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Résumé de l'article

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ABSTRACT

The effects of management innovations on performance are understudied, especially with respect to social performance. Our study contributes to this debate by examining the potential benefits of adopting liberation management, a typical management innovation when it comes to addressing a social performance gap. If employee empowerment is regarded as a lever of social performance in liberated companies, the extant literature does not reach a consensus on these alleged positive effects either. Our quantitative method – a quasi-experiment comparing two units (one liberated and another non-liberated) of a French industrial company – allows us to conclude that three liberation practices can in fact have a positive effect on social performance: participative decision-making, personalised support, and right to make mistakes.

Keywords: Management innovation, management practices, liberated company, liberation management, social performance, quasi-experiment

Résumé

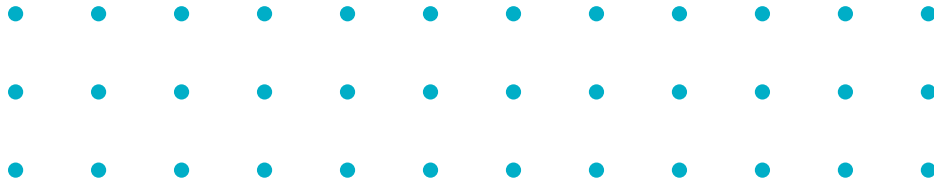
Les effets des innovations managériales sur la performance sociale sont sous-étudiés. Nous contribuons à ce débat en examinant les avantages d'un management libéré, une innovation censée combler un écart de performance sociale. Si l'autonomisation des salariés est un levier de performance sociale dans les entreprises libérées, la littérature n'établit pas de consensus sur les effets positifs supposés. Notre méthode quantitative – une quasi-expérience comparant deux unités (l'une libérée et l'autre non libérée) d'une entreprise industrielle – nous permet de conclure que trois pratiques de libération affectent positivement la performance sociale : la prise de décision participative, l'accompagnement personnalisé et le droit à l'erreur.

Mots-Clés : Innovation managériale, pratiques managériales, entreprise libérée, performance sociale, management libéré, quasi-expérimentation

Resumen

Los efectos de las innovaciones de gestión en los resultados sociales están poco estudiados. Contribuimos a este debate examinando los beneficios de la gestión liberada (Getz, 2009), una innovación que supuestamente cierra una brecha de desempeño social. Aunque la capacitación de los empleados es una palanca para el rendimiento social en las empresas liberadas, no hay consenso en la bibliografía sobre los supuestos efectos positivos. Nuestro método cuantitativo – un cuasiexperimento que compara dos unidades (una liberada y otra no) de una empresa industrial – nos permite concluir que tres prácticas de liberación afectan positivamente al rendimiento social: la toma de decisiones participativa, el acompañamiento personalizado y el derecho al error.

Palabras clave: Innovación de gestión, empresa liberada, práctica de gestión, desempeño social, gestión de liberación, métodos cuasiexperimentales



Management innovations are often described as playing a critical role in organisational performance and renewal (Khosravi *et al.*, 2019; Damanpour & Aravind, 2012; Damanpour, 2020), even more so since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis (Neeley, 2021). Management innovations are defined broadly as “the introduction of management practices, processes and structures that are intended to further organisational goals” (Volberda *et al.*, 2013, p. 1; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008). However, empirical studies on the effects of management innovations are still scarce, particularly with respect to social performance and other non-economic dimensions (known as “soft outcomes”, see Walker *et al.*, 2015). Social performance can be understood as the extent to which employee expectations are or are not being met (as measured through indicators like *employee satisfaction* or *retention rates*, along the lines of Bocquet *et al.*, 2019).

Liberation management, which amounts to adopting an “organisational form in which employees have complete freedom and responsibility to take actions that they, not their managers, decide are best” (Getz, 2009, p. 34), is a popular management innovation (e.g., Fox, 2020; Hamel & Breen, 2007). An ever-increasing number of companies, especially in France and in Belgium (e.g., Michelin, Kiabi, Décathlon), have been adopting liberation management (Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2019). At the core of this innovation lies the ambition to address a social performance gap through employee empowerment (Getz, 2009; Picard, 2015). Liberated companies can thus be viewed as a typical management innovation with respect to social performance.

However, the extant empirical literature does not seem to reach a consensus on the alleged positive effects of liberation on social performance either (see Appendix B). While some claim there are clear benefits in the form of increased quality of work life (Corbett-Etchevers *et al.*, 2019) or greater well-being at work (Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018), others highlight potential dark sides, such as mental exhaustion (Picard & Islam, 2019). A plausible explanation for these mixed results could be the lack of agreement on how to measure the effects of liberation management on social performance, with some studies focusing on objective criteria (e.g., turnover rates, see Hamel & Zanini, 2016) and others on more subjective criteria (e.g., satisfaction at work, see Getz, 2009).

In short, there is undeniably a need to investigate the effects of management innovations on social performance. Accordingly, our research question can be stated as follows: what can we learn from liberation management, a typical management innovation when it comes to addressing a social performance gap? In line with a growing consensus in both literatures (e.g., Bouville & Alis, 2014; Bocquet *et al.*, 2019; Warrick *et al.*, 2016; Battistelli *et al.*, 2023), we operationalise liberation management by looking at its core practices (six in total). We then investigate their effects on social performance in a quasi-experiment study comparing two units (one liberated and another non-liberated) of Thermocompact, a French industrial company. This should allow us to tackle the difficult task of isolating the contingencies related to internal and/or external contextual

factors. Our results are based on a survey asking questions on four variables: *working conditions*, *loyalty*, *satisfaction*, and *happiness at work*.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by presenting our conceptual framework based on the management innovation and liberation management literatures, before introducing our quasi-experimental quantitative methodology. We then go over our main findings, stressing the positive effect of three management practices on social performance: *participative decision-making*, *personalised support*, and *the right to make mistakes*. We conclude with a discussion of these results, of our main contributions and of three limitations sketching potential avenues for future research.

Conceptual framework

Management innovations and their contrasting effects on performance

Adopting a management innovation to address a performance gap

Studying the impact of adopting an innovation (whether managerial, technological, etc.) is by no means a new topic of interest (Camisón & Villar-López, 2014; Damanpour, 2020). Yet, there remain important theoretical questions surrounding the adoption of management innovations specifically, notably concerning their potential effects on performance (Damanpour, 2020; Walker *et al.*, 2015). The extant literature posits that a management innovation is adopted by an organisation to harness its benefits (for its members and/or for society at large). That is, adopting a management innovation is usually viewed as the result of a strategic decision based on expected results, with several authors including targeted outcomes in their definition. For instance, Birkinshaw *et al.* (2008) and Volberda *et al.* (2013, p. 1), define management innovation as “the introduction of management practices, processes and structures that are intended to further organisational goals”.

This commonly accepted definition rests on the assumption of human rationality lying at the core of the theory of the firm, an economic school of thought which frames the adoption decision as an efficient choice resulting from a cost-benefit analysis (Volberda *et al.*, 2014) and identification of a “performance gap” (Zaltman *et al.*, 1973), i.e., “the perceived difference between an organisation’s potential and actual accomplishments” (Damanpour, 2020, p. 222). Management innovation is thus seen as central to maintaining and/or improving organisational performance and efficiency (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012), while ensuring sustainability in a context of uncertainty (Hollen *et al.*, 2013). This can sometimes result in a “pro-innovation bias” (Rogers, 1995), leading organisational leaders “to take risks of unintended, unexpected, and undesired outcomes and allocate resources to innovation” (Damanpour, 2020, p.7) as they view it in a highly positive light. Empirical studies are therefore needed to clarify the outcomes management innovations can effectively bring about, whether economic or non-economic.

Hard vs. soft outcomes

There are two types of outcomes associated with the adoption of a management innovation (Walker *et al.*, 2015). *Hard outcomes* refer to economic results or operational performance, for instance in terms of *labour productivity* or *profitability*. Research is primarily focused on these purely economic effects (e.g., Camisón & Villar-López, 2014). Hard outcomes further include *competitive advantage* and its impact on financial and *business performance* (Besbes *et al.*, 2013). Another strand of research focuses on the effects of management innovations on other types of innovation, showing contrasting results: Mol and Birkinshaw (2013) find a positive impact on *product innovation*, while Gunday *et al.* (2011) identify adverse effects.

The management innovation literature is also interested in so-called *soft outcomes* having to do with non-economic performance. Soft outcomes are still largely understudied, as evidenced by Khosravi *et al.*'s (2019) meta-analysis conducted in line with Luk *et al.* (2008); this is confirmed by Walker *et al.*'s (2015) meta-analysis showing that only 19 empirical studies out of 52 include a non-economic dimension of performance (such as *customer satisfaction*, *formation of alliances with external players* and *reinforcement of legitimacy*). Even fewer papers are dedicated to our topic of interest, namely, social performance (or to what extent employee expectations are being met or not) by looking at variables such as *quality of work life*, *happiness at work* or *employee satisfaction* (see appendix A). Some find a positive effect (e.g., Camison & Villar-López, 2010): Jiménez-Jiménez and Sanz-Valle (2011) conducted a quantitative study using objective measures to conclude that management innovations can have a positive impact on *absenteeism* and *turnover rates*; in the same vein, Wong *et al.* (2011) show that *decentralised organisations* can lead to gains in social performance. Other studies indicate a negative effect: for instance, Bouville and Alis (2014) show that *lean practices* may induce adverse effects on social performance, as measured subjectively. Lastly, some studies reveal no effects or only under certain conditions: for example, Bocquet, Dubouloz and Chakor (2019) draw on three case studies of French industrial firms to show that the effects of *lean practices* on *worker health* should be assessed using a combination of lean and Human Resource Management practices that differ along the lean process.

All in all, these contrasting results reveal two major concerns. First, more empirical work is needed to clarify the effects of management innovations on social performance. Second, there are some serious methodological issues surrounding construct measurement (of both management innovations and their outcomes). No consensus has yet emerged on how to measure social performance in particular (see appendix A). To fill this gap, we suggest examining more closely the adoption of liberation management, which can be viewed as a typical management innovation when it comes to improving social performance. As Černe *et al.* (2016) put it, focusing on “employees” *non-technological innovation, not only that of managers, [...] is something that is bound to become even more significant in light of the evolution of contemporary organisational structures towards more horizontal, self-managed (participatory) forms*’ (p. 82) to which liberation management belongs. Besides, employees are at the core of this organisational form in which their satisfaction and happiness is clearly targeted (Getz, 2009). Accordingly, we will argue in the remainder of this paper that specific objectives need to be stated behind the adoption of a management innovation (e.g., increased social performance through employee empowerment in the case of liberation management) so that adequate measures of success can be determined (incl. *indicators of employee satisfaction* or *happiness at work* for liberation management).

Liberation management: a typical management innovation when it comes to addressing a social performance gap

Employees are widely recognised in the liberation management literature as the main recipients of this management innovation (Picard, 2015). Liberation management can thus be viewed as a means to address a social performance gap. This is openly admitted by many top managers who make the decision to adopt liberation practices: so-called “liberating leaders” essentially commit to reshaping workplace relations towards more horizontality and greater empowerment for all (Getz, 2009). This is often done in the hope to improve employee satisfaction and, ultimately, retention rates (Warrick *et al.*, 2016). Some liberating leaders even go a step further and justify these social gains as a lever of economic performance – whether this is the case or not is another important debate, which goes beyond the scope of our paper however. Take Jean-François Zobrist, the founder and ex-CEO of Favi, a famous liberated company. He equates liberation management with “*making employees happy, [which] is very easy! They need to know why they’re doing something and have the absolute freedom to do it as they see fit. [...] This is the essence of the liberated company*”. To which he adds: “[...] *We don’t aim to make profits. Money comes from making workers happy*” (Expectra, 2019, our translation).

In what follows, we will therefore consider liberation management as a typical management innovation when it comes to addressing a social performance gap, due to its commitment to empowering workers. Liberated companies have been gaining interest in the management innovation literature precisely for that reason (Fox, 2020; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Mattelin-Pierrard et Dubouloz, 2019). Accordingly, we can hypothesise that:

H1. Liberation management has a positive effect on social performance.

If top managers usually seem to have the best of intentions when adopting liberation practices, the extant empirical literature does not, however, reach a consensus on the alleged positive effects on social performance (see appendix B). Some claim liberation management is beneficial for employees notably through improving quality of work life (Corbett-Etchevers *et al.*, 2019). Others frame it as benefits in terms of working environment, well-being, and happiness at work, induced by distinctive features of liberated companies (i.e., *no pyramidal hierarchy*, *participatory model of decision*, *autonomy* and *mutual adjustment*, see Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018). Some scholars have been even more critical: for instance, Picard and Islam (2019) have recently highlighted potential dark sides, manifesting as *mental exhaustion*, *scapegoating of contrarian individuals*, or *experiencing normative pressures to be overly happy*.

In short, as with other management innovations, there is undeniably a need to clarify the effects (and most appropriate measurement tools) of liberation management on social performance.

Studying social performance through the adoption of management practices

Now that we have established the need to further investigate the effects of management innovations (incl. liberation management) on social performance, we need to think of a way to do so. There is a growing consensus in the management innovation literature about the usefulness of looking at the adoption of management practices (e.g., Bocquet *et al.*, 2019; Walker *et al.*, 2015). Examining management practices appears indicated

for three main reasons. First, it does justice to the complexity of management innovations by allowing us to describe them more comprehensively (i.e., as the combination of structural effects, management tools and practices). Second, management practices are well suited to compare the effects induced by different management innovations. Third, it allows us to look at tangible results, beyond mere statements of intent and promises made by leadership.

Going back to our topic of interest, this means that we will need to better delineate so-called liberation practices. Management practices are not foreign to the liberation management literature: liberation management has emerged as a concept in a context where management practices were being renewed (Gilbert *et al.*, 2018); moreover, liberated companies have been described before as a distinct set of practices (or even bundles of practices, see Battistelli *et al.*, 2023) aimed at improving social performance (e.g., the absence of external signs of power or hierarchical control, see Picard, 2015; Warrick *et al.*, 2016). Drawing on the literature review by Mattelin-Pierrard (2019), we have identified 11 management practices that are commonly adopted in liberated companies (see table 1).

TABLE 1 Review of liberated company management practices		
Characteristics of liberated companies	Management practices	Key sources
Integrated and self-managed teams	Self-managed teams	Bernstein <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Foss, 2003; Getz, 2009; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2017b; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Peters, 1992
	Integration of support functions in units	Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2017b; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000
Standardisation of results	Information transparency (both strategic and operational)	Arnaud <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Getz, 2012b; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Hamel & Breen, 2007
Supportive practices	Guiding roles of managers	Getz, 2009; Warrick <i>et al.</i> , 2016
	Personalised support	Getz, 2009; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Holtz, 2017; Warrick <i>et al.</i> , 2016
Collective and participative practices	Participative decision-making	Battistelli, 2019; Chabanet <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Getz, 2009; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2017a; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Warrick <i>et al.</i> , 2016
	Right to make mistakes	Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Peters, 1992
Autonomy and accountability	Self-direction	Getz, 2009; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Lee & Edmondson, 2017;
	Flexible working organisation	d'Iribarne, 2017; Getz, 2009; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Sferrazzo & Ruffini, 2021
Symbolic practices (related to the philosophy and values of liberated companies)	Abolishing external signs of power	Aigouy & Granata, 2017; Arnaud <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Getz, 2009, 2012b; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2017a; Gilbert <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Hamel & Breen, 2007
	Corporate events (formal or informal)	Carney & Getz, 2009; Warrick <i>et al.</i> , 2016

Some of these practices are recognised to have a positive effect, directly or indirectly, on well-being at work. Having *the right to make mistakes*, especially for employees facing heavy workloads, is said to increase perceived organisational support and improve self-esteem at work (Wang *et al.*, 2020). *Self-managed teams* also seem to translate into social performance gains by having a positive impact on the variety of tasks performed by employees and their autonomy (Van Mierlo *et al.*, 2005; Cohen & Ledford, 1994). Finally, a recent study indicates a positive relationship between *employee participation* in its different forms (i.e., participation in management, ownership, and company results) and well-being at work (Uribetxebarria *et al.*, 2021).

In another contribution (Battistelli *et al.* 2023), we have argued that liberation management practices can be further divided into two categories: “action-oriented” practices and “enabling” practices. The former includes practices such as *self-direction* or *self-management*, more directly aligned with the core ambition of liberation management (i.e., empowering employees to improve social performance). Enabling practices, such as *information transparency* or *tolerance for mistakes*, can be said to contribute to this goal more indirectly, as they are meant to help employees act by supporting their initiative. Based on this distinction, we further hypothesise that:

H2. “Action-oriented” practices (e.g., *self-direction* or *self-management*, see Battistelli *et al.*, 2023) have a stronger positive impact on social performance than “enabling” practices.

Methodology and data

Our objective is to examine to what extent liberation management may affect social performance. To tackle this question, we came up with a two-step methodology: 1) a combination of a literature review and expert interviews to delineate the core practices of liberated companies (six in total); 2) a quasi-experiment to study the effects of these core practices on social performance.

Expert interviews

In July and August 2018, we conducted 9 semi-structured expert interviews (for a total of 10 hours 40 minutes and 159 pages of transcripts). These were conducted following the qualitative Delphi method (e.g., Sekayi & Kennedy, 2017). Because liberated companies are widely publicised, this method, which gives a voice to a wide range of actors and “encourages honest opinion [,] free from peer group pressure” (Williams & Webb, 1994, p.181), appears to be particularly indicated in the case of liberation management. We also thought it would be suitable for checking the consistency between the practices discussed by the experts interviewed with the practices identified in the literature (see table 1).

The interviews were conducted in person, over the phone or online. We selected the interviewees based on two criteria: first and foremost, their acquaintance with liberation management; second, their different perspectives on the subject (representatives of the industry vs. academia). Our two-part interview guide included open-ended questions (verifying expert status through their acquaintance with liberated companies), and scale questions integrating 35 statements on management practices. Four mutually exclusive answers were possible for each statement: “this practice is: (1) Antinomic with liberated companies (this practice cannot be present in a liberated company)/ (2) Not representative

of liberated companies (this practice may be present in a liberated company but is not distinctive)/ (3) Representative of liberated companies (this practice is present and distinctive)/ (4) Inseparable from liberated companies (without this practice liberated company status cannot be granted)". To be considered a core liberation practice, at least eight experts needed to view it as "inseparable" from liberation management.

Ultimately, by combining Mattelin-Pierrard (2019) literature review and these expert interviews, we were able to retain six management practices as "core liberation practices" (out of the 11 listed in table 1). Three fit into the category of "enabling" practices (i.e., *the right to make mistakes, personalised support and information transparency*) introduced above, while the remaining three can be viewed as "action-oriented" practices (i.e., *self-direction, self-managed teams and participative decision-making*).

Quasi-experiment

It appears from our literature review that there is no quantitative study on the impact of liberation management on social performance. This is somewhat surprising considering the number of empirical studies dedicated to the effects of management innovations more generally. To fill this gap, we decided to conduct a quasi-experiment in a partially liberated company, to "[back up] causal inference while maintaining internal and external validity without interrupting 'real life' through intrusive intervention" (Grant & Wall, 2009, p. 655). Quasi-experiments are well suited for performance evaluation as they come with no requirements in terms of performance levels and are able to control for contextual factors, which are known to have a significant impact on performance. In the liberation management literature more specifically, it is often stressed that benefits resulting from the adoption of liberation practices might have to do with internal or external factors such as the company's size, culture or economic sector (Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018; Corbett-Etchevers *et al.*, 2019) or the centrality of the "liberating leader" (Carney & Getz, 2009; Chabanet *et al.*, 2017; Gilbert *et al.*, 2017a).

We chose to study Thermocompact, a French industrial firm that is part of the Thermo Technologies group (with a turnover of €89 million in 2017 and a total of 330 employees). Our quasi-experiment took place in one of its factories located in Haute-Savoie which is divided into two business units (BU). The wire electrical discharge manufacturing (EDM) unit (described in what follows as the liberated unit) started implementing liberation management practices in 2013; the surface coating (SC) unit (described hereafter as the non-liberated unit) preferred not to adopt liberation management. In other words, leadership left the BUs free to take up liberation practices or not. Initially, discussions were held with the EDM unit with the goal of co-constructing the "company's future". Liberation management quickly became an object of interest, with several discussion sessions organised around its practices. The employees in the SC unit decided not to get on board as they were under the impression that they would need to adopt the practices discussed by the EDM unit necessarily. It seems they did not understand the intention to "co-craft" organisational changes and so, for the sake of consistency, leadership preferred not to "impose" the adoption of liberation practices onto them. Being a partially liberated plant, Thermocompact thus constituted a great case study for our quasi-experiment: by comparing its two BUs, we were able to isolate the effects of liberation practices on social performance (i.e., effects that can be directly imputed to typical liberation practices, see Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018).

The first part of our quasi-experiment consisted of: a semi-structured interview with the CEO (1 hour 29 minutes), informal discussions with the CEO and the human resources director, a tour of the plant and non-participant observation of eight meetings (January 2018 to September 2019). We then asked the employees from both BUs to fill out a questionnaire structured as follows: first, they were asked to indicate how frequently they apply the six core liberation practices identified above; second, they were asked to rate the social performance of their unit on four measures (*working conditions, loyalty, happiness and satisfaction at work*); third, they were asked about two contextual variables, namely, their unit affiliation (in order to check the coherence between labels and actual practices) and perception of client pressure (as the preliminary interview with the CEO showed that the non-liberated unit was subject to more client pressure mainly because of shorter delivery times).

The questionnaire was administered to workers on site in November 2018. The factory employs 143 people and operates three production shifts (i.e., early morning, evening, and night shifts). In total, 109 workers completed our survey: 50 in the non-liberated unit and 59 in the liberated one, giving us a 76.22% response rate. The respondents came to a conference room in groups of three or four to complete the questionnaire. We went for a self-administered questionnaire as these usually attract more honest responses, thereby reducing social desirability bias (Alt *et al.*, 2015). To preserve the anonymity of respondents, only aggregate results were presented to Thermocompact's CEO and human resources director as well as to the human resources manager of the factory studied.

Description of variables¹

Dependent variable – social performance – The dependent variable *social performance* is the mean score of four variables, namely: *working environment, happiness at work, satisfaction at work* and *employee loyalty*. As already discussed, it is widely admitted in the literature that liberation management is intended to address a social performance gap (i.e., to increase social performance through employee empowerment). However, it is still unclear to what extent it is successful in doing so. A plausible explanation for the mixed results presented above could be the lack of agreement on how to measure the effects of liberation management on social performance. To our knowledge, the evaluation tools brought forward in the literature have not yet been reviewed systematically. Appendix B summarises our attempt to fill this gap, showing there exists a diverse range of indicators, with some studies focusing on objective criteria (e.g., *turnover rates*, see Hamel & Zanini, 2016) and others on more subjective criteria (e.g., *satisfaction of personal needs*, see Getz, 2009).

Despite this lack of consensus on what exact criteria to use, it appears that all the indicators proposed so far are to some extent concerned with employee empowerment. This suggests that social performance may be best assessed in a tailored manner, that is, by using indicators that may not be as relevant for other management innovations (e.g., lean management). For liberation management, we have identified four key variables (again, *working environment, happiness at work, satisfaction at work* and *employee loyalty*) after reviewing existing studies on the social performance of liberated companies (Corbett-Etchevers *et al.*, 2019; Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni, 2018) and the commitments traditionally made by "liberating leaders" (in line with the "performance gap" perspective on management innovations introduced in the previous section).

1. Appendix C provides a detailed overview of the variables and descriptive statistics.

To collect data at the organisational level, we integrated these variables into an employee survey, which is recognised to be an effective and efficient way to gather information on perceptions and satisfaction levels (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Employees were asked to rate on a four-point Likert scale (reversed for analysis) their responses: “Concerning the following statements², in your unit do you 1= *Totally agree*, 2= *Agree*, 3= *Disagree* and 4= *Totally disagree*?”³ Subjective measures like employee perception or satisfaction are widely used in innovation-performance studies (Damanpour, 2020; Walker *et al.*, 2015): “most of the data collected in innovation surveys are qualitative, subjective and censored” (Mairesse & Mohnen, 2010, p.8) and “many variables, whether qualitative or quantitative, are subjective in nature, based largely on the personal appreciation and judgement of the respondents.” (Pinget *et al.*, 2015, p.133). This is even more true for the evaluation of social performance and other soft outcomes, as summarised in appendix A.

The survey was administered to employees for two main reasons. First, we have already seen how they can be regarded as the main recipients of liberation management (Picard, 2015). At the risk of repeating ourselves, liberation management is aimed at filling a social performance gap through employee empowerment. Second, the literature seems to overlook that clear ambition by hardly ever giving a voice to employees and focusing largely on the opinion of liberating leaders instead.

Lastly, the internal consistency of our dependent variable (*social performance*) was checked and validated using Cronbach’s α . Our value was 0.770, which is considered acceptable by most standards (> 0.7 , see Nunnally & Bernstein, 1993).

Independent variables – six management practices – The degree of implementation of the six core liberation practices was measured using 15 variables derived from existing empirical studies. Mean scores were calculated for all the variables included in each practice (as detailed in appendix C). The variables were introduced by the following statement: “Evaluate the frequency of implementation of the following practices in your unit” and rated on a three-point scale (reversed for analysis): 1 = *Always*, 2 = *Sometimes* and 3 = *Never*. We made sure to have a reasonable scale width (i.e., the number of response options) to decrease the non-response risk (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), knowing that this would not affect Cronbach’s α in a single study, especially with three response options (Matell & Jacoby, 1972; Voss *et al.*, 2000).

Control variables – Again, quasi-experiments present the advantage of controlling for a certain number of contextual factors. In our case, these were reduced to perceived client pressure (mean score of), as rated on a four-point Likert scale, and a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent belongs to the liberated or non-liberated unit.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The liberated (50 employees) and non-liberated unit (59 employees) distribution was fairly equal. We conducted a preliminary analysis to check for violations of assumptions of normality (skewness, kurtosis and normality plot), linearity (scatterplots), multicollinearity (collinearity diagnostic, variance inflation factor < 4 and tolerance > 0.2) and homoscedasticity (scatterplots).

2. E.g., “Employees are happy at work”.

3. This is our translation of the French questionnaire.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of our variables. The relationship between liberation status, the six core liberation practices and social performance was investigated using Pearson correlations (see table 3). Pearson coefficients appear below the diagonal and the results of our test for statistical significance above the diagonal. Examination of the correlations reveals that affiliation with the liberated unit is significantly and positively correlated with social performance with a p -value < 0.001 ($r = 0.424$, $n = 109$). The results further indicate that client pressure is significantly but negatively correlated with social performance ($r = -0.339$, $n = 106$, $p < 0.001$). As expected, all six core liberation practices are positively and significantly correlated with social performance, i.e., the right to make mistakes ($r = 0.374$, $n = 108$, $p < 0.001$), self-direction ($r = 0.349$, $n = 109$, $p < 0.001$), self-managed teams ($r = 0.533$, $n = 109$, $p < 0.001$), participative decision-making ($r = 0.456$, $n = 108$, $p < 0.001$), personalised support ($r = 0.559$, $n = 107$, $p < 0.001$) and information transparency ($r = 0.479$, $n = 109$, $p < 0.001$).

TABLE 2
Descriptive statistics of the variables

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Median	σ
Social performance	109	1	4	2.7003	2.7500	.5823
Liberated	109	0	1	/	/	/
Client pressure	106	1	4	1.94	2	.893
Right to make mistakes	108	1.5	3	2.4398	2.5000	.4722
Self-direction	109	1.5	3	2.2462	2.2500	.3453
Self-managing work team	109	1	3	2.1239	2.0000	.6241
Participative decision-making	108	1	3	1.5880	1.5000	.4091
Personalised support	107	1	3	2.0327	2.0000	.6037
Information transparency	109	1	3	2.2446	2.3333	.4618

We used an independent samples t -test to identify potential differences in social performance and implementation of management practices between the liberated and non-liberated units.⁴ The fourth column of table 4 presents our t -test values, showing that: there is a significant difference between the two units with respect to *social performance* ($p < 0.001$) and *client pressure* ($p < 0.001$); the implementation rate of the management practices studied was higher in the liberated unit, as we expected; except for the *right to make mistakes*, for which no significant differences were observed between the two units.

4. Before that, we performed a Levene’s test to check the homogeneity of variance between our two groups (results not included here).

TABLE 3
Pearson correlations and significance

	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 team	.533**	.391**	-.161	.262**	.371**	-	.000	.000	.000
7. Participative decision-making	.456**	.246*	-.017	.209*	.307**	.348	-	.000	.000
8. Personalised 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 4
t-test between liberated and non-liberated units

	Means		Mean difference	t-test
	Non-liberated	Liberated		
Social performance	2.4333	2.9266	-.49322	-4.842**
Client pressure	2.2000	1.7200	.485	2.883**
Right to make mistakes	2.4100	2.4655	-.05552	-.599
Self-direction	2.0967	2.3729	-.27621	-4.406**
Self-managed work team	1.8600	2.3475	-.48746	-4.309**
Participative decision-making	1.4800	1.6810	-.20103	-2.614**
Personalised support	1.8673	2.1724	-.30507	-2.679**
Information transparency	2.0867	2.3785	-.29186	-3.450**

**Significant at .01 level. *Significant at .05 level.

Hierarchical multiple regression

We ran a hierarchical multiple regression to assess the ability of the six core liberation practices to predict social performance, while controlling for the effects of perceived client pressure and liberation status. Using a $p < 0.001$ criterion for standardised residuals, we found no outliers i.e., no observations exceeding, in line with Tabachnick and Fidell (2012).

Two models were evaluated, with *social performance* as the dependent variable in both cases. Model 1 includes two control variables: perceived *client pressure* and, in line with our quasi-experimental design, the dummy variable *liberated* (i.e., whether the respondent belongs to the liberated unit or not). Model 2 further includes the six core liberation practices. Appendix D summarises the variables used in our hierarchical regression. Table 5 displays the standardised coefficient as well as R^2 and adjusted R^2 with a 95% confidence interval. The regression coefficient is significantly different from zero, i.e., $F(2, 101)=15.412$, $p < 0.001$ with R^2 at 0.219 for model 1 and $F(8, 95)=11.438$, $p < 0.001$ with R^2 at 0.518 for model 2, thereby indicating that our models fit the data well. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.518 suggests that model 2 (incl. management practices and our two control variables) can predict more than half of the value of social performance, with a p -value < 0.000 . The corresponding F variation also appears to be significant (at $p < 0.000$). Therefore, it seems that the inclusion of the six core liberation practices in the model helps to explain 29.9% of social performance scores, even after accounting for perceived client pressure and liberation status.⁵

TABLE 5
Hierarchical regression analysis on social performance

	Standardized β 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) ⁶
Participative decision-making		.202** (.114)
Personalised support		.298*** (.084)
Information transparency		-.050 (.123)
R^2	.234	.555
Adjusted R^2	.219	.518
F change	15.412***	11.438***
p value of the overall model	.000	.000

Standard error in brackets.

*** Significant at the .01 level. ** Significant at the .05 level. * Significant at the .1 level.

5 We ran another model with further control variables (i.e., the individual's age, sex, managerial status, socio-professional category, and educational attainment), which is not shown here. It revealed no significant effects on social performance.

6. Significant but includes zero as a possible value with 95% confidence intervals.

The results of both models indicate a significant and positive effect ($p < 0.05$) of liberation status on social performance. This is consistent with the t -test results, which, again, showed significant differences in social performance between the two units. Perceived client pressure also has a significant, but negative, impact on social performance ($p < 0.01$).

Model 2 allowed us to test our hypotheses (i.e., whether liberation practices can have a significantly positive impact on social performance (H1) and some of them – “action-oriented” practices – more so than others – “enabling” practices (H2)). Our results indicate that three out of the six management practices identified as core liberation practices are predicted to have positive effects on social performance: the *right to make mistakes* ($p < 0.001$), *participative decision-making* ($p < 0.05$) and *personalised support* ($p < 0.001$). The significance of these results was confirmed using 95% confidence intervals, which, except for *self-managed work teams* ($p < 0.1$), did not include zero as a possible value. By contrast, we saw no evidence of significant positive effects for the practices of *self-direction* and *information transparency*.

In summary, H1 is supported by our study: we have witnessed an increase in social performance following the adoption of liberation management in the corresponding unit. H2, however, is only partially supported by our results: we would have expected all three “action-oriented” practices (i.e., *participative decision-making*, *self-direction* and *self-management*) to have a positive impact on social performance but found that only one of them does (i.e., *participative decision-making*).

As for the practices for which we found no significant effects (i.e., *information transparency*, *self-managing teams* and *self-direction*), perhaps we should note that, in another paper (Battistelli *et al.* 2023), we have argued that the implementation of liberation practices tends to be more sustainable when these are adopted in bundles displaying internal and temporal coherence. Accordingly, nothing excludes that we could have found an interaction effect of some of these practices, had we been able to test this hypothesis with a bigger sample size.

Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to cast light on the effects of management innovations on social performance, which tend to be too often overlooked in the literature. To do so, we chose to examine more closely the adoption of liberation management because employees are widely recognised to be the main recipients of this innovation (Picard, 2015). Therefore, liberation management can be viewed as a typical management innovation in terms of improving social performance. We drew two hypotheses from the liberation management literature: H1 holds that there should be a positive relationship between liberation management and social performance, while H2 contends that, amongst the practices that can be regarded as core liberation practices, so-called “action-oriented” practices should have a stronger impact than so-called “enabling” practices (Battistelli *et al.* 2023). Our results indicate that three out of the six management practices identified as core liberation practices have a clear positive effect on social performance, namely: *participative decision-making* (“action-oriented” practice), *personalised support* (“enabling” practice), and *the right to make mistakes* (“enabling” practice), thereby supporting H1, and H2 only partially. Before we discuss these results in greater detail, let us make some preliminary remarks.

Some preliminary remarks on contextual factors

As Grant and Wall (2009) recall, the context in which a quasi-experiment takes place may have an influence on some of the observations made. In our study, we believe that contextual factors may be responsible for two findings: the fact that a core liberation practice, the *right to make mistakes*, is implemented in both units, and the common perception of significant client pressure with adverse effects on social performance (i.e., only partially mitigated by the adoption of liberation management).

Concerning the former, we can assume that the *right to make mistakes* has unintentionally diffused to the non-liberated unit because both units are led by the same CEO. This seems plausible, given that the *right to make mistakes* is usually one of the first practices to be adopted in the liberation process (shortly followed by other so-called “enabling” practices, e.g., *information transparency*, *personalised support*, see Battistelli *et al.* [2023]). As for the experience of client pressure with ill effects on social performance in both units, two things can be said. First, the units occupy different positions in the value chain. While the liberated unit acts as a supplier, the employees in the non-liberated unit work as subcontractors, with arguably more pressure on their shoulders (i.e., due to the potential ripple effects of their actions on the rest of the value chain). Moreover, the liberated unit may feel better equipped to deal with the whims of their customers, given that liberation practices actively contribute to their empowerment. The practices of *self-management* and *personalised support* seem particularly well adapted to relieve them of extra pressures potentially exerted by managers in the other unit.

The remainder of our discussion will be centred on three takeaways.

The relevance of subjective criteria for soft outcomes

A first point of discussion concerns our proposed methodology, stressing the relevance of subjective criteria for measuring soft outcomes (see Khosravi *et al.*, 2019), and more specifically, the social performance of management innovations. This is particularly true in the case of liberation management considering that, again, employees are recognised to be the main recipients of this approach (Picard, 2015). It makes sense, then, to take their view into account when assessing the success of that management innovation. Now, one could object that relying primarily on subjective data does not counter the risk known as “adaptive preferences” in a satisfactory manner (see e.g., Mitchell, 2018). Arguably, there may be instances where people’s preferences are not really their own, due to them having internalised some external, social pressure⁷. This is a serious objection, especially bearing in mind the potential dark sides of adopting liberation practices (such as the experience of normative pressures to be overly happy, see Picard & Islam, 2019). If such a case can be made for supplementing subjective criteria with more objective measures (e.g., *turnover rates*), by no means does this call into question the relevance of our methodology. Subjective data would still be needed to make sense of more objective measures because the whole point is to investigate to what extent employee expectations are or are not being met. This is even truer for liberation management. In line with their core ambition to empower employees, we may wish to avoid another risk, that of paternalism, and consider people to be the best judges of their own welfare. Although it may

7. A famous example can be found in the household, where women tend to take care of most of the chores because patriarchy normalises the unfair division of labour between them and their male counterparts.

seem somewhat counterintuitive at first, higher turnover rates observed in some liberated companies (see Hamel & Zanini, 2016) could go hand in hand with greater satisfaction levels. The best way to know why there tends to be such an increase is to ask employees to share their reasons for leaving. It may well be that some of them are not resigning because they are burnt out, but because they are now empowered to the extent that they feel ready to start their own business.

No “one best way” to measure the social performance of a management innovation

Secondly, we would like to stress how our mixed results reinforce the importance of being clear about the objectives and measures of success before adopting a management innovation aimed at improving social performance (such as liberation management). To make sure the adoption is both sustainable and efficient, social performance may be best approached in an idiosyncratic manner: that is, by focusing on the “performance gap” (Zaltman *et al.*, 1973) or specific “organisational goals” (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008, p. 825) addressed by the innovation management in question (e.g., greater happiness at work through employee empowerment in the case of liberation practices). In other words, before adopting a specific management innovation, the main ambitions behind its implementation should be stated as clearly as possible to establish adequate measures of success. This means that there is no single “one best way” to assess the social performance of a management innovation. This is no easy task as several goals may be pursued at once, top managers may not be fully aware of their motivations and/or they may deem some of these ambitions socially undesirable. For instance, others (Gilbert *et al.*, 2018) have shown that top managers tend to adopt liberation management also for legitimacy purposes (towards internal and/or external stakeholders).

These findings contribute to a better definition of the concept of management innovations, by reinforcing the importance of intentionality in their adoption (Dubouloz, 2013). Intentionality refers to the ambition to increase performance (Le Roy *et al.*, 2013; Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009) while achieving organisational goals (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008; Volberda *et al.*, 2013). In other words, it may be argued that management innovations do not encompass all the management practices newly implemented in an organisation but only the ones adopted with clear objectives in mind – whether realised or not (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012). This is a key, yet often neglected, aspect, with only 11 studies out of the 25 most popular ones integrating intentionality in their definition of management innovations (Mattelin-Pierrard 2019). Even those papers that explicitly address this dimension do not seem to reach a consensus on the nature or scope of intended goals: examples given are “creat[ing] value for the organisation” (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012, p. 424), “improv[ing] the effectiveness and efficiency of internal organisational processes” (Dubouloz, 2013, p. 47) or “produc[ing] changes in the organisation’s managerial procedures and administrative systems” (Damanpour, 2014, p. 1269). Our results allow us to clarify two points: (1) the adoption of a management innovation may generally be regarded as “intended to further organisational goals” (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008, p. 825), whatever these may be; (2) these goals tend to vary from one management innovation to another, thereby justifying the need to specify the objectives behind their adoption (e.g., increased social performance through employee empowerment in the case of liberation management) and define tailored measures of success (incl. indicators of *employee satisfaction* or *happiness at work* for liberation management).

A perception gap behind the social performance gap: a pro-liberation bias reinforced by a strong rhetoric

Thirdly and finally, this difficulty to clarify the organisational goals behind the adoption of liberation practices may help explain the differing effects between our six practices of interest. The frequent confusion surrounding the aforementioned social performance gap may thus lead to different interpretations by top managers vs. employees (i.e., a perception gap). As mentioned hereinabove, top managers may seek to strengthen their legitimacy, thereby feeling the need to justify the adoption of liberation practices with a strong rhetoric: they are proposing a new narrative about work relations and may be tempted to boast about their good intentions to make it more convincing. This resonates with Gilbert *et al.*’s (2017a) depiction of liberation management as yet another trend that can serve as an inspiration for company leaders to initiate change. In a similar vein, Casalegno (2017, p. 240, our translation) speaks of this management innovation as “a rhetorical device conveying the necessity to change without clearly stating the nature of that change”. Top managers may thus be primarily concerned with inspiring change, or setting employees in motion, when adopting liberation practices. This may come at the cost of overcommitment, thereby leading to feelings of frustration or, worse, disenchantment amongst employees (see e.g., Fox & Pichault, 2017; Battistelli *et al.*, 2023). It may well be, then, that employees at Thermocompact pay less attention to the three practices of *information transparency*, *self-managed teams* and *self-direction* because they find the efforts behind their adoption wanting. For instance, they may have high expectations in terms of salary transparency, which is rarely put into place in liberated companies (with the notable exception of Semco).

A “pro-innovation bias” may thus be visible not only amongst top managers, as highlighted in the management innovation literature (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012; Rogers, 1995), but also amongst employees. Put differently, the strong rhetoric cultivated by top managers may lead employees to formulate higher expectations towards liberation management. This may be particularly true with so-called “action-oriented” practices (such as *self-direction* and *self-management* according to our results), more directly aimed at employee empowerment. The implementation of those practices may be more easily taken for granted, thereby not causing as much satisfaction amongst employees. *Participative decision-making* seems to form an exception, as this “action-oriented” practice is associated with a positive effect on social performance in our study. The rationale behind this may have to do with the fact that Thermocompact’s employees have taken part in some major strategic decisions (e.g., by having a say in whether to adopt liberation practices or not), which is usually not advertised (thus not to be expected) in liberation management (Getz, 2009; Battistelli *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, employees may be pleasantly surprised to witness so-called “enabling” practices being put into use, that is, to see their managers actively support their empowerment (by showing *more tolerance for mistakes* and *acting as servant leaders* at their disposal, according to our results). As is well known in social psychology (e.g., Van Dijk *et al.*, 2002), lowering one’s expectations in the face of uncertain outcomes could lead to greater levels of satisfaction (or, at least, lower levels of dissatisfaction).

All in all, we are not saying that a strong rhetoric may not be useful to sustain the use of a management innovation, notably by strengthening its legitimacy (i.e., by giving meaning to its adoption, see Arnaud *et al.*, 2016). However, top managers should be

equally wary of the risk of overcommitment. Otherwise, they may negatively affect social performance by causing feelings of frustration or disenchantment amongst employees. In particular, managers should resist the urge to focus solely, or primarily even, on “action-oriented” practices simply because these are more directly aligned with the core ambition to empower workers. Instead, we would argue that managers should first devote efforts and resources to implementing “enabling” practices. Not only would this seem to render the adoption of liberation management more sustainable (Battistelli *et al.* 2023) but also, it could lead to substantial gains in social performance according to our results. Thus, our study reaffirms the role played by managers in successfully adopting liberation management (thanks to “enabling” practices like *personalised support*), while contributing to better defining the contours of that management innovation (as the necessary combination of “action-oriented” and “enabling” practices).

Contributions

Our theoretical contributions to both the management innovation and liberation management literatures are twofold. First, we stress the relevance of subjective criteria for measuring soft outcomes such as social performance. Second, through the typical example of liberation management, we argue that social performance may be best approached in an idiosyncratic manner, using tailored indicators (i.e., directly aligned with the performance gap or core ambition behind the management innovation in question, namely, happiness at work through employee empowerment for liberation management).

This research also makes a couple of empirical contributions. First, its originality lies in the quantitative method used. Quasi-experiments are rare in the field of strategic management (Walker *et al.*, 2015) despite their clear methodological benefits (notably, with respect to isolating contingencies, Grant & Wall, 2009). This is even more true for management innovations, knowing how hard they are to operationalise (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012). Second, we show which liberation practices can actually make a difference when it comes to improving social performance, a growing concern for managers (Chabanet *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, in terms of managerial contributions, we further show that top managers should be wary of the risk of overcommitment when communicating on a newly adopted management innovation, as highlighted before (e.g., Fox & Pichault, 2017). In the specific case of liberation practices, we have seen that a strong rhetoric may induce a pro-innovation bias amongst employees, likely to heighten expectations (particularly towards “action-oriented” practices) and cause feelings of frustration or disenchantment in the long run. However, our results suggest that two “enabling” practices (*the right to make mistakes* and *personalised support*) can mitigate this effect by playing an important part in supporting employee empowerment.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Three limitations in our study can be turned into avenues for future research. Firstly, the results should be interpreted with caution since they are based on a single case study. That is, our study should be replicated with larger samples, in other contexts and/or using longitudinal data (as perceptions may evolve over time). Indeed, we may want to try and generalise our findings to other contexts (Shadish *et al.*, 2001) and management innovations. This should also allow us to test the possibility of interaction effects between the practices investigated (notably those for which we did not find any effects in isolation).

Secondly, future research could integrate a variety of internal and/or external factors to investigate to what extent liberation management may strengthen a company’s legitimacy. Organisational performance is often regarded as being affected by stakeholders’ perceptions of legitimacy, thereby leading organisations to seek both internal and external legitimacy notably by building a good reputation or goodwill (Orlitzky *et al.*, 2003). Liberated companies are no exceptions to this rule, with famous examples of vision statements clearly aimed at securing stakeholder support: e.g., “Sustain the lives of two hundred families in Hallencourt.” (FAVI) or “Committed to creating a better world together!” (CHRONO Flex).

Thirdly and finally, we focused here on one type of outcomes, social performance, when the liberation management literature usually understands performance multi-dimensionally (economic, social, environmental and societal outcomes) with potential mediating effects between these dimensions: for instance, Getz (2009) theorises a virtuous circle between employee satisfaction and “world-class” economic performance; similarly, Corbett-Etchevers *et al.* (2019) observe mutual reinforcement between social performance and product innovation. Future work could thus examine the mediating effects of social performance on product innovation and economic performance, when adopting a management innovation. We may well find that organisations have good reasons to “do well by doing good” rather than “do good and do well” (Wood & Jones, 1995, p. 235).

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APPENDIX A

Empirical studies from Walker et al.'s (2015) metanalysis of the effects of management innovations on the non-economic performance of the organisation with a social dimension

Empirical studies	Methodology/ measure	Measurement of social dimension of performance	Results
Bouville & Alis (2014)	Quantitative/ Perceptual (Subjective)	Social performance is measured by job satisfaction, a World Health Organisation measure of occupational health and intention to stay in the organisation.	Lean practices have a negative effect on all 3 measures of social performance.
Camisón & Villar-López (2010)	Quantitative/ Perceptual (Subjective)	Organisational performance includes an economic and a non-economic dimension with an assessment in terms of satisfaction (four items). Social performance includes one item: "Satisfaction of other stakeholders" (i.e. apart from shareholders and stockholders).	Management innovation has a positive effect on organisational performance.
Garrido & Camarero (2010)	Quantitative/ Perceptual (Subjective)	Social performance is related more to the societal dimension (effects on the community, society in general).	The empirical study focuses on museums. Management innovation has no effect on social performance.
Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle (2011)	Quantitative/ Objective	The authors measure the combined effect of three types of innovation (product, process and managerial) on organisational performance which is composed in part of a "human relations model" including absenteeism and turnover.	The results of the empirical study support a positive effect of innovation on absenteeism and turnover.
Luk <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Quantitative/ Perceptual (Subjective)	The authors use 5 items to measure the effect of organisational innovativeness on corporate social performance. The items related to the social dimension are employee job satisfaction levels and employee loyalty. Two items are related to customers and one to the community (societal dimension).	The results of the empirical study support a positive effect of management innovation on corporate social performance in both countries observed.
Wong <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Quantitative/ Objective	Social performance is included in corporate social performance and measured using an aggregate score, Kinder, Lydenberg, Domini, and Company (KLD), which is composed of 7 indicators: community relations, diversity, employee relations, environment, products, corporate governance and human rights. A second test is conducted with the first five indicators.	More decentralised companies have a more positive outcomes in terms of corporate social performance.

APPENDIX B

Summary of empirical studies on the effects of liberated companies

Empirical studies	Methodology/measure	Measurement of social dimension of performance	Results
Islam & Sferrazzo (2022)	Qualitative / Subjective	The paper aims to capture the effects of rituals on performance in a typical new management ideology such as liberation management.	The authors show that liberation management generates two types of tension: hierarchy vs. equality (issues around participation, information sharing and the informal interactions), and profit vs. fulfilment (issues around productivity, well-being). Those tensions may be regulated by rituals.
de Ridder & Taskin (2021)	Qualitative / Objective and subjective	The authors borrow the concept of social freedom (Honneth, 2015) and code their data in relation to derivatives of this concept (such as spaces of recognition at work, absence of intersubjectivity dimension, expression of recognition, expression of denial of recognition, lack of visibility at work, strategies to make work visible)	The empirical study focuses on public administrations. It shows that the intersubjective dimension of social freedom (Honneth, 2015) is missing in the investigated HRM practices. The investigated practices do not include interpersonal conflicts linked to recognition struggles.
Fox (2020)	Qualitative / Subjective	The empirical study analyses the liberation process according to the theoretical elements of the Actor-Network Theory.	The process of liberation is “forced” in contradiction with dominant discourses. It also contains obstacles: work overload preventing involvement in the process of change, pressure from operations and regulatory constraints, discrepancy between discourse and practice, the need for follow-up information.
Corbett-Etchevers <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Qualitative / Objective and subjective	The authors use two analytical frameworks based on well-being at work and innovation capability.	Liberated companies may improve quality of work life and innovation capabilities. However, these positive effects are contingent. In the empirical study, innovation capabilities may be facilitated by a company’s proximity to its clients while well-being may be contingent on the small size of the company.
Sferrazzo & Ruffini (2019)	Theoretical / Objective	The authors draw Sen’s capability approach and conclude that liberated companies consist seven capabilities: competence, responsibility, flexibility around working hours (possibility to allocate working time), equality, inclusion, motivation, and human flourishing.	Liberated companies are conducive to the development of organisational ethics and freedom as defined by Sen.
Picard & Islam (2019)	Qualitative / Subjective	The authors rely on a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach and study the psychological dynamics of liberation.	Liberated leadership deteriorates the symbolic order of the organisation, which has the double effect of generating intersubjective suffering and scapegoating.
Ramboarison-Lalao & Gannouni (2018)	Qualitative / Subjective	The study is based on the scenario method. It compares CEOs’ claims about the beneficial effects of liberated companies with representations of employees working in “non-liberated” companies.	Liberated companies improve happiness and well-being at work, and offer good working conditions (work environment). Increase in motivation and involvement brought about by liberated companies also lead to performance gains and technological change (notably through improving creativity and collective intelligence). But these effects are qualified by contingencies such as the company’s size, culture, and economic sector.
Hamel & Zanini (2016)	Essay / Objective and subjective	Asking why bureaucracy remains the norm, the authors provide three types of arguments. First, bureaucracy is the dominant managerial operating system. Second, the survival of bureaucracy is in the interest of managers. Third, there is no clear path for shifting from bureaucracy towards post-bureaucratic organisations.	Unprepared shift towards post-bureaucratic organisation involves high turn-over, confusion and demoralisation amongst employees, as in the case at Zappos.
Getz (2009)	Qualitative / Subjective	Based on fifteen companies committed to empowering their employees (such as Gore, FAVI, Zappos or Sea Smoke Cellars, etc.), the paper essentially relies on employees’ views.	Liberation management is based on acknowledging the personal needs of employees. The paper argues that the satisfaction of personal needs can strengthen employee motivation, thereby leading to more happiness at work and gains in economic performance at the same time.
Ravasi & Verona (2001)	Qualitative / Objective and Subjective	The study is based on the transformation of Oticon. It compares the statements made by various actors during the transformation period with objective data (such as efficiency gains and reduced time to market).	By reducing ambiguity in the distribution of authority and roles, Oticon’s new organisation significantly improved knowledge integration.

APPENDIX C

Methodology overview

Steps of analysis	Details	Empirical procedure
Identification of core liberation practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Literature review - Nine expert interviews 	- Cross validation between literature and interviews' results + one final validation
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Test of the questionnaire - Self-administered questionnaires over 3 days at the employee workplace - 76.22% response rate 	
Descriptive statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship between being liberated and social performance - Comparison between liberated and non-liberated units regarding social performance and management practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Correlation matrix - <i>t</i>-test
Hierarchical regression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Total sample (N=109) - Effect of core liberation practices on social performance 	- Hierarchical regression*

* Data were analysed using SPSS version 25.

APPENDIX D

Variables and descriptive statistics

Description		Min	Max	N	Mean	σ	Median
Dependent variable							
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
	Employee loyalty	1	4	108	3.0400	.6100	3
<i>All questions are scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale.</i>							
Independent variables							
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 and the way to do their job.	1	3	108	2.3600	.6620	2
	Accountability for work and results	1	3	109	2.5400	.6310	3
	Freedom to carry out work without hierarchical approval	1	3	107	2.2500	.6460	2
	Managers do not monitor employees	1	3	108	1.8056	.5546	2
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 human resources activities in units (recruitment, compensation policy)	1	3	107	1.2600	.4620	1
	Decisions taken collectively or individually, without hierarchical input.	1	3	108	1.9200	.5820	2
Personalised support	Personalised support (regular training, coaching, personal development, etc.)	1	3	107	1.9300	.6830	2
	Our managers support our development in terms of professional skills or 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 among employees without any hierarchical input or company 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 scored on a 3-point Likert-type scale.</i>							
Control variables							
Liberated	Part of liberated unit. <i>Dummy variable</i>	0 (No)	1 (Yes)	109	/	/	/
Client pressure	<i>4 -point Likert-type scale.</i>	1	4	106	1.94	.8930	2