

# **Liberated companies: Are they more socially responsible?**

## **A quasi experiment in a partially liberated firm**

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### **Résumé :**

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Les entreprises libérées cherchent à intégrer un éventail plus large de responsabilités en répondant aux demandes émanant de ses parties prenantes. Plus précisément, elles ont la volonté d'aller au-delà de la seule prise en compte de leur responsabilité financière et d'intégrer une responsabilité sociale. Au regard de leurs pratiques managériales caractéristiques, les salariés devraient constituer les bénéficiaires clés de l'entreprise libérée. Toutefois les résultats des rares études empiriques existantes ne permettent pas de parvenir à un consensus sur ses effets en termes de performance sociale. En mobilisant une extension du modèle Performance Sociétale de l'Entreprise par les parties prenantes de Clarkson (1995), nous proposons un cadre d'analyse permettant de lier la dimension managériale et la dimension résultats. L'objectif est d'identifier l'effet des pratiques managériales caractéristiques de l'entreprise libérée sur la performance sociale. L'étude empirique est basée sur une méthode quantitative quasi expérimentale au sein de deux unités (libérée et non libérée) appartenant toutes deux à la même usine industrielle française. Les résultats montrent que l'unité libérée est plus socialement performante que l'unité non libérée. Ils indiquent également que seules certaines pratiques managériales ont un effet positif sur la performance sociale.

**Mots-clés :** entreprise libérée, pratiques managériales, performance sociétale de l'entreprise, parties prenantes, quasi-expérimentation

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**Abstract:**

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Liberated companies tend to expand the scope of their responsibilities and meet stakeholder expectations, especially social ones, as shown in their typical managerial practices. While employees should be key beneficiaries of liberated companies, results from existing empirical studies do not reach a consensus about the real and expected effects on social performance. Extending Clarkson's model (1995) of Corporate Social Performance (CSP) grounded in stakeholder theory, we propose a framework to identify the effect(s) on social performance of the managerial practices practiced in liberated companies. The empirical test is drawn from a quantitative quasi-experimental study based on two units (liberated and non-liberated) belonging to the same French industrial firm. Results show that the liberated unit is more socially responsible than the non-liberated one. They also indicate that only some of managerial practices related to liberated companies positively affect social performance. These findings have important implications for both theory and practice.

**Key words:** liberated company, managerial practices, Corporate Social Performance, stakeholders, quasi-experiment

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Hiring a “Chief Happiness Officer” or measuring employees’ happiness and satisfaction at work are typical initiatives taken by liberated companies. They reflect companies’ desire to expand their responsibilities and meet stakeholder expectations, even social ones (Gilbert, Raulet-Croset, & Teglborg, 2018c). Among the different stakeholders, employees are at the heart of liberated companies. Their salience (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) clearly appears in the most commonly used definition of liberated companies<sup>1</sup>: an “organizational form in which employees have complete freedom and responsibility to take actions that they, not their managers, decide are best” (Getz, 2009, p. 34). Other authors consider that liberated companies engage in a distinctive set of practices (Picard, 2015; Warrick, Milliman, & Ferguson, 2016). Recently, Mattelin Pierrard et al. (2018) have identified a full list of these companies’ typical characteristics, including bundles of practices. A majority of these practices are targeted at employees: active participation in decision-making, the right to make mistakes and self- and peers’ control (Chabanet et al., 2017; Gilbert, Raulet-Croset, & Teglborg, 2018a; Gilbert, Teglborg, & Raulet-Croset, 2017; Hamel & Breen, 2007).

However, while employees should be the key beneficiaries of liberated companies (Picard, 2015), the results from existing empirical studies do not reach a consensus. Recently, qualitative research has revealed an improvement in quality of work life under certain conditions such as consistency between discourse and practices, the need to maintain a values-based framework, the right to make mistakes, self-direction and active internal communication between teams (Colle, Corbett-Etchevers, Defélix, Perea, & Richard, 2017). Moreover, while some studies report increased employee satisfaction (Getz, 2009) or greater well-being (Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018), others suggest a sharp increase in employee turnover (Hamel & Zanini, 2016; Rousseau & Ruffier, 2017). Both organizational and individual outcomes of liberated companies are still debated (Colle et al., 2017; Picard, 2015; Verrier & Bourgeois, 2016), some authors stressing a possible “dark side” (Mécréants, 2016; Picard &

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<sup>1</sup> The term of liberated company is debated (Mattelin et al., 2018). However, it is now well accepted in top-ranked journal (see Picard & Islam, 2019).

Islam, 2019). For example, in liberated companies, some employees can be excluded even when social performance clearly targeted (Gilbert et al., 2018c).

This paper seeks to further resolve this question by examining whether liberated companies are more socially responsible than non-liberated companies, and if so, which managerial practices foster this social performance.

The missing link between liberated companies' practices and social outcomes is sought through an extension of Clarkson's model (1995) of Corporate Social Performance (CSP), which links the managerial dimension to social outcomes. It conceives CSP as "the ability to manage and satisfy the different corporate stakeholders" (Igalens & Gond, 2005, p. 133)<sup>2</sup> and thus strongly emphasizes stakeholder expectations, including those of employees, who contribute to the success of the company (Backhaus, Stone, & Heiner, 2002) and whose satisfaction is critical to organizational survival (Clarkson, 1995; Jenkin, McShane, & Webster, 2011). Clarkson's model aims to be easier to operationalize than the other principle CSP models, offering a solution to measure performance as a multidimensional construct in accordance with the organization's stakeholders. Moreover, by focusing on stakeholder expectations, social performance can be measured through employees' satisfaction and perceptions (Clarkson, 1995).

The empirical test is based on expert interviews and a quasi-experimental quantitative study. In particular, we focus on managerial practices found in the liberated company's literature and validated by expert interviews. In order to properly identify the effects of these managerial practices on social outcomes, we compare two units ("liberated" and "non-liberated") of the same French industrial company. In the "non-liberated" unit, we interviewed 50 employees; 59 in the "liberated" unit, for a total of 109 employees out of 144 overall. By comparing the social outcomes from these two units, we control for external contingencies. Furthermore, this methodology avoids the critiques levelled at CSP empirical studies in determining what constitutes an appropriate or "good" level of social performance (Van Oosterhout & Heugens, 2008).

This study provides several contributions. First, it offers empirical evidence about the effects of liberated companies on social performance, which represents a key managerial and academic concern (Anact, 2015; Chabanet et al., 2017; Hamel & Zanini, 2016). While an increasing number of managers are interested in this organizational form, to initiate or give up "liberation", they need to know its potential effects. Second, it contributes to the CSP literature

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<sup>2</sup> "Corporate Social Performance" refers to the theoretical framework whereas "social performance" refers to measuring organizational performance in social terms, i.e. toward employees at the organizational level of analysis.

based on Clarkson's model (1995) as we focus on managerial practices related to employees. The managerial dimension of CSP receives still little attention (Jamali, 2008), and the link with the outcome portion of the model remains underexplored (Bourgel, 2018). Third, research remain to be done as empirical studies on social dimension remain scarce compared to economic and environmental studies (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018; Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003).

The paper is structured as follows. The first part provides the theoretical framework and hypotheses development. The second part looks at the methodology used in this research. The results are presented and discussed before concluding with the limitations and avenues for future research.

## **1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1.1. LITERATURE REVIEW OF LIBERATED COMPANIES' MANAGERIAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES**

Liberated companies are usually defined as an "organizational form in which employees have complete freedom and responsibility to take actions that they, not their managers, decide are best" (Getz, 2009, p. 34) or "a new combination of a humanist philosophy, an adhocratic structure, processes enabling employees' autonomy and accountability, and democratic management practices based on trust" (Mattelin Pierrard, Bocquet, & Dubouloz, 2018). These definitions foster human agency at the core of the organization (Autissier & Guillain, 2017). Liberated companies target a social dimension of performance as they tend to respond to "social expectations (democracy, liberty, autonomy, generations Y and Z)" (Gilbert et al., 2018c, p. 287), happiness at work leading to a higher performance (Casalegno, 2017).

Getz (2009) and Carney & Getz (2009), anchoring their work in motivation theories, present a theoretical virtuous circle in which employee satisfaction leads to "world class" economic performance and is mutually reinforcing. Picard & Lanuza (2016) report that employees perceive positive effects, beyond economic ones, thanks to a reappropriation of work. The results of Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni (2018) support a positive effect of liberated company policies on well-being at work, as do Colle et al. (2017) on the quality of work life. However, social indicators like turnover find no consensus. Hamel & Zanini (2016), Rousseau & Ruffier (2017) and d'Iribarne (2017) indicate an increase in turnover when liberated companies are implemented, whereas Carney & Getz (2009) conclude that the rate is below the mean. Among the few empirical studies available on liberated companies' effects,

some depict negative outcomes. At the individual level, Picard's critical review (2015) shows a deep-seated malaise amongst employees of liberated companies through interviews and observations using an interpretivist approach. Liberated companies are "demanding" toward employees (Hamel & Breen, 2007) and seem to exclude employees or potential employees who are not at ease with freedom and autonomy (Chabanet et al., 2017; Colle et al., 2017; Fox & Pichault, 2017; Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018; Rousseau & Ruffier, 2017). Some may have some difficulties to adapt to the change that represents liberated companies and be exposed to psychosocial risks (Holtz, 2017; Picard, 2015). At Zappos, a liberated company, 15% of employees would have left the company because of the additional work following the lack of managers (d'Iribarne, 2017). Even though the literature depicts some negative effects of liberated companies, these effects seem to be limited to few employees (i.e. not observable at the organizational level of analysis). This is reflected in the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1-** Liberated companies are more socially responsible than non-liberated companies.

The lack of consensus suggests that being liberated or not is not enough to observe its effect(s) on social performance. Liberated companies appeared in a context of managerial practices renewal (Gilbert, Raulet-Croset, & Teglborg, 2018b). Following Picard (2015) and Warrick et al. (2016), liberated companies are characterized by a distinctive set of practices. These typical managerial practices, like abolishment of external signs of power or no hierarchical control, could lead to better employee satisfaction (Getz, 2009). This is consistent with the findings of Colle et al. (2017) in an exploratory qualitative study. They observe an improvement in the quality of work life under certain conditions: coherence between discourse and practices, the need to maintain a framework composed of values, the right to make mistakes, self-direction and active internal communication between teams. Additionally, Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni (2018) note a perceived improvement in well-being. Their research leads them to propose a conceptual framework of liberation management in which good working environment, happiness and well-being are mediators between liberated companies and technological change and performance. In particular, liberated companies have specific key managerial practices: flattening of the hierarchy, participation, autonomy and mutual adjustment (Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018).

**Table 1: Review of liberated company's managerial practices**

<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBERATED COMPANIES<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>MANAGERIAL PRACTICES</b>	<b>KEY SOURCES</b>
<b>Integrated and self-managed teams</b>	1. Self-managed teams	Carney & Getz, 2009 ; Getz, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2018c; Gilbert, Teglberg, & Raulet-Croset, 2017; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Jacquinet & Pellissier-Tanon, 2015; Peters, 1992
	2. Integration of support functions in units	Gilbert et al., 2017; Hamel, 2011; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000
<b>Standardization by results</b>	3. Information transparency (both strategic and operational)	Arnaud, Mills, & Legrand, 2016; Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet et al., 2017; Getz, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2018c ; Ravasi & Verona, 2001
<b>Supportive practices</b>	4. Guiding roles of managers	Fox & Pichault, 2017; Getz, 2009; Warrick et al., 2016
	5. Personalized support	Fox & Pichault, 2017; Getz, 2009; Holtz, 2017; Verrier & Bourgeois, 2016; Warrick et al., 2016
<b>Collective and participative practices</b>	6. Participative decision-making	Chabanet et al., 2017; Colle et al., 2017; Getz, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2017; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Jacquinet & Pellissier-Tanon, 2015; Rousseau & Ruffier, 2017; Warrick et al., 2016
	7. Right to make mistakes	Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet et al., 2017; Peters, 1992
<b>Autonomy and accountability</b>	8. Self-direction	Getz, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2018c; Hamel, 2011; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Jacquinet & Pellissier-Tanon, 2015; M. Y. Lee & Edmondson, 2017
	9. Flexible working organization	Colle et al., 2017; d'Iribarne, 2017; Fox & Pichault, 2017; Getz, 2009; Hamel & Breen, 2007
<b>Symbolic practices (related to the philosophy and values of liberated companies)</b>	10. Abolishment of external signs of power	Arnaud, Mills, & Legrand, 2016; Getz, 2009, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2018c; Gilbert et al., 2017; Hamel & Breen, 2007
	11. Corporate event (formal or informal)	Carney & Getz, 2009; Warrick et al., 2016

A deep examination of the literature is therefore needed to identify the core practices associated with liberated companies. This study, as it deals with social outcomes related to employees, reviews managerial practices that may address employee expectations. Our literature review leads to the identification of 11 managerial practices related to the

<sup>3</sup> Characteristics are adapted from a systemic analysis of the liberated company literature (Mattelin Pierrard, Bocquet, & Dubouloz, 2018).



characteristics of liberated companies (Mattelin Pierrard et al., 2018). The results are summarized in table 1 above.

Consequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**Hypothesis 2-** Liberated companies' typical managerial practices have a positive effect on social performance.

The literature review above presents expected outcomes from both a theoretical point of view and an empirically observed. Hence, the question of liberated companies' effects on social outcomes is still open. Empirical liberated company literature about outcomes remain scarce, and to our knowledge quantitative studies are lacking. At the same time, we need a theoretical framework to link managerial practices and outcomes at the organizational level of analysis.

## **1.2 UNPACKING THE LINK BETWEEN LIBERATED COMPANIES AND SOCIAL PERFORMANCE WITH CLARKSON'S MODEL**

We propose to examine the link between typical liberated companies' practices and social outcomes through an extension of Clarkson's model (1995) of Corporate Social Performance (CSP) dealing with very contemporary organizational issues. As it connects the managerial dimension to social performance, it enlarges the concept of performance beyond the economic dimension and proposes to evaluate social performance with subjective measures.

Unlike other CSP conceptualisations, this model establishes a clear link between managerial practices and social performance. This is reflected in Clarkson's conception of CSP: "the ability to manage and satisfy the different corporate stakeholders" as summarized by Igalens and Gond (2005, p. 133) who identify the main theoretical CSP models. More precisely, Clarkson's model puts an emphasis on both the managerial dimension of stakeholders and related outcomes such as employee satisfaction and attitude and links the managerial dimension to its outcomes. Thus, stakeholders management is "theoretically" integrated in the model (Gond & Crane, 2010).

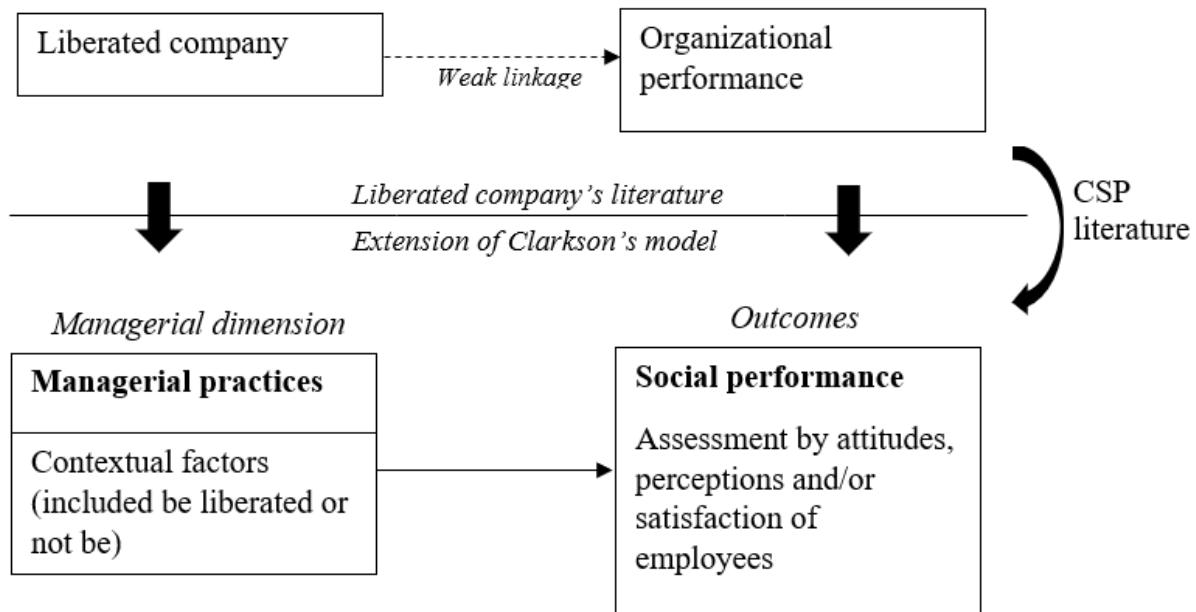
This model puts a strong emphasis on organizational issues for groups of stakeholders: employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, public stakeholders, and competitors. Stakeholders are "persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future" (Clarkson, 1995, p.106). Among them, employees are considered as primary (Clarkson, 1995), even salient stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997), since they contribute to the success of the company (Backhaus et al., 2002) and their



satisfaction is critical to organizational survival (Clarkson, 1995; Jenkin et al., 2011). Based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), it assumes that all stakeholders matter and that none of them should be predominant in organizational issues (Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Thus, to be effective, an organization must “meet or exceed stakeholder expectations regarding social issues” (Husted, 2000, p. 27). Moreover, Clarkson’s model focuses on multidimensional performance. These dimensions may be categorized according to an organization’s stakeholders (i.e. economic performance for shareholders, social for employees). Therefore, employees can assess social performance of the organization with subjective measures in terms of expectations, perception or satisfaction (Clarkson, 1995; Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2001; Jamali, 2008; Vong & Wong, 2013; Wood, 1991, 2010). Social performance needs to be evaluated “as [it is] experienced by employees” (Van Buren III, 2005, p. 688).

Even if Clarkson does not resolve all this issue’s difficulties, his model appears easier to operationalize than the other principle CSP models (i.e. Carroll, 1979; Wood, 1991; Wood & Jones, 1995) in that he offers solutions to measure performance in accordance with the organization’s stakeholders. While Clarkson does not detail what the managerial dimension encompasses, he specifies that CSP is grounded in the organization’s reality (1995), i.e. what they do and to what extent they do it (Gond & Crane, 2010). Therefore, as this model interrogate “how firms really do perform” (Gond & Crane, 2010, p. 687), we suggest that the managerial dimension is observable through practices to effectively “capture the actions” (ibid., p.681). As explained earlier, employees are clearly targeted in liberated company literature as the key beneficiaries of typical managerial practices. Yet one of their key roles (as stakeholder) recognized in the CSP literature is to evaluate outcomes (Clarkson, 1995; Wood & Jones, 1995). Indeed, stakeholder perceptions offer a good measure (Igalens & Gond, 2005) to evaluate whether liberated companies’ managerial practices lead to social performance. Figure 1 links conceptual and operational realms to provide an overview of Clarkson’s model extension to study the effects of liberated companies on organizational performance.

**Figure 1: Extension of Clarkson's model (adapted from Priem & Butler, 2001)**



## 2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The objective of the study is to examine whether liberated companies affect social performance. To this end, we use a quasi-experimental method. More generally, experiments are “well-suited to examine causal relationships” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 7). A methodology overview is available in appendix A (p.28).

### 2.1 EXPERT INTERVIEWS

This research is based primarily on qualitative data to elucidate the passage of liberated companies' measures from theory to practice (Brulhart, 2005). During July and August 2018, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews with experts for an equivalent of 10:40 of recordings or 159 pages of transcripts. We selected these experts for diversity in their positions and their links with liberated companies: three current and one former senior managers in liberated companies (Haute-Savoie Habitat, Poult and Teraitem), two academics (including one with a critical approach), one well-known consultant and writer on “liberation” in companies, one member of an executive's association (“Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants”) and one president of an association interested in new forms of organization and management (MOM21).

**Table 2: Identification of liberated companies' typical managerial practices**

MANAGERIAL PRACTICES	LITERATURE REVIEW <sup>(1)</sup>	EXPERT INTERVIEWS <sup>(1)</sup>	TYPICAL MANAGERIAL PRACTICES
1. Self-managed teams	++	++	X
2. Integration of support functions in units	+	+	/
3. Information transparency (both strategic and operational)	++	++	X
4. Guiding roles of managers	+	-	/
5. Personalized support	++	++	X
6. Participative decision-making	++	++	X
7. Right to make mistakes	++	++	X
8. Self-direction	++	++	X
9. Flexible working organization	+	++	/
10. Abolishment of external signs of power	++	-	/
11. Corporate event (formal or informal)	+	-	/
12. Employee participation in strategy development process	-	++	/
13. Sharing value created	-	+	/
<b>Number of typical managerial practices</b>			<b>6</b>

<sup>(1)</sup> - : Non representative practice; +: Representative practice; ++: Typical practice

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by phone or in videoconferences. The interview guide had two parts. The first is composed of open questions (checking expert status, experience related to liberated companies, performance and typical practices associated with liberated companies). For example, we ask them “Which managerial practices are inseparable from liberated company?”; “On the contrary, which managerial practices would call the liberated company status into question?”; “In your opinion, does the adoption of the liberated company lead to a positive, negative or neutral effect on the organizational performance? What kind of performance?”. The second, with scale questions of about 35 affirmations linked with liberated companies' managerial practices, enables validation of the typical practices extracted from the literature. The question asked is “How do you qualify each of the following statements? 1. Incompatible with the liberated company (this practice cannot be present in a liberated company) 2. Unrepresentative of the liberated company (this practice may be present in a liberated company, but it is not typical, 3. Representative of the liberated company (this practice

is present and typical), 4. Inseparable from the liberated company (without this practice the liberated company status cannot be granted)”.

Table 2 presents the liberated company managerial practices selected after the expert interviews. To be accepted for inclusion, practices must be fully validated (“++”) by both the literature and expert interviews (a minimum of seven experts must consider the practice “representative”, or non-representative for reverse questions, and eight for being included as “typical”). Two practices supplement the list following the expert interviews, *employee participation in the strategy development process* and *sharing value created*. However, since they are not representative in literature, they are not added as typical managerial practices. In the end, six managerial practices were included in the survey. These six practices were subject to a double checking by a well-known liberated company chief officer by email. His feedback supports the six selected practices, even if, from his point of view, some practices should be added to the shortlist like “abolishment of external signs of power”. However, we followed our initial intent to select only managerial practices fully validated all along the process.

## 2.2 QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Since our aim is to determine whether liberated companies are more socially responsible than non-liberated ones, and following the theoretical framework combining liberated company literature and Clarkson’s model, the research is drawn from a quasi-experimental quantitative study. The quasi-experimental approach fits Clarkson’s recommendations in terms of performance evaluation since it depends on (1) the industry and the fit with criteria of performance, profit and stakeholder satisfaction; (2) the determination of an appropriate level of performance.

The empirical study is based on a French industrial firm that is liberated in certain units. The company specialises in innovative coatings and wires for the high-tech industry. It belongs to a group established in five countries (France, Vietnam, China, Singapore and the United States). The group’s turnover was about 89 million euros in 2017, with 41 million euros for the firm studied. The overall workforce includes 330 employees, 225 of whom work in three French plants. We propose to compare two French units of one plant in order to eliminate the impact of contingent factors. One business unit (“liberated”) has adopted managerial practices associated with liberated companies since 2013, while the other one (“not liberated”) has not adopted such practices. As suggested by Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni (2018) in a liberated companies, performance can be affected by external contingencies and organizational conditions. A comparative study in a partially liberated plant is a good way to isolate the effects

on social performance, i.e. effects that can be directly imputed to typical managerial practices. For example, this method neutralize the potential effects related to the “liberating leader” as he is seen as essential in liberated companies’ literature (Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet et al., 2017; Gilbert et al., 2017). Indeed, the objective of the quasi-experimental approach “is to strengthen causal inference while maintaining internal and external validity without interrupting ‘real life’ through intrusive intervention” (Grant & Wall, 2009, p. 655).

The study was carried out after conducting a semi-structured interview with the chief executive (1 hour 20 minutes), informal discussions with him and the human resources director, a tour of the plant and non-participant observations during four liberated companies’ meetings (January 2018 to May 2019). The questionnaire is structured as follows. First, employees indicated how frequently they used the six managerial practices. Second, they rated the social performance of their unit on four measures (*working environment, loyalty, happiness and satisfaction at work*). Third, they provided information on contextual variables including their unit affiliation, in order to check the coherence between labels and practices, and their perception of pressure from clients (the preliminary interview with the chief executive reveals that the non-liberated unit is subject to more client pressure). We also asked about individual and sociodemographic characteristics.

The questionnaires were filled out face-to-face with each employee in the workplace in November 2018 at various times of the day due to shift work (early morning, evening and night shifts). We surveyed 109 employees (of a total staff of 144): 50 in the non-liberated unit and 59 in the liberated unit, or a 75.69 % response rate. Among non-respondents, one has made a clear refusal, some ran out of time, and the majority was not present (work stoppage, vacations, part-time work or temporary employment). Employees came to the conference room in groups (3 or 4 persons) for the survey, self-administered in order to get more “honest” responses and reduce a potential bias of social desirability (Alt, Díez-de-Castro, & Lloréns-Montes, 2015). The results of this study have been presented to the chief executive, the human resources director and the human resources manager on April 2019.

### **2.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE VARIABLES**

Appendix B (p.29-30) shows the full list and descriptive statistics.

*Dependent variable– Social performance* - The dependant variable called *social performance* is a mean score of four variables, i.e. *working environment, happiness at work, satisfaction at work* and *employee loyalty*. These performance variables were drawn from

existing studies which aimed to assess social performance, and adapted to this specific context (Clarkson, 1995; Martinez-Conesa, Soto-Acosta, & Palacios-Manzano, 2017; Verbeke & Tung, 2013), or about liberated companies' outcomes (Colle et al., 2017; Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018). Since surveys are effective and efficient in assessing stakeholders' perceptions (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), these measures offer an indicator of performance at the organizational level provided by employee perceptions and satisfaction<sup>4</sup>. They were asked, "*Considering the following affirmations in your unit do you*" on a four-point Likert scale: 1= "*Totally agree*", 2= "*Agree*", 3= "*Disagree*" and 4= "*Totally disagree*" (that have been reversed for analysis). Subjective measures are relevant (Clarkson, 1995) because in addition to evaluate, stakeholders "act upon their interests, expectations, experiences, and/or evaluations" (Wood & Jones, 1995, p. 243). Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  of the dependant variable *social performance* is 0.770 that is above the acceptable limit of 0.6.

*Independent variables – Six managerial practices* - The implementation degree of the six liberated company managerial practices is measured through 15 variables, inspired by existing empirical studies (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2003; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Harley, Allen, & Sargent, 2007; Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000; Sharpe, 2006; Wu, Mahajan, & Balasubramanian, 2003). Mean scores are then calculated for all variables including in each practice (detailed in appendix B, p.29-30). Variables were rated on a three-point scale (Shah & Ward, 2003): 1 = "*Always*", 2 = "*Sometimes*" and 3 = "*Never*" (which have been reversed for analysis). They are introduced by "*Evaluate the frequency of implementation of the following practices in your unit.*"<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, paying attention to scale width (number of response alternatives) decreases the risk of nonresponses (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Besides, in a single study, increasing scale width does not affect alpha, especially after three (Cox Iii, 1980; Matell & Jacoby, 1972; Voss, Stem, & Fotopoulos, 2000).

*Control variables*– As this is a quasi-experimental study, control with contextual variables is reduced to client pressure (mean score of) rated on a four-point Likert scale. A dummy variable indicates whether the respondent's unit is liberated.

<sup>4</sup> Sample question: "*Employees are happy at work*".

<sup>5</sup> This is an English translation of the French questionnaire.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Distribution between liberated and non-liberated units is almost equivalent (50 in the liberated unit and 59 in the non-liberated unit). Preliminary analysis is conducted to ensure no violation of assumptions of normality (skewness, kurtosis and normality plot), linearity (scatterplots), multicollinearity (collinearity diagnostic,  $VIF < 4$  and  $Tolerance > 0.2$ ) and homoscedasticity (scatterplots).

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the variables**

	N	MIN.	MAX.	MEAN	MEDIAN	SD
Social performance	109	1	4	2.7003	2.7500	.5823
Liberated	109	0	1	/	/	/
Client pressure	106	1	4	1.94	2	.893
1. Right to make mistakes	108	1.5	3	2.4398	2.5000	.4722
2. Self-direction	109	1.5	3	2.2462	2.2500	.3453
3. Self-managing work teams	109	1	3	2.1239	2.0000	.6241
4. Participative decision-making	108	1	3	1.5880	1.5000	.4091
5. Personalized support	107	1	3	2.0327	2.0000	.6037
6. Information transparency	109	1	3	2.2446	2.3333	.4618

**Table 4: Pearson's correlations and significances**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social performance	-	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
2. Liberated	.424**	-	.002	.272	.000	.000	.005	.004	.001
3. Client pressure	-.339**	-.272**	-	.136	.018	.049	.430	.165	.057
4. Right to make mistakes	.374**	.059	-.108	-	.202	.003	.015	.017	.000
5. Self-direction	.349**	.400**	-.204*	.081	-	.000	.001	.001	.000
6. Self-managing work teams	.533**	.391**	-.161	.262**	.371**	-	.000	.000	.000
7. Participative decision-making	.456**	.246*	-.017	.209*	.307**	.348	-	.000	.000
8. Personalized support	.559**	.253**	-.096	.205*	.306**	.547**	.410**	-	.000
9. Information transparency	.479**	.316**	-.186	.410**	.374**	.590**	.447**	.511**	-

\*\* Significant at .01 level.

\* Significant at .05 level.

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics of the variables used in the study. The relationship between being liberated, the six managerial practices and social performance is investigated using Pearson's correlations (see table 4). The numbers below the diagonal are coefficients and above the results of the test for statistical significance. An examination of the correlations reveals that being part of the liberated unit is significantly and positively related to social



performance at the  $p < 0.001$  level ( $r = 0.424$ ,  $n = 109$ ). The results also indicate that client pressure is significantly but negatively related to social performance ( $r = -0.339$ ,  $n = 106$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As expected, managerial practices positively and significantly correlate to social performance, whether it be the *right to make mistakes* ( $r = 0.374$ ,  $n = 108$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), practices related to *self-direction* ( $r = 0.349$ ,  $n = 109$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), *self-managing work teams* ( $r = 0.533$ ,  $n = 109$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), *participative decision-making* ( $r = 0.456$ ,  $n = 108$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), *personalized support* ( $r = 0.559$ ,  $n = 107$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or *information transparency* ( $r = 0.479$ ,  $n = 109$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

We use an independent sample t-test to identify differences in social performance and managerial practices between the liberated and non-liberated units. The last two columns of table 5 show the values of the t-test and the effect size (percentage of the variance explained by unit affiliation) after checking Levene's test for equality of variances (not included here). The t-test shows that there is a significant difference between the two units regarding *social performance* ( $p < .001$ ), as there is for *client pressure* ( $p < .05$ ). Looking at managerial practices, as expected, their implementation degree is higher in the liberated unit. However, there is no difference for the *right to make mistakes*.

**Table 5: T-test between liberated and non-liberated units**

	MEANS		MEAN DIFFERENCE	T-TEST	ETA SQUARED <sup>6</sup>
	NON- LIBERATED	LIBERATED			
Social performance	2.4333	2.9266	-.49322	-4.842**	0.2295
Client pressure	2.2000	1.7200	.485	2.883*	0.0777
Right to make mistakes	2.4100	2.4655	-.05552	-.599	0.0035
Self-direction	2.0967	2.3729	-.27621	-4.406**	0.1993
Self-managing work teams	1.8600	2.3475	-.48746	-4.309**	0.1881
Participative decision-making	1.4800	1.6810	-.20103	-2.614*	0.0661
Personalized support	1.8673	2.1724	-.30507	-2.679*	0.0701
Information transparency	2.0867	2.3785	-.29186	-3.450**	0.1149

\*\* Significant at .01 level.

\* Significant at .05 level.

<sup>6</sup>  $Eta\ squared = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N_1 + N_2 - 2)}$  (Pallant, 2016)

In addition, the magnitude of the differences in the means is large ( $\eta^2 > 0.14$  (Pallant, 2016)) except for the *right to make mistakes*. It is consistent with correlations shortage with being liberated (table 4). As recommended by Grant & Wall (2009), the context of a quasi-experimental study may help to explain these results. Indeed, both units are affiliated to the same chief executive. He is the one who decided to “liberate” the plant, yet one of them rejected this. Thus, we can assume that this practice persists in some forms. Indeed, some of the liberated managerial practices may be partially and unofficially adopted.

### 3.2 HIERARCHICAL MULTIPLE REGRESSION

A hierarchical multiple regression is used to assess typical liberated managerial practices effect on social performance after controlling for client pressure and being liberated. With the use of a  $p < 0.001$  criterion for standardized residuals, no outliers among the cases were found in excess of about  $\pm 3.3$  (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

Hierarchical regression provides two models. *Social performance* is the dependant variable in both models. The first includes the dummy variable “*liberated*” (i.e. employees who belong to the liberated unit) in accordance with quasi-experimental design and the control variable client pressure. In model 2, we add managerial practices. Appendix B (p.29-30) summarizes all the variables used in the linear regression. Table 6 displays the standardized  $\beta$  coefficient,  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  with 95% confidence limit.  $R$  for regression is significantly different from zero,  $F(2, 101) = 15.412$ ,  $p < .001$  with  $R^2$  at .219 for model 1 and  $F(8.95) = 14.821$ ,  $p < .001$  with  $R^2$  at .518 for model 2, which indicates that the data satisfactorily fit the models. The adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.518 indicates that more than half of social performance is predicted by model 2 including managerial practices and control variables at  $p < .000$ .  $F$  variation is also significant ( $p < .000$ ). Thus, the inclusion of typical managerial practices of liberated companies explains an additional 29.9% of social performance even after accounting for client pressure and belonging to the liberated unit. We also ran another model, not shown, that adds individual controls (age, sex, management status, socio-professional category and education) that provided non-significant effects on social performance.

The results provided both by models 1 and 2 indicate a significant and positive effect ( $p < 0.05$ ) of being liberated on social performance and support hypothesis 1. This is consistent with the t-tests displayed in the descriptive statistics that show a higher level of the social

performance mean score in the “liberated” unit. Regarding the effect of client pressure, it has also a significant and negative effect on social performance ( $p < 0.01$ ).

To determine if distinctive managerial practices of liberated companies have a significant effect on social performance, we look at model 2. The results indicate that three typical liberated managerial practices predict social performance and have a positive effect: the *right to make mistakes* ( $p < 0.05$ ), *participative decision-making* ( $p < 0.05$ ) and *personalized support* ( $p < 0.001$ ). Their significance is confirmed by their 95% confidence intervals that do not include zero as a possible value except for *self-managed work teams* ( $p < 0.1$ ). In contrast, there is no significant effect of practices related to *self-direction* or *information transparency*. Thus, the results partially support hypothesis 2, which proposes that a higher level of social performance can be expected when typical managerial practices of liberated companies are implemented.

**Table 6: Hierarchical regression analysis on social performance**

	STANDARDIZED $\beta$ COEFFICIENT	
	MODEL 1	MODEL 2
Client pressure	-.242*** (.059)	-.216** (.047)
Liberated	.358** (.105)	.170** (.093)
Right to make mistakes		.213** (.094)
Self-direction		.025 (.135)
Self-managed work teams		.163* (.088) <sup>7</sup>
Participative decision-making		.202** (.114)
Personalized support		.298*** (.084)
Information transparency		-.050 (.123)
R <sup>2</sup>	.234	.555
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.219	.518
F change	15.412***	11.438***
P-value of the overall model	.000	.000

Standard error in brackets.

\*\*\* Significant at .01 level.

\*\* Significant at .05 level.

\* Significant at .1 level.

When significant, standardized  $\beta$  coefficients (table 6) indicate the variation in the dependant variable if the independent variable changes by one standard deviation (provided in table 3). For example, an increase of .6037 for mean personalized support leads to an additional .298 in mean social performance if other independent variables stay constant.

<sup>7</sup> Significant but includes zero as a possible value with 95% confidence intervals.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research extends Clarkson's Corporate Social Performance (CSP) model (1995) to establish the missing link between liberated managerial practices and social performance. According to Clarkson's model and this quasi-experimental study, the results are twofold. First, descriptive statistics (*t*-test) show a significant difference between the "liberated" and "non-liberated" units regarding managerial practices (except *the right to make mistakes*) and social performance. Secondly, we run a regression analysis to examine the link between managerial practices and social performance, all else being equal. Results of regression show that (1) liberated companies are more socially responsible than are non-liberated. These results extend those of Colle et al. (2017) and Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni (2018), whose qualitative studies find beneficial effects of liberated companies on employees. (2) The results also reveal that three managerial practices have a significant and positive effect on social performance (*personalized support, the right to make mistakes and participative decision-making*) whereas three managerial practices do not: *self-managing work teams, self-direction and information transparency*.

According to the literature, these managerial practices influencing social performance are those that best characterize liberated companies. Considering this result, liberated companies are organizations that authorize employee actions as well as "enable" them (Adler & Borys, 1996). Indeed, an "enabling organization is an organization in which the formal rules aimed at the coordination of the actors of the organization by human supervision, as well as technical devices, allow the achievement of the company's objectives while allowing the development of possibilities of action and hence the health of the workers" (Bruère, Bellemare, & Caroly, 2018, p.96). The "enabling" aspect is seen "as experienced by employees" (Adler & Borys, 1996, p.77). Managerial practices influencing social performance are *the right to make mistakes, participative decision-making and personalized support*. All together they represent a specific combination of liberated companies' managerial practices (Carney & Getz, 2009; Peters, 1992; Warrick et al., 2016). Indeed, if employees are encouraged to participate and make decisions, they need to know that mistakes are not systematically sanctioned and that they will be able to succeed (e.g. with personalized support and skills development). Moreover, if everyone could be involved in decision-making, they need to be trained for. This internal consistency between authorizing and enabling employee actions is a characteristic of liberated companies (Mattelin Pierrard et al., 2018).

These combinations of practices may be linked to “bundles”. A bundle is a configuration of practices used in different domains (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018; Shah & Ward, 2003). The liberated company’s literature emphasizes the consistency of the whole organization (Gilbert et al., 2018c; Mattelin Pierrard et al., 2018; Warrick et al., 2016); these “systems” of practices could mutually reinforce their effect on performance (Macduffie, 1995). The recent work of Delmas & Pekovic (2018) shows that complementarity of practices could be greater: for example, the complementarity between environmental and managerial practices improves economic performance (i.e. employee productivity). This complementarity could be observed between managerial practices or it could be enlarged with environmental practices, social practices and community-related practices (multiple stakeholder perspective).

### *Contributions*

This study provides preliminary empirical evidence of the effects of liberated companies on social performance, which is still a subject for debate in the literature. It gives voices to employees that have hitherto been neglected in literature in favour of “liberating leaders” (Casalegno, 2017; Dortier, 2016). Contributions to CSP literature are threefold. First, it contributes to the CSP literature due to the extension of Clarkson’s model (1995) as we focus on managerial practices linked to social outcomes. Indeed, the managerial dimension of CSP still receives little attention, and the link with the model’s outcome dimension remains underexplored (Jamali, 2008). The CSP literature needs further research regarding stakeholder management and managerial levers leading to performance (Bourgel, 2018). Second, since data has been collected for the specific need of this study grounded in CSP Clarkson’s model, it represents an attempt to re-coupling CSP models and CSP data as Gond and Crane (2010) called for. Third, empirical studies on the social dimension remain scarce compared to economic and environmental studies (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018). Thus, managerial practices should be carefully further studied for their effects on social performance, as financial and environmental performance research is still in the majority.

From a managerial perspective, it is not appropriate to follow all managerial fashions, as Zerbib (2019) reminds us. The CSP framework is thus useful in questioning new managerial models that aim to face the challenge of achieving multidimensional performance and exploring “the social impact of corporations on societies” (Gond & Crane, 2010, pp. 696–697). This study provides evidence on the effects of liberated companies on social performance, which represents a key managerial concern (Anact, 2015; Chabanet et al., 2017). While an increasing number of managers are interested in liberated companies, to initiate or enable “liberation”,

they need to know its potential effects. Using Clarkson's model, this work is meant to be comprehensible to practitioners since stakeholder approaches are recognized as "easy to grasp by managers as most firms understand and define obligations and responsibilities vis-a-vis their traditional stakeholders" (Jamali, 2008, p. 229). Besides, employees are crucial stakeholders to firm survival (Clarkson, 1995). Thus, employees' assessment of social performance is a key concern both for managers and organizations (Van Buren III, 2005).

From an empirical and methodological perspective, one of the key benefits of quasi-experiments is that they rein in contingent factors as well as differences in strategy, culture and structure. Moreover, despite their many advantages, quasi-experimental studies are greatly lacking even though they ensure that studies are equally relevant for practitioners, as they fit their actual interests (Grant & Wall, 2009), and for academics.

#### *Limitations and avenues for future researches*

We identify three main limitations to this study that may lead to interesting future research. First, this study, as it takes place in one organization, needs to be replicated with a larger sample, another context and/or longitudinally (as stakeholders' perceptions may evolved) in order to be generalizable (Shadish et al., 2002). Indeed, we must interpret carefully results as they come from one case.

Second, regarding the strategic vision of well-known liberated companies - "Doing even more and better for less, cultivating love for our customers, remaining in Hallencourt and respecting the land of our children" (FAVI), "Engaged together for a better world" (Chronoflex) or "Build an intelligent territory, the territory of tomorrow, for the citizens of Haute-Savoie" (Teractem) - they tend to respond to a diversity of stakeholders in accordance with CSP literature grounded in stakeholder theory. As recommended by several authors, academics could take into account the diversity of stakeholders (Jamali, 2008; Van Oosterhout & Heugens, 2008). Following an institutional perspective, organizations aim to gain legitimacy, internally and externally, through reputation or goodwill for example (Backhaus et al., 2002; Orlitzky et al., 2003). Thus, organizational performance is a consequence of legitimacy. Future work may observe if liberated companies help in gaining legitimacy toward internal and/or external stakeholders.

Third, we focus on one outcome, social performance, whilst the liberated company literature identifies several outcomes and multidimensional performance (economic, social, environmental and societal) with mediating effects. Getz (2009), using motivation theories and ethnographic methodology, presents a virtuous circle in which employee satisfaction leads to "world class" economic performance, as seen in the subtitle of Carney and Getz's book (2009):

*“Free Your Employees and Let Them Lead Your Business to Higher Productivity, Profits, and Growth”*. While some other authors note “quick and strong performance effects” (Foss, 2003, p. 334) following the adoption of liberated company practices, they have not precisely studied this link. This observation is based on the increase in operating profit and return on equity (DeFillippi & Lehrer, 2011; Verona & Ravasi, 2003). Colle et al. (2017), based on a single case study, found a positive effect on innovation in accordance with expected and intended outcomes (Carney & Getz, 2009; Getz, 2009; Hamel, 2011; Peters, 1992). Ramboarison-Lalao and Gannouni (2018) reveal that assistant managers perceive positive effects on creativity and technological change mediated by social performance. Future study may examine the mediating effects of social performance on innovation and economic performance in line with the “do well by doing good” instead of the “do good and do well” of Wood & Jones (1995, p. 235).



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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Methodology overview

STEPS OF ANALYSIS	DETAILS	EMPIRICAL PROCEDURE
1. Identification of typical managerial practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature review</li> <li>Nine expert interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross validation between literature and interviews' results + one final checking</li> </ul>
2. Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Test of the questionnaire</li> <li>Self-administered questionnaires over three days at employee's workplace</li> <li>75.69 % response rate</li> </ul>	
3. Descriptive statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relation between being liberated and social performance</li> <li>Comparison between liberated and non-liberated units regarding social performance and managerial practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Correlation matrix</li> <li>T-test</li> </ul>
4. Hierarchical regression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Total sample (N=109)</li> <li>Effect of typical managerial practices on social performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hierarchical regression<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Data were analysed using SPSS version 25.



## Appendix B: Variables description and descriptive statistics

DESCRIPTION		MIN	MAX	N	MEAN	STAND. DEV	MEDIAN
<i>DEPENDANT VARIABLE</i>							
Social performance	• Working environment	1	4	108	2.7500	.7380	3
	• Happiness at work	1	4	106	2.4500	.7700	3
	• Satisfaction at work	1	4	109	2.5700	.8320	3
	• Employees loyalty	1	4	108	3.0400	.6100	3
<i>All questions are four-point Likert-type scales.</i>							
<i>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES</i>							
Right to make mistakes	• Employees allowed to make mistakes without risk of blame or rejection.	1	3	107	2.3738	.6069	2
	• Employees encouraged to learn from their mistakes.	1	3	107	2.5000	.6780	3
Self-direction	• Employees allowed to decide how to go about getting their job done, the way to do their job.	1	3	108	2.3600	.6620	2
	• Accountability in work and results	1	3	109	2.5400	.6310	3
	• Freedom to accomplish work without hierarchical validation	1	3	107	2.2500	.6460	2
	• Managers do not monitor employees	1	3	108	1.8056	.5546	2



DESCRIPTION		MIN	MAX	N	MEAN	STAND. DEV	MEDIAN
Self-managing work teams	• Team members jointly decide on their work.	1	3	106	2.000	.7830	2
	• Employees encouraged to develop a variety of skills for the functioning of their team.	1	3	108	2.2600	.6750	2
Participative decision making	• Integration of HR activities in units (recruitment, compensation policy)	1	3	107	1.2600	.4620	1
	• Decisions collectively or self-taken, without hierarchical appeal.	1	3	108	1.9200	.5820	2
Personalized support	• Personalized support (regular training, coaching, personal development, ...)	1	3	107	1.9300	.6830	2
	• Our managers help us to develop ourselves, either professional skills or personal soft skills.	1	3	107	2.1400	.6930	2
Information transparency	• Access to information needed for work, both strategic and operational.	1	3	108	2.3500	.6310	2
	• Direct communication between employees without required hierarchical appeal or procedures.	1	3	108	2.3600	.6760	2
	• Goals, objectives and strategies are communicated to employees.	1	3	108	2.0300	.6900	2
<i>All questions are three-point Likert-type scales</i>							
<b>CONTROL VARIABLES</b>							
Liberated	Be part of liberated unit. <i>Dummy variable</i>	0 (No)	1 (Yes)	109	/	/	/
Client pressure	<i>Four-point Likert-type scales.</i>	1	4	106	1.94	.8930	2