

Social Purpose in an Organization from the Perspective of an Employee: A Self-Determination Outlook on the Meaning of Work

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Research note

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Abstract

Objective

Advancing social purpose in organizations is usually studied from the macro perspective, i.e., how it benefits organizational business goals or society more broadly. In this paper, we focus on social purpose from the perspective of the employee and propose that advancing social purpose in an organization allows individuals to fulfil an important human need for the meaning of work (MW). This study's objective was to assess whether a volunteering Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program in a manufacturing company allows employees to fulfil their basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and an analysis of artifacts, i.e., the company's multimedia materials such as employer branding ads and lectures where managerial staff shares knowledge about management strategies in this company.

Results

In the analysis, three main themes describing different aspects of voluntary work at the company were identified. These themes were related to SDT theory and described how voluntary activities served the needs of (1) relatedness, (2) competence, and (3) autonomy. We conclude that CSR programs have the most positive impact on MW when they allow employees to engage in prosocial actions and satisfy those needs.

Introduction

Recent research demonstrates that finding the meaning of work (MW) is a growing need among employees (1). MW is the subjective experience of significance and intrinsic value in one's work (2). Definitions of MW highlight an individual's need to make sense of one's self (3), find a sense of purpose in work (4,5), and the desire to serve the greater good (6). Based on Bakan's (7) framework of two fundamental modalities of human existence (agency and communion), two aspects of MW can be derived (8). *Agentic MW* relates to perceiving one's work as meaningful to the extent to which the work brings personal benefits: enhances the meaning of one's life, contributes to a sense of self-development, and allows to accomplish goals that are central to the self (8). *Communal MW* refers to the degree to which an employee perceives the work as having a beneficial impact on other people or 'world' in general: it involves viewing one's work as a calling, a sense of fulfilling a mission at work, and acting for the good of the humanity or the environment (8).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, designed to serve a greater good, seem to have a potential to support the need for MW among employees, especially in its communal aspect. The problem is that many of the CSR initiatives are ill-suited to fulfil this need because they are often planned top-down, precluding employees from directly engaging in prosocial activities. This 'distance' can impede creation of communal MW for individual employees. In fact, research shows that most employees have little knowledge about their firm's CSR activities, and increasing employees' proximity to the CSR

initiatives is seen as a major challenge for managers (9). Yet, only active involvement in CSR activities relates to the meaning of work (10). Following self-determination theory (SDT) (11), we argue that prosocial actions in an organization create individual MW when they involve intrinsic (i.e., inherent drive) rather than extrinsic (i.e., external regulation) motivation.

The basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are the basis of intrinsic motivation and behavior (11). *Relatedness* reflects the extent to which a person feels that he or she “belongs”, i.e., is connected to other people. This need is fulfilled when individuals are able to interact with others, experience caring for them (12), and have a sense of relevance in their lives (13). CSR activities that are focused on helping others are inherently interpersonal. Relatedness is also developed by setting common goals, which builds a sense of cohesiveness in a team. *Competence* represents a sense of efficacy in performing the activities: the notion of being able to achieve one’s goals (11). To satisfy this need one ought to be effective, i.e., perform a behavior that has a positive effect on the world. For example, research on people with multiple sclerosis shows that those patients who provide support to other patients report greater self-efficacy. Competence is related to the sense of mastery: an experience of being good at what one does (11). *Autonomy* signifies undertaking decisions and actions with a sense of volition and internal locus of control. An autonomous act is considered to be an expression of one’s values and reflect the self. To fulfil the need for autonomy, the actions need to be experienced as self-initiated, self-chosen, or self-endorsed. Thus, extrinsic awards or others-imposed conditions hamper intrinsic motivation (14).

Fulfilment of relatedness, competence, and autonomy needs has been linked with positive employee outcomes (15). Additionally, enhancement in well-being from prosocial behavior is mediated by the satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness (16). It follows, therefore, that CSR activities may be instrumental in creating communal MW as long as they serve the basic needs enlisted by SDT. In this article, we study a case of a manufacturing company whose business goals are not devoted to social purpose, like teaching, curing or helping. Thus, communal MW cannot be simply achieved by the employees by means of pursuing a job with a clear calling. Here, we focus on one of the CSR activities, i.e., volunteer work, to observe whether it allows employees to fulfil the basic needs outlined by SDT.

Materials And Methods

Organizational context

The study was conducted in the context of a manufacturing company in Poland. Currently, it employs over 80 people, of which over 50% are office employees (white collars). Voluntary work in this company is a part of their CSR. Each employee engages a minimum of 16 working hours in voluntary actions per year. There is a list of voluntary projects to engage in – employees can choose activities from it, as well as are able to submit new projects. Additionally, 1.5% of each employee's remuneration is allocated to the charity budget.

Data collection and methods

The study used qualitative research method. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and an analysis of artifacts, i.e., multimedia materials like employer branding ads and lectures where managerial staff shares knowledge about management strategies in this company. Semi-structured interviews with five employees from four different departments were conducted at the company's headquarter. The interview guide contained questions about the characteristics of work, employee attitudes, and voluntary activities of employees (see Additional file 1). The interviews lasted forty-five to ninety minutes, were recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Based on the interviews and the artifacts, the researchers listed characteristics of activities undertaken by employees and the organization in the area of volunteer work. Then, two team members (MPK, AŁB) independently assigned these features to one of the categories: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Discrepancies were discussed and final decisions made by the whole team.

Results

In the analysis, three main themes describing different aspects of voluntary work at the company were identified. These themes were related to SDT theory and described how voluntary activities served the needs of (1) relatedness, (2) competence, and (3) autonomy. The themes are illustrated with quotes that are poignant and representative of the findings.

Relatedness

One of the most distinctive characteristics of this volunteering program is the focus on local environment and personal contact. An example of this is an annual action of preparing Christmas gifts for the families in need who come from the city where the company is based. All employees are involved in this project. They form teams representing different departments and are responsible for finding a family that needs help. The gifts are delivered in person. These activities allow employees to create bonds with the help recipients.

"After a year, you meet the person you helped, and they remember you. It is a pleasant feeling."

Although projects are conducted in small teams, employees celebrate and exchange their experiences at the organizational level. For example, during Christmas Party, employees share their emotions and reflections regarding the "Christmas Gift" project by showing pictures and videos of the experience. Respondents expressed that helping as an organization allowed them to create a sense of mutual goals and values with other team members. They often used metaphors of "a family" or "a sports team" when describing their organizational community. They viewed the work at the company and their charity work as coherent, and they identified with both of them.

"The Foundation is not separated from the company and its employees, at least we don't see it that way. The foundation is 'us' and we are the foundation."

Competence

The fact that employees can freely choose a voluntary activity rather than being assigned to one, gives them an opportunity to utilize their strengths, skills and knowledge. As respondents declared, they help in a way that is possible for them.

“Sometimes, we paint a room; sometimes, we teach English. We do what are best at and what we can”.

“We collaborate and share our experiences. Everyone is important! For example, while organizing annual Christmas Gift, an IT employee suggests what IT equipment to buy, an employee who has school children suggests what should be in the school layette, etc.”.

Some respondents saw the wide variety of possible voluntary activities as a chance to develop competences or learn new things. Helping others in need allowed them to develop necessary skills to deal with difficult emotions or situations.

“You have to try new things and leave your comfort zone while helping”.

As the projects are focused on solving concrete problems and are well-planned, respondents declare that they can observe the short- and long-term effects of their efforts. Being personally engaged in helping enables them to perceive the positive consequences of their actions.

“You can provide long-term support and change people’s lives in a positive way”

Autonomy

Having a choice was one of the most important characteristics of volunteering expressed by respondents. Employees highlighted that they feel free to choose a voluntary action, and they described themselves as agents of decisions and actions. A possibility to launch new projects seemed to enhance a sense of agency in the employees as well. The freedom also enabled employees to act in accordance with their values and interests.

“I’m the one who chooses what I’ll get involved in, like I can take the kids and plant the trees on Saturday”.

Respondents stated that when it comes to volunteering, they do not feel controlled. There are no official schedules or implemented ways to monitor employee volunteering activities by the management.

“We treat ourselves as adults. If we commit to volunteering, the company trusts that we will fulfill it.”

Importantly, there are no rewards for voluntary work. Employees treat it as part of their job rather than something unusual. While talking about benefits of helping, respondents spoke about their positive emotions and personal growth.

„While helping you start to appreciate those things that you have and feel gratitude”.

Discussion

In this case study, we showed that CSR activities can be construed so as to allow employees to create social bonds, to use strengths and build competence, as well as to be experienced as self-chosen and coherent with the self. Thus, by fulfilling the basic needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, a volunteering program at work may result in internal motivation. Consequently, CSR actions that are important from the perspective of the company can be beneficial to employees by allowing them to create MW.

An important part of the voluntary activities in this company was the fact that they are obligatory for all employees. At first, it may seem to contradict the idea of autonomy. However, our interviews revealed that employees perceive the volunteering program as a way to build an integrated community at work rather than as an additional job demand. Importantly, the information about the way volunteering is organized in the company is presented during the recruitment process to attract candidates with similar values.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first case study which analyses the practical use of SDT in CSR solutions. Notably, SDT is a well-established framework and can provide evidence-based guidelines to design CSR solutions that support MW at work. Another strength of this case is its universality, since presented solutions are not industry-specific and can be adapted in different organizational contexts. Specifically, the business goals of the presented company are not related to social purpose; thus, this case serves as an opportunity to observe how social purpose can be pursued by most workplaces.

Conclusion

Implementing SDT theory in organizational CSR programs can serve as an evidence-based method of enhancing social purpose in organization and employees' MW. By engaging workforces in volunteering, companies may not only build its positive image but also enable employees to experience their organization as positive, which is an important factor of well-being at work (17).

Limitations

Some limitations need to be addressed. First, we conducted interviews with only five employees. Still, each of them represented a different division of the company and had different experiences in volunteering projects, which increased our opportunity to collect information from a wider perspective. Second, all interviewees represented division heads. It is possible that – although all of these activities are performed regardless of organizational hierarchy – the views that were shared represent management experiences, which limits our conclusions.

Abbreviations

MW: Meaning of work

CSR: Corporate social responsibility

SDT: Self-determination theory

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study described in this manuscript was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Ethics Committee for Research Projects of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Gdansk who provided specific approval for this research project after the research was reviewed (43/2020). All subjects provided written informed consents.

Consent to publish

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The data used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: MPK, AŁB, MR. Acquisition of data: AŁB. Analysis: MPK, AŁB. Writing—original draft preparation: MPK, AŁB, MR. Writing—review and editing: MR. Supervision: MR. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Supplementary Files

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