The observations contribute to the field of organizational change and shed light on organizational practices, much like other anthropologists have done (Papa 1999; Caulkins and Jordan 2012; Garsten and Nyqvist 2013; Denny and Sunderland 2016; Moeran 2021), thereby contributing to the development of new entrepreneurial practices.

The first section of the essay introduces dynamic problem-solving skills. Then, I describe the structure of Company X and its flexible organization. I continue by discussing outsourcing, the internalization of processes, and the acquisition of new businesses. This is presented hand in hand with the actual problems of missing materials and the increase of prices that the company is facing. Sustainable practices to resist such crises are underlined. To conclude, I emphasize the employees' relationship and high personal involvement with the company and their contribution to its success.

Moving Within the Company

In my pursuit to uncover some of the characteristics of a typical medium-sized Italian company and gain insights into their so-called "secrets," I embarked on an immersive research journey. This endeavor involved spending several months within a group of companies, primarily located in the vicinity of Modena and Piacenza. I conducted participant observation within these companies, and I was secured access thanks to

the CEO of the corporate group. This access was granted upon the request of the secretary of the business association, which had commissioned the research. It was believed that the CEO's reputed open-mindedness would provide me with the extended and thorough access necessary for my ethnographic study. In Italy, it is not common for companies to work with ethnographers, and academics typically make brief visits to their offices, often for purposes like conducting a two-hour interview. Building trust and learning as much as possible about the company and its business were essential for my research. I needed to spend as much time as possible with different employees, understand the processes and relationships, and move freely within the different spaces.

In general, I was deeply immersed in the company's daily operations during working hours, and I typically had lunch at the on-site canteen. Occasionally, I even joined the employees for dinners and leisure activities in the evenings. At Company X, I occasionally went swimming at the nearby pool during lunch breaks with some of the employees. At Company Y, I engaged in post-work volleyball games with members of the product development and financial departments of the company. The leisure time spent together helped me strengthen my relationships with various people, get to know them better, and become more integrated within the company.

I moved from the office to the production site, actively participating in departmental meetings and shadowing various people throughout their workdays, ranging from senior directors to frontline workers. My goal was to gain insights into their distinct procedures, challenges, and perspectives. In the case of Company Y, I immersed myself in some manual tasks to engage with the workers and experience the department's atmosphere firsthand. At Company X, I occasionally undertook minor tasks like welcoming clients or assisting with organizational assignments. I recorded my observations, processes, responses to my inquiries, and notable remarks made by the people that I encountered on my notepad. Additionally, I captured photographs documenting the company's premises, meetings, and ongoing activities.

I was completely transparent with everyone about my academic research at the university, providing thorough explanations of anthropology and its methodologies, particularly to those who were my closest informants. By familiarizing themselves with my research approach, they were able to assist me further, granting me more access and sharing their expertise about their work. Some people, less involved in my research, such as the administrative secretaries, thought that I was sent by the CEO in order to ameliorate the communication among some of the employees. They even observed tangible, positive outcomes of my presence and work, as relayed to me by an informant who had become a close friend during my time in the field. Moreover, during the fieldwork, I shared some of my written work and provided previews of my

forthcoming data analyses to both the CEO and some of my closest informants.

“Somehow We Fix It!” Dynamic Problem-Solving Skills

Dynamic skills are the basis of a company’s ability to innovate its offer and implement strategic and organizational changes. These are required to anticipate or respond effectively to changes in the competitive environment. Katia, the marketing manager of Company X, explains to me one day:

The Italian secret lies in the fact that, somehow, we come out of it, we are not pigeonholed. If you have never done something, you do it on-site anyway, correct it, find innovative solutions even if you do not follow a specific process [...] And, in this act of finding solutions, Riccardo [the group’s CEO] is really good. Somehow, we come out of it.

Katia also explains: “We are a small number of people for each type of activity, so you are always in a hurry, and you immediately learn to get by.” It is, in this way, not uncommon that alternative solutions are found.

An indicative example of these dynamic problem-solving skills takes place among some of the workers. One day, I observe the preparation of some stickers and posters for a fair that the company will participate in. Two workers use a machine that would normally be used for another function – to glue a large sticker – and they explain to me that there could be a small alignment problem of the letters that might move or be badly cut. I ask with surprise: “And what do you do in that case?!” The answer is short: “Somehow we fix it!” Fortunately, in the end, the problem does not arise, but the confidence with which the two workers had replied indicate the general attitude and adaptation.

At Company X, problems are often discussed together in front of machines set up for assembly or outside in the yard for testing. The employees are always looking for suggestions and practical solutions; for example, “let’s try to run the fan at 50,” or “let’s position the machine like this!” Pietro, from the technical office of Company X, disconsolately exclaims while checking the data of a machine tests that do not coincide: “Here, we are in the emergency room of a hospital, but a serious one!” In the end, in this case, it is decided to do the tests in a controlled environment, and it turns out that a supplier can lend his old soundproof room for the occasion. We move there with the technicians, but the room was built in the 1960s and does not seem to comply with the regulations. So, Michele, the manager, repeatedly asks the technicians to take breaks and leave the room, so that the machine can cool down, and there will be no danger. The results, however, are very good, and, even in this case, with an alternative solution and with the help of an external contact, the

employees are able to solve a problem that they have been struggling with for days.

At other times, I listen to online meetings between the technical department and some particularly demanding customers. The latter require machines that can withstand particular temperatures or weather events, such as snow or sandstorms, and I observe a technician scribbling a sketch of a modified machine on a piece of paper. He shows it to his colleagues who give their opinion, and he immediately presents his idea to the customer in front of the camera. Often, ideas are new and difficult to implement, but somehow solutions are found. As someone remarks: "We have to do this, and somehow we do it."

Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam (2021) define improvisation as "generative." In fact, for them, copying an existing model is not a creative process and can only replicate the existing. In order to generate the new, as we have seen in my examples, you should be allowed not to follow fixed rules. In his book *The Business of Creativity: Toward an Anthropology of Worth*, Brian Moeran (2014) asks in the introduction: "How can an industry, which relies of formal organization, rules and routines, be creative?" (2014: 13). His answer is: "Creativity implies individual spontaneity that can only emerge when routines are *not* followed, when rules are broken" (2014: 13).

Sometimes, too much organization is seen as negative because it does not allow creativity and flexibility. Paolo, one of the managers of the production department of Company X, emphasizes "improvisation" and "trying to find solutions on the spot" as two of the fundamental characteristics for the success of the company. At my insistence in knowing his opinion about another company, he tells me: "They are too organized in plastering things up!" And he adds: "They make a plan and the situation must remain plastered for 30 days. They have a big company mentality." In reality, it is a small company, and his comment is clearly negative. For him, an excessively static type of organization, such as the one indicated, causes things not to work. Then, he specifies:

Here, we have an organization by hour, not by day. I call the company every evening at 8:30 pm to find out how to organize work for those who start at 6 am the following morning. It is like a puzzle, a dynamic chain. You have to be reactive and fit in with the work of others.

From this explanation, it seems clear that, for Paolo, a 30-day organization is excessive and too static to be productive, especially in small Italian companies that should always be ready for changes.

The concept of flexibility in business, particularly the notion of a flexible firm, is not a novel idea. It has been extensively discussed, primarily by management scholars and sociologists. In the Weberian model, employees are expected to adhere strictly to their designated

roles, as organizational structures emphasize precise functions (Sennet 2007). Conversely, in the post-Fordist era, marked by the decline of mass production, standardization, and a more hierarchical management approach, a new paradigm of the “flexible” organization has emerged. This fresh model places a strong emphasis on adaptability, collaboration, and customer-centricity in response to the rapidly evolving dynamics of today's business environment.

Adaptability and flexibility are frequently associated with contemporary workforce mobility and modern outsourcing strategies (Krause-Jensen 2010), which, as we will see, are entirely unrelated to the case under examination in this essay. In contrast to the scenario analyzed by Jakob Krause-Jensen (2010) in his *Flexible Firm: The Design of Culture at Bang & Olufsen*, the flexibility that I encountered does not necessitate the establishment of new regulations or increased bureaucracy. Instead, we will see that it frequently relies on tight communication networks, which can be effectively leveraged, particularly due to the organization's size, facilitating frequent exchanges and continuous interactions among both new and longstanding employees, fostering close collaboration.

Structuring or Non-Structuring? Chaotic Dynamism

In such companies, although often greater structuring is dreamed of, requested, and considered the resolution of many existing problems, *non-structuring* is, at the same time, convenient in many circumstances and makes the company more flexible and ready for different requests, even if “disorganized” and precisely because it is used to being so. *Non-structuring* also leads to exaggerated adaptability and a dynamic environment. Such dynamism is often a cause of frustration, but it also keeps people involved, interested, and ready to solve problems.

In a paper on complexity, Elena Bougleux (2021) discusses the adaptability of dynamic systems in nature. Such adaptability allows them to symbiotically adjust to the contexts in which they are immersed and, consequently, to develop in different ways. This capacity to adapt, she stresses, can be widely found in nature. Similarly, in our case, a complex environment and the impossibility to anticipate the future, especially in difficult socio-political conditions such as the post-COVID period, make rational economic standards of organization less agile and dynamic systems of organization more resilient.

One of the managers in Company X explains to me:

Our strength, what has made us survive up to now, is our dynamism. There are also many inefficiencies in the organization, but they are compensated for by the dynamism we have. If now the salesman comes in and says, “tomorrow we have to give that machine to the client,” we stop everything and make that machine

and send it away [...] This is almost impossible in any other structured company because there would be so many steps to get to do this.

Then, he explains to me what he means by "inefficiencies":

We make mistakes because, for example, we do not have time to check a drawing. It is sent to production, it is printed, and then we realize only after the first step that it is wrong. We try to balance speed and control, but sometimes we can't.

And he adds:

The total resolution of these inefficiencies, however, would entail a total plastering of the system, which might save you 100,000 euros of inefficiencies a year, but it creates one million euros loss on the market because you don't sell.

The manager gives me an example and tells me that, for a large company, it can take about three years from the moment when an executive gives "the okay" for production to the finished product. This means that when the product enters the market, it is already old. For example, in the field of electric generators, the technology changes in three years, and, above all, the rules also change. Consequently, you have to adapt your products quickly. The manager explains to me that, in a large company, it is more difficult to make changes, and things continue to be done as they have always been done.

Large companies are very bureaucratic and structured to such an extent that the creation of procedures requires a lot of office work. The manager tells me: "Here, we have no procedures. Sometimes we need to go and look at the photos of the machines that we produced before." And again:

We do not have a bill of materials (list of all the materials a machine is made of). We stop at 10 lines per bill. A normal company has 150-200 lines. To manage that amount of information takes a lot of energy!

He explains to me that most of the components have a low cost, meaning that they are not so essential to the total price.

To manage that amount of data, you waste a lot of time. After two months of use, the bills are already obsolete because with so many codes, sometimes the suppliers change, and the pieces change. We only have the bills of materials for the main materials as a way to save time.

For example, one day in the manager's office, I observe a junior worker from the technical office, Giulio, entering with some papers and asking for help on some data to be forwarded. I am told that a large consulting company is doing an analysis of the company on the owner's commission.

Giulio asks how to proceed, and, together, we read the e-mail with the requests. The consulting company requires all the bills of materials and invoices of the purchased parts, which, in fact, do not exist in the required form, and it would take a long time to put together this information and organize it for an analysis. Michele, the production manager, states:

In a more structured company, this request is simple, feasible, but we don't even have the lists of everything. We have them in a simplified way. A bolt is missing, and we put one on, even if it is not precisely the one required. We have so many customized machines.

He explains to me that to send all the required data would take a painstaking three-four months of work, with three or four people employed. So, the cost and the benefit of this work would not be equal. Two people from the consultancy came to visit the company and stayed for two days. In such a short time, it is impossible to understand the complexity of the company's activities, and they ask us for data that they consider relevant, but which are not so relevant to us. In fact, Michele complains: "You can't come just for two days. Next year, come and stay three or four months to understand the complexity of our business, and if there is something you need, we will help you and solve it." He reiterates: "I don't have the bill of materials for all the machine versions. We don't need it in our organizational model, because we manage the variants each time. It is not relevant to our way of working!"

This kind of organization is clearly linked to a certain type of market. In fact, the same considerations could not be made for the automotive sector that I observed in Company Y, where the organization of materials and production is much more painstaking and where an analysis of this type would be simpler.

For medium-size companies such as Company X, a high level of dynamism is essential to meet the needs of customers who increasingly require extreme customization. The fact of not being standardized, but being flexible is a strong point for customers who require different versions of the same product. However, this necessary dynamism can certainly create organizational difficulties and a sort of chaos that people in the company often complain about. Organizational difficulties, as we have seen, are often overcome through creativity and through the presence of a robust human capital.

"Successful adaptation is an important part of success in today's business world" (Englehardt and Simmons 2002: 113). Organizational studies have a long history with theories of flexibility. However, as Danilo Brozovic (2018) points out in his comprehensive review, there is still a predominant focus on quantitative research approaches in this field. Flexibility is increasingly recognized as a strategic competitive element in a rapidly changing world. For instance, Charles S. Englehardt and Peter R.

Simmons (2002) suggest that organizations should experiment with what they refer to as a "loosely bounded developmental organizational layer" (2002: 113), and they encourage a balance of fixed and flexible organizational elements through a two-level structure. Toby J. Tetenbaum (1998) as well as Eric D. Beinhocker (1997) question classical economic and organizational theories rooted in Newton's ideas of linearity, predictability, and the order of the universe. Instead, they introduce more complex organizational theories that consider organizations as complex systems and, as such, consisting of interconnected components, resulting in unpredictability. As mentioned earlier, dynamic natural systems can be compared to social and business organizations, sharing characteristics and complexity with them. Organizational flexibility involves change and adaptation, which are typical features of natural complex adaptive systems.

Lack of Materials and Outsourcing

In terms of organization, there is, in the group of companies studied, a constant search for internalization of processes. While organizational flexibility has often been associated with the outsourcing of production, the internalization processes observed here not only enhance production flexibility to meet a growing array of demands, but, more importantly, also appear to reduce the company's vulnerability. For instance, with in-house production of certain components, countering a global crisis, such as a shortage of materials, becomes much more manageable.

It is the 19th of October 2021, and I am at a big agriculture fair in Bologna. I am sitting at a table with Michele, the director of the production of Company X. Mr. Facchetti, a sales representative for Company W, a big engine producer, tells Michele: "A customer just asked me for 150 engines for February." Facchetti laughs, and, raising his voice with surprise, he says: "Can you believe it! He had to give up 150 CDI¹, do you understand?! It's incredible that you have to give up on business like that!"

This discourse is not new to me. In the months leading up to the agriculture fair, I have been recording people's stress in running after orders and trying to organize the production and work with the problem of materials missing, but also with the problem of prices to rewrite and renegotiate. People in the field are surprised that the crisis of materials is still going on. Nothing like this happened before and for such a long time. The Italian suppliers need materials and pieces from China. All raw

¹ CDI stands for Capacitor Discharge Ignition, which is a type of electronic ignition system.

materials come from there, and prices are in certain cases five times higher now!

As Giuseppe, a salesman from Company X, explains to me, there might be various reasons for why this crisis of materials happened. Among such reasons he sees the slow reactivation of the production after the COVID-period; the huge immediate request from the market; raw materials coming mainly from China such as 50 percent of the production of steel; the lack of many electronic components that are essential for the engines; China keeping much of the production for its own market; everybody trying to buy a lot and thus amplifying the crisis; ports that are congested, making it difficult to even find containers to transport goods; and costs of transports having doubled, if not tripled.

When looking at businesses in the 21st century, we observe a constant movement of goods, people, and ideas (know-how). These movements and interconnections are often seen as positive. Materials are travelling to different parts of the planet, and there has been a constant increase in the horizontalization of production and outsourcing. However, as we have seen, the disruption of supplies and lack of materials have also showed the weakness of such global interdependence.

Giuseppe is very critical of outsourcing, and he believes that companies should invest more in internal production. For instance, he tells me that bringing the production outside often means spending more in terms of logistics, but also in terms of losing know-how. "Today," Giuseppe explains to me, "it is not important how big you are, but how fast you can be, and you can be fast only if you control many of the processes." Also, the big companies, in particular, have difficulties in finding a smart model, while small and medium industries with advanced technology can do better. Concerning the know-how, he explains:

It is difficult to find interlocutors with technical knowledge, because when you construct everything abroad (see the USA), you lose knowledge, you lose this capacity which comes from "doing"; for example, it is not only that they cannot use more traditional kinds of technologies, but they cannot read them, sometimes they cannot understand them.

In conclusion, he states:

In order to bring back to a company the know-how that it has been transferred, you probably need ten years then [...] The idea some years ago was, "why to invest in machines and know-how when you can use subcontractors?!"

Now, Giuseppe says, there is an inversion of this tendency, and, in his opinion, companies should invest in technology and internal production.

This is not only Giuseppe's opinion. It has also been the way that Riccardo, the big boss of the group, has been thinking. Riccardo recalls the

times at the beginning of the 2000s when everyone was trying to move production abroad, because labor costs could be much lower:

I remember, you felt almost a misfit if you weren't working to open a factory abroad. I went to Shanghai in 2005 and spent two weeks there doing analysis, meetings [...] and the more I continued with the analysis, the more I became convinced of the irrationality of the choice.

Riccardo explains that the cost is certainly important, and that this aspect should not be neglected. But then he continues:

When one takes a decision and analyzes it, it has collateral aspects, some of which can be measured in euros, others with quantitative means, but many others are certainly not measurable. The point is that the measurable ones take on a certain importance because you can put them in a table; for example, you can say that one hour of labor in China costs three euros and here 30 euros. But how much impact, for example, does the fact that I am making a product in China have on the image of my product in the eyes of my client? How do you measure this variable? It is as if these elements that cannot be transformed into numbers lose their voice in advising the entrepreneur, but they are much more important if anything!

In much the same way, the relation between goods, place, and value has been analyzed in Veronica Redini's (2008) study on Italian entrepreneurs of the textile business outsourcing in Romania for low-cost labor. Redini (2021: 169) emphasizes the attention placed by the business owners on not damaging the image of their products. For this reason, she states, they try to maintain a "low profile" when producing abroad. "Made in Italy" has value, and it is easy to spoil the image of your brand by placing the production elsewhere.

According to Riccardo, then, the problem is the anxiety that the entrepreneur or manager often has to justify their decisions in an understandable and rational way. As he describes it: "The anxiety of finding numerical support for a choice, especially to justify it later, if by chance that choice goes wrong." According to him, entrepreneurs should take more responsibility for their decisions, without looking for false certainties in the tables and the numbers. In fact, they often fail to paint a complex reality made up of many variables. He talks about a vision that should be much more customer-oriented and says: "I realized that we did not need cheap labor, but a different mentality within the company."

Riccardo internalized many component production activities at a time when everybody else seemed to be moving component production to other countries in order to save financial resources.

Everything that was done outside has been brought in. We are very verticalized; that is, we start from the raw material and arrive at the finished product, both in terms of design and in terms of production. And this is a big benefit from our point of view. If you talk to an economist, he would tell you that the costs are too high, and it would be better to produce externally.'

For example, one morning, I follow Daniele, the chief of the assembling department of Company X. He immediately spots a missing piece from a machine that should be rapidly sent to a client, so we walk to the storage, we remove a similar piece from another machine and borrow it. Then, Daniele walks to the carpentry and asks somebody to produce that missing piece. It would be really difficult to work in the same way and with such a customized production, if most of the phases were to be held outside the company. Pieces are done on the spot, modified, and found with flexibility and extreme customization.

Apart from this verticalization, even before the pandemic and supply-chain shortages, Riccardo was looking forward in a search to acquire those businesses that could be complementary to their production or that could be useful for the future. An example of this strategy is the acquisition of a company near the Lake Como which produces Lithium batteries and recently of a company in the business of electric engines. I heard Michele once explaining to a salesman from another company how they once went to China to visit a battery producer and explained their needs to an engineer. This engineer, however, was replaced shortly afterwards, and all the previous work was lost. People are important. Points of reference are important. After this experience, Riccardo decided to buy the company in Como.

Especially when you work on customized projects, you need to have good interlocutors and work together, because people and stable relations are important. The importance of such relations is clearly seen also inside the company, with employees serving as key points of reference, and, at times, even representing the company itself. In Company X, there is little turnover. Many of the people from the initial group are still in the company, providing a sense of continuity.

Trust and Involvement as a Source of Competitive Advantage

Giving employees responsibility is a source of competitive advantage. The involvement of some people in the organization goes far beyond contractual obligations, salary, or control of the entrepreneur. It is undoubtedly motivated by personal satisfaction, but also by a sense of responsibility towards other people, by putting one's face on it ("*metterci la faccia*") and being a specific point of reference, not simply the "manager x" or the "employee y." Often, the activities rely on historical memory and experience of individual people instead of a formal record.

Some people, who remain in the company for years, become real points of reference for everyone and are the face of a company and its reliability. During my stay with Company X, I attend a meeting with distributors to explain new machines and price lists. Almost everyone already knows each other, and some do not miss the opportunity to tell me that they have been working with the company for more than 20 years, even since the old owner was there and the company was located in another place. Continuity certainly gives security to the customers and, in this case, also to the company's collaborators. Here, the greater sense of continuity and trust are attributed to the internal market salesman, who has been in the company for years and is an important point of reference that one can consistently count on. The distributors tell me that people like him are the ones who "make the company." Companies of this size rely heavily and, first of all, on individuals who become fundamental points of reference.

The essential role of trust in business relations has been widely emphasized in other studies (Sischarenco 2019: 56; Solomon and Flores 2003: xii; Pagden 1988: 129; Gambetta 1988: 171). Much is based on trust in the person who is the main interlocutor. This, as Giovanni himself explains to me, can be a positive aspect, but it can also be seen as a weakness, especially from abroad, when answers are expected even when this person is not present. In Italy, informal and personal relations dominate many fields, including business (Zinn 2001; Sischarenco 2019).

As we have seen in the case of distributors, there is sometimes a single point of reference, a single trusted person who represents the company for them. This gives an enormous personal responsibility to this individual, who may feel guilty if the problems are not immediately solved, and who personally takes care to control that they are. Countless work situations extend beyond the established working hours. There are exchanges and communications in the evening or in moments of festivity or holiday that are otherwise dedicated to personal life. This was easily observed in the leisure activities that I spent together with some of the company employees. For instance, they consult their e-mails during an evening drink, or conversations are initiated with colleagues via WhatsApp to solve a specific problem that a customer has just pointed out via e-mail.

Working life thus pervasively invades private life, especially for those taking on key positions in the company. Many managers told me about their anxieties or about not being able to sleep the previous night, because there was a problem that occupied their heads and had to be solved. Although there is no daily or obsessive control over them, they feel a sense of responsibility as if the company were their own, structuring their lives around work. For example, the salesman never turns off the mobile even during free time, because he waits for possible

phone calls from other time zones, and the production manager takes the family to the sea, but manages the e-mails every day remotely.

While this “always on” approach to work can sometimes induce stress, it certainly gives a lot of personal satisfaction to Company X employees, who feel that they are contributing to the business’ success and are generally motivated. People do not feel like a number, but feel essential. Many of them have been with the company for years. Fabio, the head of the assembly department, for example, explains:

I would never go back (to the old workplace). Here, it is varied [...] You have to go around to all departments to be coordinated and to get the machines finished (the machines must be assembled with all the pieces and finished so that they can be sent to the customer). You have to make everything fit together.

And with a pinch of pride, he adds: “If I had to stay home for two days, everything would stop.” Giovanni, one of the salesmen, jokingly tells me to write that “there is never peace on earth for men of good will,” because the problems seem to add up. At the same time, however, he confesses that he enjoys it when he manages to solve one.

The entrepreneur-manager relationships and the manager-employee relationships require trust and many moments of independent work. Consequently, there are often important decisions that need to be taken independently. In such a dynamic and poorly structured environment, there is necessarily little control over what happens in each instant of the various processes. Furthermore, the functions of each are very unclearly defined, and they often cross over into other areas.

In the weeks of my stay in Company X, I have seen the entrepreneur and owner only a few times. In fact, compared to other companies in the group, Company X is older, less confrontational, and as many have pointed out to me: “Now it functions by itself!” (“*Ormai viaggia da sola!*”). Here, the relationship between entrepreneur and manager often seems to be based on trust. There are many decisions, including financially important ones, such as the planning of the purchase of engines for an entire season (engines that will be installed on the electric generators and lighting towers), which are left to the discretion of the managers. Managers who, on the other hand, are very well known by the owner and who have worked for years in the company. The high personal involvement of many managers also implies their degree of freedom in movement and decision-making. The two things go hand in hand and gradually increase the responsibility and involvement of individuals within the company.

I was able to observe how even new employees are quickly absorbed by this system and quickly identify with the company. Giuliano has been employed by Company X for less than two years. He comes from experiences in companies that are completely different in terms of

mission, size, and organization. He often complains to me and tells me that he feels lost because nothing seems to be in order in the company. At the same time, he is so absorbed by the mission, and he dedicates his body and soul to the new company. He arrives early in the office, communicates in the evening with colleagues to understand how to intervene promptly, and respond to the problems of foreign customers. He moves from one office to another and from office to production to get help or to collect information. He seems to have been completely absorbed by the company and feels personally responsible for the successes or failures of the actions resulting from his work.

In my study with entrepreneurs in the construction business (Sischarenco 2019), I show how businesses are not only "family run," but also "run as a family." Being personally interested and completely involved in the business, as if it were your own family, is considered a good trait for a businessman. In this case, we clearly observe that it is a valuable characteristic also for other key figures of the company, in a social environment in which the importance of personal relationships is particularly striking. Also, other researchers, such as Sylvia J. Yanagisako (2002), underlines an undeniable cultural influence and a strong family element in businesses in Italy. Many businesses in the country are family owned, but even the businesses that are not family owned are often based on very close ties. Research on the social environment in which individuals are embedded (Granovetter 1985) is fundamental to understanding business.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed some characteristics of a possible model of resilience – characteristics that have been highlighted in a time of crisis brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. But in an interconnected world where crises are always unfolding somewhere, these ingredients contributing to a resilient business organization may well be generalizable to a broader cross-section of organizations. Even what we call a "manufacturing" business today is also a finance, sales and marketing, and IT business, so my observations from the northern Italian manufacturing sector may well apply to other organizations. Successful companies tend to be more flexible in their organization and are characterized by dynamic problem-solving skills. Problems are always different and cannot be predicted in advance. Solutions are often found in the moment, with a lot of flexibility and with the certainty that, in some way, problems can always be solved.

Greater structuring is often seen as a goal to be achieved. However, *non-structuring* makes companies more flexible, dynamic, and ready for different requests, even if "disorganized" and precisely because they are used to being so. *Non-structuring* also brings dynamism and

prompt resolution of problems, often impossible in different organizational realities.

Furthermore, from an organizational point of view, there is, in the group of companies studied, a constant search for internalization of processes. Contrary to theories that promoted outsourcing as a form of flexible organization, this seems to bring greater flexibility in production to respond to increasingly varied needs, but, above all, greater resilience. For example, with the internal production of some components, it is easier to counter a global crisis such as that of the supply of materials.

The companies considered are highly based on human resources; that is, companies in which the contribution by individuals to the group is significant, and good human relations are essential to the company's functioning. This is what makes the company able to deal with chaos and its open structure, and what makes its flexibility possible. The involvement of some people goes far beyond contractual obligations, salary, or control of the entrepreneur. It is undoubtedly motivated by personal satisfaction, but also by a sense of responsibility towards other people by putting one's face on it and being a point of reference. This involvement can only take place supported by a management that trusts individuals and allows them to act with a certain independence. In these business contexts, activities are often based on the historical memory and the experience of individuals working in the company rather than on a formal record of knowledge and information.

The panorama that emerges from this empirical research is not that of a harmonic model. In fact, what I have described is more of an "anti-model." Here, problems and chaos are often governed through, as Michele once told me, "goodwill and improvisation" more than a model-like organization to follow. A lack of organization is often seen as inefficient, and producing internally is seen as a waste of time and money. With my ethnographic fieldwork, I want to show that what have been pillars of economic rationality should be overturned and that resilient companies are those who can count on this kind of flexible organization, good human resources, and perhaps also good networks. This period could bring businesses to rethink their way of working and making use of resources, and these observations could give ideas of how to manage change in a globalized business world.

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