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# CONFLUENT LOYALTY: A MODEL OF EMPLOYER – EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP IN MODERN LABOUR MARKETS

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**Purpose**: In the article employee loyalty is reinterpreted in the context of late modernity, characterized by job insecurity, increasing career mobility, and evolving organizational relationships. The empirical findings reveal differing interpretations of loyalty between employers and employees. To address this gap, the concept of *confluent loyalty* is proposed - a dynamic, relational construct based on perceived alignment of goals, reciprocity, and acceptance of the evolving nature of organizational ties.
**Design/methodology/approach**: The study was quantitative and cross-sectional, using a self-designed survey questionnaire on the understanding and manifestations of loyalty at work. Data were analyzed descriptively and comparatively, focusing on differences between employees (N = 500) and employers (N = 500).
**Findings**: The findings suggest that employee loyalty no longer implies long-term tenure in a single organization but is increasingly linked to contribution quality and goal alignment. The findings revealed differences in how employers and employees understand loyalty, highlighting a gap between functional and relational perspectives.
**Research limitations/implications**: The study was exploratory and based on self-reported data, limiting conclusions about the strength and structure of relationships between variables. Future research should develop and validate a scale for *confluent loyalty* and test the model in longitudinal studies to capture the dynamic nature of employee - organization relationships.
**Practical implications**: The results suggest that interpretive differences between employers and employees may weaken employment relationships and negatively impact organizations. Incorporating the relational dimension of loyalty in HRM practices may enhance goal alignment, improve team stability, and reduce turnover costs.
**Social implications**: The findings suggest that redefining loyalty in relational terms may support the development of a work model better suited to contemporary employment conditions. More broadly, it may help reduce tensions from mismatched expectations, enhancing job stability and quality of working life.
**Originality/value**: The article contributes to HRM literature by introducing *confluent loyalty* as a dynamic, relational extension of classical loyalty concepts. Its novelty also lies in

comparing employer and employee perspectives, revealing interpretive discrepancies that require further validation.
**Keywords**: employee loyalty; confluent loyalty; relational HRM; labour markets.
**Category of the paper**: research paper.

# 1. Introduction

Traditionally, employee loyalty - understood as a relatively stable commitment to a single organization - has lost its central role in describing employment relationships with the rise of flexible work arrangements and career mobility (Smarżewska, 2024). The literature has shifted toward individual career responsibility, adaptability, and readiness to change jobs (Arthur, 1994; Hall, 2004), redefining the employee-organization relationship as more temporary, flexible and sustainable (De Vos et al., 2020).

Contemporary organizations operate in conditions of environmental hyper-turbulence, characterized by overlapping strategic discontinuities (Czakon, 2024). In such circumstances, loyalty has regained attention in the context of growing uncertainty, labour shortages, and skill mismatches (Ketchand, Strawser, 2001). A volatile socio-economic environment does not support the development of stable ties and may even threaten traditional notions of loyalty (Bugdol, 2006). At the same time, organizations increasingly recognize the importance of stable, committed teams for maintaining efficiency and competitiveness (Meyer, Allen, 1997; Pfeffer, 1998; Boxall, Purcell, 2016).

Contemporary employment conditions challenge the view of loyalty as a unilateral and enduring commitment. The satisfactory employee-organization relationships and current careers become increasingly conditional and subject to renegotiation, requiring a relational and dynamic perspective (Eva et al., 2020). This article aims to redefine loyalty through the concept of confluent loyalty, understood as a relational bond sustained as long as both parties perceive the relationship as meaningful and mutually justified, in line with contemporary relational HRM (Moczydłowska, 2013; Wang et al., 2022).

# 2. Employee loyalty and the shift in career and fit paradigms

## 2.1. Classical approaches to employee loyalty

Early theoretical approaches to employee loyalty originate from social exchange theory developed by Homans (1958) and Blau (1964, 2009). In this view, the employee-organization relationship is based on reciprocity: employee effort and commitment are exchanged for

rewards, security and recognition. Loyalty is not moral in nature but results from perceived fairness, fulfilment of obligations, and trust built over time. Social exchange theory remains a key framework for understanding loyalty as a relational outcome of balanced contributions and benefits, although contemporary employment conditions modify this exchange.

Another classic perspective is Becker's (1960) side-bet theory, which explains loyalty as the result of rational cost calculations rather than emotional attachment. It arises from accumulated "side bets", such as tenure, benefits and firm-specific skills, whose loss increases the cost of leaving (Becker, 1960). This concept underpins later theories of organizational commitment, particularly continuance commitment (Meyer, Allen, 1991). However, it is increasingly viewed as less applicable in today's flexible and unstable employment contexts.

The most influential framework is Meyer and Allen's (1991, 1997) three-component model of organizational commitment, comprising affective ("want to stay"), continuance ("need to stay"), and normative ("ought to stay") elements. This model enabled empirical distinction between emotional, instrumental, and normative sources of loyalty and has informed extensive research on commitment and turnover intentions (Meyer, Allen, 1991; Meyer, Allen, 1997). Today, however, it is being reinterpreted in light of boundaryless careers (DeFillippi, Arthur, 1994; Arthur et al., 2005) and increasing labour mobility (Arthur, Rousseau, 1996), which reduce the relevance of continuance commitment while reinforcing the importance of voluntary, affective attachment (Zhu et al., 2025). There is a need to develop new HR and management concepts that enable sustainable use of opportunities in the modern labour market (Heinrich, 2026).

### 2.2. Contemporary understanding of loyalty in the context of evolving forms of employment and person-organization fit

Current shifts toward more flexible forms of employment and business relations (e.g. the B2B model, see: Ruiz-Martínez, Frasquet, Gil-Saura, 2019) significantly modify the classical logic of social exchange described by Homans (1958) and Blau (2009). Previously, the employee-organization relationship was based on relative stability, a predictable - though deferred - return on investment and long-term interaction. Today, this exchange has become more conditional and subject to revision: the time horizon of relationships is shortening, risk of asymmetry is increasing, and the expected "return" on commitment more often takes the form of development opportunities, meaningful work, or sustained employability (Fugate et al., 2004), rather than long-term security. As a result, loyalty is no longer a natural outcome of balanced contributions and benefits. Increasingly it depends on ongoing evaluations of relationship quality, perceived fairness and other characteristics, in conjunction with the underlying dimensions of protean, boundaryless and mobility preferences, as well as career attitudes (Kumar et al., 2023).

This shift is also reflected in person-environment fit theories, often conceptualized as the subjective experience of compatibility (Cable, DeRue, 2002). Classical approaches assumed relatively stable alignment between individual values, traits, and goals and the profile of the organization, job, or occupation. This allowed researchers to explain both positive outcomes of perceived fit - such as engagement, satisfaction, and well-being (e.g., Roczniewska, Retowski, 2014) - and negative consequences of misfit, including stress, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover (Verquer, Beehr, Wagner, 2003). In increasingly dynamic labour market conditions, however, fit is no longer a fixed state but becomes a process of continuous negotiation and maintenance (Van Vianen, 2018, p. 91).

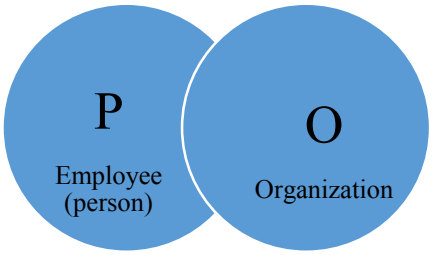
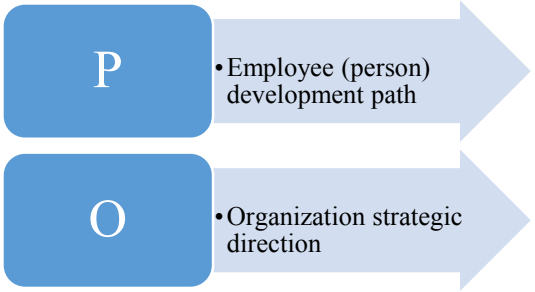
Recent studies indicate that employment relationships are now bilateral and dynamic, with their durability based on continuous renegotiation of expectations rather than a stable psychological contract (Bannya et al., 2023). In this context, relational HRM has emerged, emphasizing the quality of interactions and the resources generated between organizational actors. These include not only human capital (i.e. engagement, Juchnowicz, 2010) but also social capital - trust, norms of reciprocity, and the capacity for cooperation (Bugdol, 2006). These relational resources, shaped by HR practices that foster interaction and knowledge exchange, determine the durability of relationships and forms of loyalty that are increasingly conditional and negotiated (Edafioghor, Zhou, Wu, 2026).

## 3. Proposal of the concept of confluent loyalty

The above considerations indicate that classical approaches to loyalty - whether based on social exchange, cost calculations of leaving, multidimensional commitment, or person-organization fit models - assumed relative stability of employment relationships and durability of achieved alignment. However, contemporary organizational conditions, often described by the VUCA framework (Bennett, Lemoine, 2014), challenge this ontology of work relations, shifting the focus from one-time fit toward an ongoing process of negotiating and maintaining alignment. This shift is illustrated in Table 1, which presents the transition from a static model of fit to a relational view of alignment as a dynamic process.

A direct inspiration for outlining the concept of confluent loyalty was A. Giddens's (2001) notion of the reflexive relationship in late modernity. A review of HRM literature has not identified prior use of the terms "confluent employee loyalty" or "confluent organizational loyalty". The term is therefore proposed as a new conceptual framework, inspired by the idea of confluent social ties maintained as long as they remain meaningful and mutually sustained. Applied to employment relationships, this perspective frames loyalty not as a stable, structurally embedded commitment, but as the outcome of continuous, reflexive alignment of goals and dynamically updated expectations between employees and organizations.

**Table 1.**
*From static fit to relational alignment*

| Loyalty as | |
|---|---|
| **static fit** | **relational alignment** |
| <br>**Characteristics:**<br>• Stability<br>• Consistent alignment of values and goals<br>• Long-term contract<br>• Loyalty as a result of fit<br><br>**Interpretation:**<br>If the employee and the organization fit, the relationship is assumed to be stable (a state). | <br>**Characteristics:**<br>• Dynamic process<br>• Renegotiation of expectations<br>• Possibility of divergence<br>• Loyalty as a result of maintained alignment<br><br>**Interpretation:**<br>The relationship lasts as long as alignment in direction is maintained (a process). |

Source: own elaboration.

Giddens argues that in late modernity individuals no longer follow predefined roles or stable identity frameworks but must continuously answer questions such as "what to do", "how to act", and "who to be", which is reflected in the renegotiated nature of contemporary work relationships. A review of classical loyalty theories and modern career paradigms reveals growing tension between traditional loyalty - understood as long-term attachment to one organization - and current labour market realities. Loyalty however, has not lost its importance but has transformed: it shifts from employment stability and economic necessity toward relational, voluntary, and situational commitment based on value alignment, quality of collaboration, and opportunities to develop competencies enhancing employability. Employees remain in a relationship as long as the organization provides development, autonomy, value congruence, and a sense of agency; when these conditions are no longer met, leaving is seen not as a breach but as a rational career decision. Under structural uncertainty, the individual - rather than the organization - becomes the main guarantor of biographical continuity, fostering a shift from organizational to more self-directed (autotelic) loyalty.

In this context, it becomes pertinent to ask about the current meaning and scope of employee loyalty, as well as how it is defined, experienced, and practiced by participants in the contemporary labour markets. Answers to these questions are provided by the research presented in the following section, which aims to empirically reconstruct the meanings attributed to loyalty under a changing career paradigm.

## 4. Methods

This section presents selected findings from the authors survey research, analysed from two perspectives: employers and employees. The study was conducted on a nationwide sample using a mixed-method approach (CAWI and CATI). It was carried out in September 2025 on a sample of N = 1000, including employees (N = 500) economically active individuals aged 18-65, and employers (N = 500) representing 29 private-sector industries[1].

Participants included private-sector employees representing industries such as: research and development; banking and finance; biotechnology and chemistry; construction; consulting; journalism and media; energy; pharmaceuticals; geodesy, geology, and environmental protection; mining; internet and e-commerce; IT (administration, graphics, programming, web development, hardware); accounting; logistics; marketing; real estate; customer service and call centres; law; industrial production (other); construction industry (commercial and residential buildings); construction industry (industrial equipment and infrastructure); automotive industry (parts, sales, and repair services); advertising and PR; sales and trade; telecommunications; transport; and insurance.

## 5. Results

The chart below (Figure 1) compares selected responses from both samples - employers and employees - regarding interpretations of loyalty and their scope of meaning. A more detailed comparison is presented in the table (Table 2). Below is a commentary on the results for each respondent group.

[1] The study was conducted by the research agency Openfield on behalf of Trenkwalder.




Note: Values represent the percentage of respondents' indications.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives.

Source: own elaboration.

The table below presents selected results along with commentary, highlighting the contrast between how employers and employees understand loyalty.

**Table 2.**
*Contrast of loyalty perspectives: employers vs. employees*

| Dimension | Employers perspective (N = 500) | Employees perspective (N = 500) |
|---|---|---|
| **Main definition of loyalty** | High quality of work and task (52.4%) | Diligent and committed task performance (69.4%) |
| **Primary focus** | System efficiency and process continuity | Personal engagement and fulfilment, individual contribution |
| **Secondary indicators** | Remaining despite alternative offers (41.6%)<br>Adherence to rules (41.2%) | Adherence to rules (55.6%)<br>Responsibility for outcomes (51.4%) |
| **Nature of loyalty** | Functional, depersonalized, instrumental | Engaged, personalized, subjective |
| **Level of reification** | Loyalty perceived as a commodity that can be bought or lost (59%) | -- |
| **Dynamics of employee loyalty** | Decline over the past 5 years (66.8%), intensified by the growth of well-being culture (46.6%) | -- |
| **Gender differences** | -- | Women: team responsibility (55%)<br>Men: loyalty to the employer (47.3%) |
| **Generational differences** | -- | Generation Z (18-24):<br>rejecting counteroffers 55+: internalization of values (62.8%) and responsibility (57.7%) |
| **Moment of reflection on loyalty** | Becomes apparent mainly in its absence | Perceived as an ongoing expression of one's personal attitude toward work |
| **Dominant logic** | Organizational stability and efficiency | Individual commitment and responsibility |

Source: own elaboration.

**Employers' perspective (N = 500)** The analysis of employers' responses indicates that loyalty is primarily defined in functional and performance-related terms. Its main manifestation is high-quality work and task fulfilment, followed by employment stability and adherence to procedures. This is particularly evident in flexible forms of employment, where effectiveness in task execution matters more than attachment to the employer. This perspective focuses on process continuity and organizational efficiency, while the relational dimension - such as employee well-being or identification - remains secondary. Thus, loyalty is perceived not as a component of the relationship, but as a condition for the smooth functioning of the system, becoming most visible when it is lacking.

**Employees from the employers' perspective** Employers observe a clear decline in employee loyalty (66.8%), and its durability is, in their view, dependent on consistent support from the organization for individual employee development (62.4% of responses). In this sense, confluent loyalty is realized as the ability to pursue one's own goals through attachment to a given organization. Moreover, according to employers, the strongly individualistic orientation of employees is associated with a shift in loyalty - from a specific company to the broader profession (46.2% of responses). There is also an increasingly common belief that long-term loyalty to a single employer may hinder employee development (51.2% of responses), supporting the view of loyalty as having an instrumental character.

**Employees' perspective (N = 500)** The analysis of employees' responses indicates that loyalty is primarily perceived as personal commitment and diligent task performance, with this category receiving a notably higher share of responses than among employers. It is followed by adherence to organizational rules and a sense of responsibility for team or company outcomes, particularly emphasized by women and older employees. Men more often associate loyalty with faithfulness to the employer and willingness to remain with the company despite competing offers, giving it a more instrumental character. Generational differences are also evident: younger respondents link loyalty to rejecting alternative job offers, while older employees stress internalization of values and responsibility toward the organization. Unlike the employer perspective, the employee view is more subjective and individualized, emphasizing personal engagement as the core expression of loyalty. Moreover, when such engagement is supported by favourable conditions - such as flexible work arrangements (e.g., home office or task-based work) - employee attachment clearly increases.

## 6. Conclusions

The comparison of both perspectives shows that although employers and employees identify similar manifestations of loyalty, they assign different meanings to them. For employers loyalty is primarily a guarantee of system efficiency and process continuity,

whereas for employees it appears as an expression of personal commitment and responsibility. It can be argued that the difference lies not in behaviours themselves, but in divergent interpretations of their meaning. This tension between functional and relational understandings of loyalty highlights the need for a model that captures it as a sustained alignment of expectations and actions between both parties - namely, confluent loyalty.

Additionally, as many as 59% of employers describe loyalty as a "commodity" that can be acquired, maintained, or lost depending on the conditions offered by the organization, while 51% believe that under conditions of economic uncertainty, loyalty to a single organization is losing its importance, giving way to career strategies based on limited attachment to a specific employer and a greater job mobility.

## 7. Discussion

The findings highlight a fundamental shift in the understanding of employee loyalty under contemporary labour market conditions. While employers and employees refer to similar behaviours, their interpretations diverge, reflecting a tension between functional and relational perspectives. This discrepancy suggests that loyalty is no longer a stable, universally shared construct but a context-dependent and negotiated phenomenon.

The results align with broader theoretical developments emphasizing the decline of long-term, organization-cantered commitment in favour of more flexible and self-directed career orientations. In this context, loyalty becomes conditional, grounded in perceived value, reciprocity, and opportunities for development rather than in permanence or obligation. The observed shift toward individual responsibility for career continuity further supports the idea that loyalty is increasingly decoupled from a single employer and embedded in a broader professional development. Following the results of Deloitte report (Smarżewska, 2024), the main activities were listed which companies can invest to aimed at strengthening employees' loyalty: a positive organizational culture, supportive role of leaders, appropriate motivational systems and attractive financial conditions, as well as flexible forms of employment (i.e. remote or hybrid work).

The proposed concept of confluent loyalty offers a useful framework for integrating these perspectives. By framing loyalty as a dynamic alignment of expectations and goals, it captures both the organizational need for stability and the individual need for autonomy and growth. This relational approach may be particularly relevant for HRM practices aimed at fostering sustainable engagement in conditions of uncertainty and mobility.

At the same time, the exploratory nature of the study calls for caution. Further empirical validation is needed to determine whether confluent loyalty constitutes a distinct construct and how it relates to key organizational outcomes such as retention, performance, and team cohesion. The presented findings are preliminary and descriptive, aiming to capture perceptual differences in how loyalty is understood by employers and employees rather than to test statistically significant relationships. The study did not use a validated loyalty scale but relied on declarative indicators, which limits conclusions about the structure and psychometric properties of the construct. Therefore, the results should be treated as exploratory and requiring further conceptualization and operationalization.

Future research should:

1. precisely define loyalty - including confluent loyalty - at theoretical and construct levels,
2. develop and validate a measurement tool distinguishing functional, relational, and instrumental dimensions,
3. conduct exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to verify the construct's structure,
4. test the model quantitatively using relationship analyses and structural models,
5. include longitudinal designs to capture the dynamics of alignment over time.

Such an approach would enable empirical verification of whether confluent loyalty constitutes a distinct construct from classical organizational commitment and whether it is associated with variety of organizational outcomes such as retention, turnover, performance, effectiveness or team stability.

## 8. Summary

The article attempts to reinterpret employee loyalty in the context of late modernity, marked by job insecurity and increasing career mobility. A review of classical concepts - from social exchange theory to the three-component model of commitment - shows that loyalty has traditionally been understood as a relatively stable attitude based on fit, cost calculations of leaving, or emotional and normative attachment. However, the contemporary labour market challenges these assumptions, shifting the focus from enduring commitment to a conditional, reflexive relationship grounded in ongoing evaluation of expectations and alignment of development paths.

The empirical findings reveal interpretive differences between employers and employees. For employers, loyalty is primarily associated with organizational efficiency and goal achievement, and is sometimes even treated as a quasi-material value ("commodity"), whereas for employees it reflects personal commitment and responsibility. The divergence lies not in behaviors themselves but in their interpretation. Although the findings are exploratory and require further validation, they open space for an integrative model. In response, the concept of

confluent loyalty is proposed as a dynamic, relational construct based on perceived alignment of goals, reciprocity, and acceptance of the revisable nature of employment relationships. This model extends classical approaches and provides a framework for further research on the relational dimension of loyalty.

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