

## Article

# Sustainable Loyalty of Employees in Poland as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The pandemic has triggered, on one hand, a wave of employee disloyalty in the form of quitting from non-functioning companies and choosing those seeking employees, and on the other hand, reinforcing their relationships with those companies that made a lot of effort to prevent quitting or letting employees go. The cognitive aim of this article is to answer the question of whether this transition is intended to be temporary or permanent—an issue which has not been recognized in the literature on the subject so far. The planned cognitive contribution is the verification of the hypothesis pertaining to the uneven occurrence of individual types of loyalty. The study was conducted on a nationwide, representative sample (n = 1000) with the use of the CAWI questionnaire. Research has confirmed that sustainable loyalty occurs more often than other types of loyalty. This is a balanced type of loyalty in which the commitment of the employer and the employee is equal, and the employee is attached to the organization and puts their trust in it. The obtained results were interpreted in the context of the influence of the pandemic.



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**Keywords:** types of employee loyalty; sustainable (partners) loyalty; result of the pandemic; employee routine; employee trust; a three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment; social capital; world risk society

## 1. Introduction

Employee loyalty to the organization involves both being passive, in the sense of not leaving the organization, and constructive, in the sense of keeping legal obligations [1] (pp. 42–46), as well as a psychological contract [2] with the current organization despite more favourable job offers in other organizations [3] (p. 745).

Employee loyalty means the longer retention of an employee in an organization, connected with fulfilling its goals and associating it with its development [4]. It can be also defined as the perceived probability of continuing work in a given organization, regardless of its current image in the labour market [5] (p. 21). It is the result of experiencing [5] (p. 21):

- positive emotions related to working in the organization;
- benefits of working in the organization;
- responsibility for the welfare of other employees in the organization;
- obstacles in possible transitions to work in another organization.

This type of working attitude has an economic value, as maintaining employee loyalty also helps in the following ways in the times of pandemic:

- preventing the loss of competitive position [6];
- increase in the value of human capital [7] (p. 112) and thus—due to the importance of intangible values [...]—the values of the organization;
- retaining customers (preventing a loyalty spiral), in accordance with the regularities described as the Sears chain (the employee-customer-profit chain of Sears), represent-

ing the impact of employees' and managers' behaviour on customer satisfaction and financial results;

- not lowering income and work efficiency [8];
- stopping excessive staff turnover [9];
- reducing the costs of acquiring and training new employees, the inflow of valuable employees recommended by the existing ones.

Therefore, it is important as a behavioural lever of value, often being a condition for the company's survival on the market in this period. This is evidenced by the number of companies that had to shut down during the pandemic. From the beginning of the second quarter of 2020 to the end of the first quarter of 2021, 512 enterprises in Poland declared bankruptcy [10] (p. 6). This means that a specific organizational strategy and HCM (Human Capital Management) strategy translate into specific HCM practices, which translate into behavioural outcomes (including employee loyalty), and then into performance outcomes and financial results [11] (p. 46).

Young employees usually have the lowest level of loyalty [12] (p. 164): "This results show that loyalty grows with age and employees by the age of 30 have significantly lower level of loyalty to the organization compared to employees from their parents' generation" [12] (p. 151). However, employee loyalty cannot only be associated with the values and attitudes of the younger generation [13,14]. It can be influenced by [15]:

- the number of disappearing and newly created jobs;
- uncertainty about the threat of being made redundant;
- changes in the employment and unemployment rates.

Employee loyalty should not be equated with loyalism (submission to those in power and those who own financial resources). It should also be taken into account that there may be multi-loyalty (simultaneous work for different companies) [16] (p. 153), and that loyalty may be of a short-term or long-term character. This means that the specific pandemic structure of loyalty types described in this article may change over time.

Section 2 of the article presents the "pandemic context" leading to the formation of certain types of loyalty. Attempts have been made to answer the question of whether the economic situation at various stages of the pandemic development—in particular, the situation on the labour market—is conducive to employee loyalty towards the company. Section 3 presents a review of the literature. It concerns three internal loyalty mechanisms: trust towards the organization, becoming used to the organization, and organizational commitment. Based on a critical analysis of the literature on the subject, we have identified a research gap. Section 4 of the paper contains an outline of the methodology. The results obtained were presented in Section 5, and the discussion on them in the context of the COVID-19 and the conclusions resulting therefrom are presented in Section 6.

## 2. The "Pandemic Context" of Shaping Employee Loyalty

### 2.1. *Impact of the Pandemic on the Number of Jobs and the Potential Loyalty of Employees in Poland*

The arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to Poland and its spread resulted in the announcement of an epidemic threat on 13 March 2020 and a restriction of the functioning of institutions and workplaces [17]. The restrictions included, among others: retail (most shops in the shopping centres were closed), gastronomy (a total ban was introduced for restaurants, cafes, ice cream parlours, pizzerias, etc., except for "take-away" and "delivery"), the event and exhibition industry (the organization of fairs, exhibitions, congresses, conferences, etc., was banned), cultural and entertainment activities (e.g., theatres, cinemas, libraries, museums, casinos were closed, concerts were banned), sports and recreation (stadiums were closed and halls, it was forbidden to organize sports events, swimming pools, gyms, fitness clubs, etc., were closed), and tourist facilities (activities related to running tourist accommodation facilities, such as camps, holiday centres, farms, youth hostels were banned).

Then, it seemed that these actions—also due to the fact that similar actions were taken in many countries around the world—could contribute to the emergence of a deep “corona crisis”, unspecified in terms of duration, which would also leave its mark on the labour market. The temporary “freezing” of the functioning of entire industries influenced the situation on the labour market in Poland, but not as much as originally expected.

The situation in the labor market is one of the most important external conditions shaping employee loyalty [18,19]. The description of the labor market as a determinant of employee loyalty will be presented based on the statistical data on cutting and creating new jobs as well as employment and unemployment rates.

The deteriorating situation on the labour market in Poland during the pandemic is confirmed by the data of Statistics Poland on labour demand (Table 1). The scale of jobs liquidated in the first two quarters of 2020 was greater than in the corresponding periods of the previous year, while in the third and fourth quarters of 2020, fewer jobs were liquidated than in the third and fourth quarters of 2019. Most jobs were liquidated in the first quarter of 2020—a total of 119.9 thousand, i.e., 35.2% more than in the first quarter of 2019, and the least number of jobs were liquidated in the fourth quarter—53.9 thousand. In the second quarter of 2020, more jobs were liquidated than new ones were created. A comparison of the data from the first year of the pandemic with the data from the preceding year indicates that in 2020, the number of newly created jobs was lower than in 2019. A decrease in the number of newly created jobs occurred in all quarters of 2020 compared to the corresponding quarters the previous year. The largest decrease was observed in the second quarter of 2020, by as much as 44.2% compared to the corresponding quarter of the previous year. The high decrease in the number of newly created jobs in the second quarter of 2020 was probably caused by the reaction of economic entities to the lockdown introduced in mid-March. In the whole of 2020, 204.3 thousand fewer new jobs were created, and 15.8 thousand more jobs were liquidated than in 2019. As a result, the number of job vacancies at the end of each quarter of 2020 was lower than in the corresponding periods of the previous year. The largest decrease was noted at the end of the second quarter by 46.4%, and the smallest at the end of the fourth quarter by 32.7%. In 2020, the lowest number of vacancies was recorded at the end of Q1, when their number amounted to 76.5 thousand.

**Table 1.** Jobs in Poland in 2011, 2019, and 2020.

Jobs	2011				2019				2020			
	Q * 1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
During the quarter (in thousands)												
Liquidated	108.1	94.0	104.3	122.9	88.7	81.9	82.1	61.3	119.9	93.6	62.4	53.9
Newly created	178.6	149.2	141.2	111.4	262.3	146.8	151.2	114.4	170.6	81.9	126.4	91.5
At the end of the quarter (in thousands)												
Vacancies	74.1	61.0	57.8	45.5	142.5	151.8	148.6	125.4	76.5	81.4	91.1	84.4

\* Q—quarter. Source: [20], [21] (p. 1), [22] (p. 1), [23] (p. 1), [24] (p. 1).

The deterioration of the situation on the labour market during the pandemic could have had an impact on employee loyalty. The lower number of newly created jobs and higher number of liquidated ones in Poland in the first year of the pandemic compared to the previous year could have caused employees to feel (not necessarily justified) job insecurity and a risk of dismissal. The emerging feeling of fear of potential job loss could have modified the employees’ attitude to the organization in which they were employed, especially their trust in the company and organizational commitment, i.e., two internal loyalty mechanisms (cf. Section 3), and, consequently, could have affected the loyalty of employees. On the other hand, the liquidation of jobs was associated with the dismissal of employees and resulted in breaking the ties between employees and the organization. It

resulted not only in the destruction of the two loyalty mechanisms mentioned above, but most of all it interrupted the operation of the third mechanism, which is the habit to the organization.

## 2.2. Impact of the Pandemic on the Level of the Employment Rate in Poland

The changes in the employment rate in the subsequent quarters of 2020 compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019 were small (Table 2). The total employment rate increased in Q1 and Q4 2020 compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019 by 0.5 percentage points and 0.3 percentage points, respectively, while it decreased in Q2 and Q3 2020 compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019 by 0.6 percentage points and 0.3 percentage points, respectively.

The analysis of the changes in the level of the employment rate by gender indicates that in the case of men, it increased only in the first quarter of 2020, while in other quarters it decreased compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019. However, in the case of women, the direction of changes in its level was analogous to the total employment. It is worth noting that in Q2 the decline in the employment rate of women was clearly greater than that of men. It amounted to 1.1 percentage points and 0.2 percentage points, respectively, compared to the corresponding quarter of 2019.

The level of the employment rate changed in the subsequent quarters of 2020 differently in individual age groups. Only in the 45–59/64 age group did it increase in all quarters of 2020 compared to the corresponding quarters of the previous year. Moreover, this increase was clearly higher than in other age groups. The smallest increase in the employment rate in the analysed age group took place in the second quarter of 2020 by 0.7 percent, and the largest was in the fourth quarter of this year by 3.4 percent compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019. The largest decreases in the employment rate occurred in the 15–24 years age group. In this age group, this indicator increased only in the first quarter by 0.5 percent, while in the remaining quarters it decreased by 3.4 percent, 5.0 percent, and 5.3 percent in relation to the corresponding quarters of the previous year. Decreases in the employment rate may result from the fact that people from this age group often combine education/studies with work, e.g., in industries such as gastronomy and trade. Entities operating in these industries during the periods of lockdowns had to suspend their activities, which could result in layoffs. A decrease in the employment rate in the largest number of age groups, i.e., 15–24, 25–34, and 25–44, was recorded in the second quarter of 2020 and amounted to 3.4 percent, 1.2 percent, and 3 percent, respectively, compared to the second quarter of 2019.

**Table 2.** Employment rate by sex and age (in%).

Specification	2011				2019				2020			
	Q * 1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Total	50.0	50.7	51.1	50.8	53.7	54.4	54.9	54.4	54.2	53.8	54.6	54.7
Males	57.5	58.8	59.5	58.9	62.2	62.8	63.7	63.5	63.0	62.6	63.3	63.4
Females	43.2	43.5	43.5	43.4	45.9	46.8	46.9	46.1	46.3	45.7	46.5	46.8
15–24	23.7	25.3	26.1	24.7	30.6	31.3	32.8	32.1	31.1	27.9	27.8	26.8
25–34	76.4	76.3	76.5	76.8	80.8	81.4	81.6	81.5	81.0	80.2	80.9	81.5
35–44	81.3	81.9	82.1	81.8	84.4	85.0	85.2	85.5	85.3	84.7	85.8	86.0
45–59/64	60.1	61.3	61.8	61.4	71.1	73.1	74.0	73.1	73.3	73.8	75.6	76.5
60/65+	6.3	6.5	6.6	6.7	8.0	7.9	8.3	7.8	7.9	8.3	8.7	8.7

\* Q—quarter. Source: [25], [26] (p. 14), [27] (p. 16), [28] (p. 16), [29] (p. 16).

The total employment rate did not change much in the first year of the pandemic compared to the previous year. Therefore, it is difficult to indicate the potential impact

of a change in its level on employee loyalty on that basis. On the other hand, certain possibilities of interpretation are provided by the analysis of the level of employment rates according to the structures. Different levels of employment rates for men and women may, *inter alia*, prove the existence of different priorities and importance of professional work for different sexes. Higher employment rates for men may, for example, be linked to organizational commitment. On the other hand, the lower employment rate for women may be caused, among others, by temporary professional inactivity caused by caring for young children and, in the context of loyalty, decrease the commitment to the organization. The employment rate in individual age groups not only fluctuated at different levels, but also changed to varying degrees during the pandemic. Different levels of the employment rate for individual age groups may indicate, for example, different priorities and affect loyalty through different commitments and habits.

### 2.3. Impact of the Pandemic on the Level of Unemployment and Potential Employee Loyalty

Despite the pandemic and temporarily introduced lockdowns, the unemployment rate in the subsequent quarters of 2020 remained at a constant level of 3.1%, except for Q3, where it increased to 3.3% (Table 3). At the same time, in the first two quarters of 2020, the unemployment rate was 0.8 per cent and 0.1 percent lower, respectively, than in the corresponding quarters of the previous year, while in the remaining quarters it was 0.2 per cent higher.

In terms of gender, the unemployment rate was lower in Q1 for men by 0.4 percent and for women by 1.3 percent, while in Q2 it was lower for women by 0.2 percent. It has not changed in the second quarter for men or in the fourth quarter for women. It increased in the third quarter for men by 0.1 percent and for women by 0.2 percent, and in the fourth quarter it increased for men by 0.5 per cent compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019.

The unemployment rate varied according to age. It was clearly higher in the 15–24 age group than in other age groups, and it also increased the most in the following quarters of 2020 compared to other age groups. Compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019, in the subsequent quarters of 2020, changes in the unemployment rate in the age groups 25–34, 35–44, and 45 and more were bi-directional but insignificant (up to  $\pm 0.9$  percent). The unemployment rate in the 15–24 age group changed the most, from  $-1.7$  percent in the first quarter of 2020 to 4.9 percent in the fourth quarter compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019.

**Table 3.** Unemployment rate by gender and age (Labour Force Survey/LFS, in %).

Specification	2011				2019				2020			
	Q * 1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q 1	Q 2	Q3	Q4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4
Total	10.0	9.5	9.3	9.7	3.9	3.2	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.3	3.1
Males	9.9	8.9	8.3	8.8	3.4	3.2	2.9	2.6	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.1
Females	10.2	10.1	10.6	10.9	4.6	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.6	3.2
15–24	26.7	24.6	25.4	26.5	10.4	10.4	10.8	7.9	8.7	9.5	12.5	12.8
25–34	10.3	10.0	9.9	10.1	4.8	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.9	3.9	4.2	3.3
35–44	7.0	6.7	6.3	7.0	3.1	2.8	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.6	2.3	2.4
45+	7.7	7.1	6.8	7.1	2.8	2.1	1.9	2.3	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.1

\* Q—quarter. Source: [25], [26] (p. 18), [27] (p. 20), [28] (p. 20), [29] (p. 20).

Both the level of the unemployment rate and its change may determine the development of employee loyalty. A high level of the unemployment rate may impair trust, engagement, and commitment and, consequently, have an adverse effect on employee loyalty. The low level of unemployment reported during the pandemic in Poland has not had a negative impact on employee loyalty. However, it is worth emphasizing that within

the period of low unemployment, it is relatively easy for employees to find a new job, which may increase employee turnover and, consequently, reduce employees' habituation to the organization and affect other loyalty mechanisms. The relatively high fluctuation of employees is evidenced by the low (two-year) median work experience with one employer for people employed in Poland as regular employees [30].

In the initial period of the pandemic in Poland, the changing situation in the labor market could have had a potential impact on employee loyalty. The analysis of the statistical data describing the situation in the labor market allows us to make the assumption that employee loyalty in this period could have been influenced by the increase in the number of cut jobs and a decrease in the number of new jobs created and, consequently, a decrease in the number of vacancies. Such a situation could have caused uncertainty among workers regarding the maintenance of their current job. To some extent, the unemployment rate could also be a factor influencing employee loyalty, especially in the youngest age group (up to 24 years of age), which saw the largest increase in unemployment. In other age groups—as already mentioned—its impact on loyalty could be associated with the ease of changing jobs at lower levels of unemployment. In the analyzed period, the level of the employment rate did not change significantly, therefore, it can be presumed that this element did not affect employee loyalty. Young people may be an exception in this respect. Only in this age group, the employment rate decreased, which could have influenced the shaping of loyalty in this age group.

Tables 1–3 also present data for 2011 to illustrate the situation in the labour market in the period in which the first pilot study on the types of employee loyalty was carried out [5].

### 3. Internal Loyalty Mechanisms—Literature Review

#### 3.1. Employee Trust

Employee loyalty as an expression of the attitude towards the organization is a construct that is difficult to measure and predict in practice [31,32] due to its complexity. It contains three mechanisms—the employee's trust in the organization, his attachment to it, and the organizational commitment. Each of them must be functioning properly in order to build loyalty, for example, for its occurrence in the case of customers, but also internal customers, i.e., employees, trust is necessary [8,33].

Trust involves many paradoxes [34,35]. This is of interest to various scientific disciplines in which it is interpreted differently [36–38].

In economics, it is considered at both the macro- and microeconomic level. This is not surprising as different economic relationships involve risk or uncertainty [39]. Moreover, trust, especially in knowledge-based organizations, is associated with the possibility of creating a competitive advantage, even of a permanent character [40,41]. As regards the macroeconomic level, its relationship with economic growth and/or development, social capital, and system trust is considered in the first place. [42–47].

The subject of interest in this article is the employee trust, i.e., the microeconomic level. There, trust is also considered in the context of development, specifically individual development [48]. In addition, its other functions are indisputable and therefore play a role [49], including in the context of financial decision making [50].

When it comes to definitions of trust, there are highly influential social science definitions that have been formulated:

- R. Mayer, J. Davies, F. Schoormen [51] (p. 712): emphasizing the relationship of trust—control;
- D. Rousseau, S. Sitkin, R. Bert, C. Camerer [52] (p. 395) and E.M. Whitener, S.E. Brodt, M.A. Korsgaard, J.M. Werner [53] (p. 513), and P.P. Morita, C.M. Burns [54] (p. 88): emphasizing faith in the positive intentions of the other party regarding the expected behaviour also in the future;
- R.J. Lewicki, B.B. Bunker [55] (p. 137) and S.S. Tzafirir and M. Eitam-Meilik [56] (p. 193) and R.M. Morgan and S. Hunt [57]: indicating the relationship between the trust

and the willingness to continue a certain interaction and invest in it, that is with the commitment of duration, as a component of commitment, that is, a component of loyalty, similar to trust.

It is important to distinguish between its various forms, for example, in the form of calculated trust or calculus-based trust [58].

The subject matter literature presents the structures of organizational trust models [59], as well as the results of research on its antecedents/determinants [60,61] and the effects in the form of work effects of individual employees and companies [62–64] and the possibilities of influencing trust through the practices of Human Resources [65–67], including constraints to rebuild lost trust [68]. The results of the analyses refer to companies with different levels of employment [69].

For the avoidance of doubt as well as the trust towards the employer, social exchange theory [70,71] is important. The balance of benefits for the stakeholders (employers and employees), which follows in its mind, is mutually beneficial [72].

It must be taken into account that—as it results from the literature on the subject [73–75]—trust and distrust are not opposites, but separate constructs, differently operationalized.

### 3.2. Employee Routine

The second mechanism of internal loyalty is the employee routine. Employee routine is a habit, i.e., daily repeated fixed activities, resulting in their automatism based on the learning mechanism. Employee habituation is manifested in rituals related to commuting, communicating with colleagues, or methods of performing tasks. Loyalty based solely on habituation occurs in the so-called loyalty out of routine or helpless loyalty caused by coercion. It is therefore not the highest form of loyalty [76], which is true loyalty [77]. It may be a derivative of comfort, reluctance to change—obligation to incur certain expenditures—or fear of disappointment with a new job and a new employer. Thus, despite the feeling of dissatisfaction with work, employees are rather motivated to maintain their current habits and not to change the current structure of their activities. This does not mean that employee satisfaction—resulting, similarly to customer satisfaction, from the type and strength of his expectations [78]—automatically implies loyalty: “The relationship between loyalty and satisfaction is complex and discontinuous (...). Its mapping is a function having a graphical form of a curve—concave for states of dissatisfaction and convex for states associated with a high level of satisfaction; between the points of discontinuity there is an area of indifference (...) where changes in the level of satisfaction do not affect the level of loyalty” [79] (p. 44).

### 3.3. Organizational Commitment

The third internal mechanism building up employee loyalty is the employee’s organizational commitment [80–83], defined in some detail in the subject matter literature. [84]. It depends not only on the characteristics of the work or the properties of the work environment, but also on the characteristics of individual employees, which must be taken into account in the research. Commitment is a higher level of motivation than compliance and identification with the goal. It manifests itself in readiness for independence, undertaking new tasks and projects, excluding activities competitive to work, as well as in organizational citizenship behaviour, i.e., voluntary behaviours initiated by the employees and not subject to evaluation or remuneration, going beyond their contracted duties [85], important especially in the pandemic period.

The currently accepted three-component model of organizational attachment by N.J. Allen and J.P. Mayer [86–88] includes:

- affective commitment, reflecting positive emotions and feelings towards the organization;

- continued commitment related to staying in the organization due to the costs and the risk of losing already gained benefits (high sacrifice commitment) or inability to obtain another job (low-alternatives commitment);
- normative commitment, determining the obligation to remain in the company (e.g., due to pandemic conditions implying an increased demand for certain products/services, e.g., vaccines, courier, care, health services).

It refers to the mechanisms of associating employees with the organization distinguished by E. Etzioni [89]: coercive power, remunerative power, normative power, and building pro-loyalty strategies on this basis [90] (p. 347).

Commitment is measured across countries, allowing for comparative analysis [91,92]. There are also studies on individual economies and differences in commitment across sectors [93].

The research gap that this article is focused on is the identification of types of loyalty shaped as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in the most recent literature on the subject [94], it is not so much the question of the types of loyalty that is being discussed, but rather its intensity and dynamics. The study of the types of employee loyalty in Poland before the pandemic, which was carried out using the same questionnaires [5] (pp.218–224) as described below (Section 4), shows that the following loyalties dominated [5] (p. 185):

- committed loyalty without trust (29% of respondents);
- committed loyalty (27% of respondents).

This means that balanced loyalty was not among the dominant types of loyalty.

Loyalty types have so far been studied with regards to consumers [95]. The contribution of this research is to study the types of loyalty with reference to employees, and this to take place at a time when the types of loyalty have been influenced by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Methodology

In the literature, the components of loyalty are most often studied from a psychological perspective [96], therefore, as a research method, an experiment is used [97]. Comparative analyses between countries are based on questionnaires. The questionnaire is a useful method for diagnosing the declared loyalty.

In this study, conducted in May 2021, the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) questionnaire was used, which, in order to be representative of the research, was distributed among 1000 employees in Poland: women, men, in various age groups, in all voivodeships in the number corresponding to general population (Tables 4–6). The method of proportional selection was used here [98] (pp. 45, 54).

This particular method of obtaining data was selected due to:

- the willingness to ensure convenience for respondents (possibility to choose the time to complete the survey), and above all, a sense of anonymity (which is of great importance in the case of sensitive research issues, such as a possible willingness to leave the employer), which increases the credibility of the survey compared to traditional surveys, avoiding the social desirability effect;
- low costs [99];
- the possibility of using computer software during research that allows to detect errors and inconsistencies in filling in the questionnaire in real time;
- the ability to encode data and their statistical evaluation.

The aim of the research was to determine the structure of the loyalty types of employees based on the three above-described loyalty mechanisms and taking into account that commitment may be positive, negative, or there may be a lack of commitment. Questions used (Appendix A)—modified due to the pandemic and changes that occurred on the labour market (Tables 1–3)—had been also used in own research on types of loyalty 9 years ago [5]. These studies were a kind of pilot for the clarity of survey questions for the respondents.

The questionnaire questions refer to the three inner loyalty mechanisms described above. At the same time, questions are formulated taking into consideration the current state of research, such as the relationship between loyalty and contribution to shaping the image of an organization [87], undertaking work tasks that go beyond the particular interests of an employee [100], or recommending the company as an attractive workplace [100].

Thus, the existence of trust was identified in this study on the basis of a positive answer to the question: “Do you have trust in your company, i.e., do you think that even during a pandemic it fulfils all, also unwritten obligations?” Limiting the study to the identification of trust by direct inquiry or by means of one or one or two statements is not uncommon in the literature [65], although sometimes the identification of trust towards the employer needs (as in S.L. Robinson [101]) as many as 7 statements. Due to the scope of the study (1000 respondents), the possibility of identifying trust towards the company based on experimental methods, recommended in the literature on the subject [102], was excluded.

Similarly, the existence of a habit was determined based on a negative answer to the following question: “Would you like to move to another company now, but not only because it involves the need to change your current habits?”.

The type of commitment was identified on the basis of answers to 6 questions covering 5 aspects: the perceived importance of the durability of the relationship with the current organization (question 3); recommending other people to work in the company or advising them against it (questions 4 and 5); readiness to carry out new tasks/projects in your company (question 6); define your opinion on job satisfaction/dissatisfaction, perceived own contribution to the company’s survival on the market, and willingness/lack of willingness to work elsewhere (question 7); and present your view on civic behaviour (organizational citizenship behaviour) in the form of an approach to making the maximum effort for the company during a pandemic in terms of remunerating for all work, for some or no remuneration (question 8).

In the case of:

- at least three (more than half of the answers) of the following answers: “important” (to question 3), “yes” and “yes” or “yes” and “no” (to questions 4 and 5), “yes” (to question 6), choice of statement 1 (to question 7), selection of statement 1 (to question 8)—a positive commitment was identified;
- at least the following three answers: “unimportant” (to question 3), “no”, and “yes” (to questions 4 and 5), “no” (to question 6), choice of statement 2 (to question 7), choice of statement 2 (to question 8)—a negative commitment was identified;
- at least the following three answers: “difficult to say” (to question 3), “no”, and “no” (to questions 4 and 5), “difficult to say” (to question 6), choice of statement 3 (to question 7), choice of statement 3 (to question 8)—a lack of commitment was identified.

Depending on the distribution of responses regarding trust, habit, and the identified type of commitment, the types of loyalty of internal customers [7] (p. 20) [103], i.e., employees (Table 4), were identified by analogy to the distinguished types of consumer loyalty [104] (p. 89).

In the absence of at least 3 answers allowing us to identify the type of involvement,—and, consequently, the type of employee loyalty—the group/type of loyalty was identified based on Table 5.

**Table 4.** Determining the type of employee loyalty depending on the distribution of responses.

Answer to the Question 1	Answer to the Question 2	The Type of Commitment Identified on the Basis of Questions 3–8	Group	Commitment Type
Yes (existence of trust)	Yes (no habit)	Positive *	1	Committed loyalty
No (no trust)	Yes (no habit)	Positive *	2	Committed loyalty without trust
No (no trust)	No (the existence of a habit)	Positive *	3	Committed loyalty out of routine
Yes (existence of trust)	No (there is a habit)	Positive *	4	Sustainable (partnership) loyalty
No (no trust)	No (the existence of a habit)	Negative **	5	Helpless loyalty out of coercion
No (no trust)	Yes (no habit)	Negative **	6	Unaccepted coercive loyalty
Yes (existence of trust)	Yes (no habit)	Lack of commitment ***	7	Conscious loyalty
Yes (existence of trust)	No (the existence of a habit)	Negative **	8	Understanding loyalty
Yes (existence of trust)	No (the existence of a habit)	Lack of commitment ***	9	Rational loyalty
Yes (existence of trust)	Yes (no habit)	Lack of commitment ***	10	Conditional loyalty
No (no trust)	No (the existence of a habit)	Lack of commitment ***	11	Loyalty out of routine
No (no trust)	Yes (no habit)	Lack of commitment ***	12	Non-negative loyalty

\*, \*\*, \*\*\* At least 3 specified answers indicated in the text.

**Table 5.** Identification of the group/type of loyalty if the conditions specified in Table 4 are not met.

Trust Identification	Habit Identification	Number of Answers to Questions 3–8 (4 and 5 in Total) Showing Positive, Negative, or Non-Commitment	Group Qualification (Loyalty Type)
Yes	No	2—positive, 1—negative, 2—none	1
Yes	No	2—positive, 2—negative, 1—none	7
Yes	No	1—positive, 2—negative, 2—none	10
No	No	2—positive, 1—negative, 2—none	2
No	No	2—positive, 2—negative 1—none	12
No	No	1—positive, 2—negative, 2—none	6

Table 5. Cont.

Trust Identification	Habit Identification	Number of Answers to Questions 3–8 (4 and 5 in Total) Showing Positive, Negative, or Non-Commitment	Group Qualification (Loyalty Type)
No	Yes	2—positive, 1—negative, 2—none	3
No	Yes	2—positive, 2—negative, 1—none	11
No	Yes	1—positive, 2—negative, 2—none	5
Yes	Yes	2—positive, 1—negative, 2—none	4
Yes	Yes	2—positive, 2—negative, 1—none	9
Yes	Yes	1—positive, 2—negative, 2—none	8

To sum up: disjunctive questions were used, collecting information about the existence of trust in the organization and habituation to it and the same type of questions in order to find out whether the respondents recommend or advise against working in their company and whether they are ready to participate in new tasks and projects. In addition, the survey questionnaire consisted of three cafeteria questions (question regarding the importance of the durability of the relationship with the current company; question about the contribution of work to maintaining the company's position on the market and satisfaction with this job; question about civic behaviour in the organization).

Therefore, the research focused on the verification of the following hypotheses:

- of the some commonly occurring types of loyalty and others occurring less frequently—among working Poles,
- of the non-dominance in the post-pandemic period—as opposed to the pre-pandemic period—of engaged loyalty without the trust and committed loyalty;
- of no statistically significant differences between gender and age and the share of the dominant loyalty type among the respondents;
- of the occurrence of employees exhibiting citizenship behaviour in the peri-pandemic period among employees representing balanced loyalty (whom the authors propose—in the absence of adequate nomenclature in the literature on the subject—to be called “super loyal”). It is assumed that these will be people who represent the view that employees in a pandemic should make the maximum effort for the company, even if they do not receive any remuneration for it. Loyalty includes a tendency to make sacrifices [12] (p. 189), therefore, distinguishing the super loyal employees is legitimate.

## 5. Results

The study covered 1000 employees—628 women and 372 men—including 69 people up to 24 years of age, 779 people aged 25–54, and 152 people aged 55–64. The proportion of the sample size in terms of age corresponds to the structure of the general population (6.9%—under 24 years old, 77.7%—aged 25–54, 15.4%—aged 55–64 [105] (p. 133)). The percentages of responses to individual survey questions are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Distribution of answers to survey questions (in%).

Question Number/Answer	The Percentage of Respondents Who Chose a Given Answer Variant
1/yes	84.5
1/no	15.5
2/yes	36.8
2/no	63.2
3/valid	69.1
3/invalid	7.1
3/hard to say	23.8
4/yes, recommending	58.3
4/no, not recommending	41.7
5/yes, discouraging	20.4
5/no, not discouraging	79.6
6/yes, readiness	79.5
6/no, no readiness	4.8
6/hard to say	15.7
7/satisfaction, contribution	58.0
7/contribution, but willingness to work elsewhere in the absence of such an opportunity	29.0
7/dissatisfaction and unwillingness to work elsewhere	13.0
8/making maximum effort for the company, even without remuneration	22.8
8/making maximum effort for the company only in the case of remuneration for all work	59.6
8/making maximum effort for the company in the event of at least partial remuneration	17.6

The conducted research confirmed the hypothesis about the uneven occurrence of individual types of loyalty. They showed that more than half (50.1%) of the respondents represent the type of sustainable (partnership) loyalty, i.e., one with trust, habit, and committed loyalty. Committed loyalty comes second (every six to seven respondents) as regards the share of loyalty types in the structure. It differs from sustainable loyalty by a lack of habit. Two other types of loyalty have a share above 5.5%, i.e., represented by at least 20 respondents. These are a loyalty of reason and a conscious loyalty. This means that all the loyalty types with the highest shares are the types with the presence of trust. On the other hand, the lowest shares (1.3% each) are for the types of loyalty with no trust, i.e., committed loyalty from routine and helpless loyalty due to coercion. Detailed research results are presented in Table 7.

The analysis of people representing the type of sustainable loyalty indicates (Table 8) a slightly higher percentage of women than men, as well as people aged 55–64. They are therefore people belonging to the Baby Boomers generation (born in 1964–1946). The  $\chi^2$  (chi square) tests performed with the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  have not shown any statistically significant differences between sex and age and the share among representatives of sustainable loyalty.

**Table 7.** Types of employee loyalty in Poland after the COVID-19 pandemic by frequency of occurrence (as of May 2021).

Commitment Type	Number of Persons	Percentage of Surveyed Employees
Sustainable loyalty	501	50.1
Committed loyalty	162	16.2
Rational loyalty	61	6.1
Conscious loyalty	56	5.6
Unaccepted coercive loyalty	53	5.3
Conditional loyalty	43	4.3
Non-negative loyalty	38	3.8
Understanding loyalty	28	2.8
Loyalty out of routine	17	1.7
Committed loyalty without trust	15	1.5
Committed loyalty from routine	13	1.3
Helpless loyalty out of coercion	13	1.3

**Table 8.** Sociodemographic characteristics of representing sustainable loyalty.

Feature	Number of People Representing Sustainable Loyalty	Percentage Representing Sustainable Loyalty (of Total by Sex/Age)
Men	177	47.6
Women	324	51.6
People under 24 years old	32	46.4
People aged 25–54	384	49.3
People aged 55–64	85	55.9

In addition, from the group of people representing sustainable loyalty, the most loyal (“super loyal”) people were separated. Table 9 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the “super loyal” employees.

**Table 9.** Characteristics of “super loyal” people.

Number and percentage of super loyal people in the research sample	136	13.6
Number and percentage of super loyal women (of total by sex)	86	13.7
Number and percentage of super loyal men (of total by sex)	50	13.4
Number and percentage of super loyal people up to 24 years of age (of total by age)	7	10.1
Number and percentage of super loyal people aged 25–54 (of total by age)	115	14.8
Number and percentage of super loyal people aged 55–64 (of total by age)	14	9.2

## 6. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusions (Future Research Suggestions)

The results obtained should be interpreted taking into account the attitude towards loyalty before the pandemic, expressed in the low value of the median seniority in one employer, in the context of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. These results indicate that the pandemic changed—at least temporarily—employees’ attitudes to loyalty. Thus, the research does not confirm—reported in the literature on the subject [106]—the lack of a relationship between employee involvement and the crisis situation. However, it should

be noted that, in the literature, the study concerned the economic crisis, while the nature of the pandemic crisis seems to be slightly different in nature.

The research on whether the types of the represented employee loyalty have changed after the pandemic is of great importance for those companies which are currently in a difficult economic situation. The studies must contain information on whether they can count on the retention (loyalty) of the employees within the organization or if they will leave it, thus reducing the company's value. This may force such companies to decide to open insolvency proceedings.

The results in the form of prevailing types of loyalty differ from those obtained in 2011 [5], which could be influenced, among others, by a different situation on Poland's labour market during the implementation of the first (i.e., in 2011) and the second study on the types of loyalty among employees in Poland. As per Tables 2 and 3, there are clearly higher employment rates and lower unemployment rates than those for the period previously covered by the research. In the light of this data, this means that a change in the dominant type of loyalty was influenced not by the objective situation on the labour market, but by its subjective perception, i.e., by the feeling of uncertainty caused by the pandemic, which is clearly highlighted by the title of the article. The prevalence of sustainable loyalty among employees in Poland is not an evident result, not only in the context of the low unemployment rate, but also in the data related to employee optimism. The research shows that "Poland ranks first among all EU countries in terms of employee optimism regarding the subjective chance of finding a new job within 6 months" [107].

The pandemic created a new, unknown threat, which—in analogy with the butterfly effect [108]—hit all societies at an extraordinary speed and at the same time, and caused changes in the situation of the markets, including the labour markets. This corresponds to the definition of a world (global) risk society [109], with such features as: relocation (intertwining forms of risk at the spatial, temporal, and social level), incalculability, and irreparability (inability to obtain full knowledge and the need to take into account even the most unlikely scenarios). The resulting effects of a pandemic should not be measured only in an objective manner (e.g., by the dynamics of the unemployment rate) because, as U. Beck argues, they must be perceived through the prism of the assessments of individual populations. Therefore, it is also reasonable to define the loyalty risk as a consequence of a pandemic from the perspective of subjective opinions, determined by means of a questionnaire. A high percentage of people representing sustainable loyalty, and among them, a high percentage of the "super loyal", may indicate that working people feel an existential threat, fuelled by the fear policy and traditional and modern (social) mass media presenting the phenomenon of "real-time mass death on a global scale by active participation and presence of all mankind" and "the shock experience of the fragility of the foundation of the civilized world" [110] (pp. 106–107). Feeling the omnipresence of global uncertainty leads to resignation from actions that may violate one's own status quo, including one's position in the company and on the labour market, and thus leads to loyalty in order to not give up the built-up social capital. The risk borne by the employer and the employee is—as a result of a common COVID-19 experience—shared, which promotes sustainable loyalty. It is part of the concept of "global assemblage" [111] (p. 81) and is compatible with all three components of organizational commitment. This seems to be to some extent crossing out the symptoms of generational differences in loyalty observed before the pandemic and presented in the literature on the subject [112] (p. 188). They do not reveal the discontinuation of behaviour regarding the continuity of work in one company between Baby Boomers and Millennials, visible before COVID-19.

The result of a high share of sustainable loyalty should not come as a surprise in the context of the results of the research under the Workplace employment relations survey [...], which show [92] (p. 23) (data for 2011) a relatively high (75%) participation of people who feel loyal to the organization. It should be noted that the present research took into account not only the organizational commitment, but also employee trust and employee routine.

Maintaining sustainable loyalty will require a balanced commitment and investment in both the trustee and trustee relationships. The point is not to lead to an erosion of trust and gradually transform the imputed trust into knowledge-based trust, then into relational trust, and then into identification-based trust, in accordance with the model of trust development over time [113] and according to the logic of increasing dependence in work [114]. Otherwise, sustainable loyalty will not be a long-term result. This requires the use of the Employee Relationship Management concept, which is a logical consequence of the following earlier stages of the development of personnel functions, not oriented towards the balance of the main stakeholders of the organization, i.e., employers and employees [9] (pp. 5–14):

- bureaucratization (up to approx. 1960);
- institutionalization (1960–1970);
- humanization (1970–1980);
- economization (1980–1990);
- entrepreneurship, strategic management (from approx. 1990).

Employee Relationship is a derivative of Customer Relationship Management [115] (pp. 7–8), pioneered by D.K. Rigby, F.F. Reichheld, and P. Scheffer [116], and popularized by R. McKenn's book "Relationship Marketing: Successful Strategies for the Age of the Customer" [117]. In Employee Relationship Management, among others, [118] retention (pro-loyalty) investments in employees take into account their different value for the organization, which is reflected in distinguishing [7] (p. 116) the Most Value Employees, Most Growable Employees, and Below Zero Employees. Their employment shares in the organization are dynamic, affecting the share of sustainable loyalty. When implementing Employee Relationship Management, it is necessary to distinguish between external determinants of relations between employees and employers, on which the influence is limited, and internal factors [119,120].

The subject of the study, which limited the study, was not a broader spectrum of variables related to employees, such as the professional affiliation of employees or their family status, or—included in the literature on the subject [121,122]—intermediary variables, such as organizational culture or the perceived use of Corporate Social Responsibility by the organization (manifested by concern for the well-being of employees, also in the pandemic period), affecting organizational commitment. Caring for the well-being of employees may affect their retention time in the organization, i.e., their loyalty. This is the effect of the exchange between employees and employers [123], including the perceived organizational support [124]. At the same time, one should also note that satisfied employees do not necessarily have to be loyal [125]. Therefore, to establish permanence or impermanence of the sustainable loyalty identified in the study, it is necessary to continue research with regards to different types of loyalty among employees in Poland and not only on employee satisfaction. The study also does not take into account working conditions and remuneration. It is known, however, that in the conditions of a pandemic, some of the respondents worked remotely. According to LFS, 10.8% of all employees in the fourth quarter of 2020 in Poland worked remotely [126]. Therefore—in analogy to consumers [127,128]—we can speak of their e-loyalty. The types of e-loyalty should not differ from the types of traditional (non-virtual) loyalty, but it would require empirical confirmation. Above all, however, the dynamics of the structure of loyalty types in individual working populations should be further monitored to determine whether the COVID-19 effect in the form of a large share of sustainable loyalty is short-term or long-term. Further research could use not a three-factor but a five-factor model of organizational commitment [129], including—in relation to the N.J. Allen's and J.P. Mayer's proposals—additionally affiliative commitment and associative commitment. Its use would therefore take into account the positive experiences of the employee, which is important in the conditions of the experience market [130], as well as the balance of values and benefits of the organization's stakeholders. One could also consider using the Burke Intent Scale, as some studies [131] indicate its explanatory potential. However, the study was not limited by the use of the CAWI questionnaire, as,

according to statistical data, 90.4% of households in Poland have access to the Internet [132] (p. 24).

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## Appendix A

Questionnaire questions:

1. Do you have trust in your company, i.e., do you think that even during a pandemic it fulfils all, also unwritten obligations?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
2. Would you like to move to another company now, but not only because it involves the need to change your current habits?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
3. How important for you is the durability of your relationship with the current organization?
  - (a) Important
  - (b) Not important
  - (c) Hard to say
4. During the pandemic, did you recommend other people to work in this company?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
5. Have you advised other people not to work in this company in the last 16 months?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
6. Do you feel ready to participate in the implementation of new tasks/projects in your company at this moment?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
7. Which of the following descriptions best fits your situation?
  - (a) I am satisfied with the work in the company; I contribute to keeping it in the market
  - (b) I would like to work elsewhere, but it is not yet possible; it is difficult to say that I contribute to keeping my company in the market
  - (c) Although I am not satisfied with the work in the company, I would not like to work elsewhere

8. Which of the following views are closest to you?
- During a pandemic, employees should make maximum effort for the organization, even if they are not paid
  - During a pandemic, employees should make maximum effort for the organization, but only if they receive remuneration for all the performed work
  - During a pandemic, employees should make maximum effort for the organization, but only if they are remunerated for at least some of their work

Metrics:

9. Gender
- Man
  - Woman
10. Age
- Under 24 years old
  - 25–54 years old
  - 55–64 years old
11. Voivodeship  
(Please specify) . . . . .

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