

A Comparative Analysis of Mission Valence Among Social Services Personnel Working in Elder Care and in Services for Children and Adults

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Abstract

In this article, the motivation of personnel working in the social work system is examined through the lens of Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory, with a specific focus on the concept of *mission valence*. The study investigates the role of *mission valence* as one of the key motivational factors influencing individuals' commitment to work within the social services sector in previous research (Dilova-Vasileva & Tsanov, 2025). A comparative analysis is conducted between two groups of employees: (1) those providing social services for older adults (above working age), and (2) those employed in organizations supporting children and adults.

Keywords:

Work motivation, Social services system, Public service motivation, Mission valence, Social work

Introduction

Public service motivation (PSM) refers to one's drive to contribute to society in its broadest sense (Perry and Hondeghem 2008). It is the motivation of those who value highly spending their energy or resources to make society a better place – for any given value of better (Vandenabeele et al., 2020). Mission Valence on the other hand can be viewed as an employee's perception of the attractiveness or salience of an organization's purpose or social contribution. Mission valence is a concept formulated by Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) that serves to provide a better understanding of what compels an employee to uphold and achieve goals within their organization. It enhances the satisfaction that an individual experiences or anticipates to receive from advancing the organizational mission, and in turn, it has the "potential to influence the ability of the organization to recruit, retain, and motivate its employees." (Wright, Bradley E., Moynihan, Donald P., Pandey, Sanjay K., 2012). Mission valence refers to "an employee's perception of the attractiveness or salience of an organization's purpose or social contribution" (Wright, Moynihan, & Pandey, 2012).

Literature review

The concept of *mission valence* can be understood as the employee's perception of the attractiveness or significance of the organization's goal or its social contribution (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). James Perry's (Perry & Wise, 1990) Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory posits that ultimately, aligning an organization's mission with the values and characteristics of its employees can enhance the potential effects of public service motivation, fostering commitment to the organization's success and increasing retention. Employees in the public sector, motivated by a desire to help others, are more likely to seek employment in socially engaged organizations, as these organizations' missions often align with their own personal values. The first step in promoting public service values among employees is to select individuals who possess or respond positively to such values (Lewis & Frank, 2002; Mann, 2006). In particular, it has been suggested that "the more engaging, attractive and worthwhile the mission is to people, the more the agency will be able to attract support from those people, to attract some of them to join the agency, and to motivate them to perform well in the agency" (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999, p. 16) The attractiveness of mission is expected to influence the ability of the organization to recruit, retain and motivate its workforce (Bradley & Pandey, 2011). Consistent with these expectations, it has

been found that the more attractive the mission, the more likely an employee will want to be associated with the organization (Pandey et al., 2008) and strive to help it succeed (Wright, 2007). Given the altruistic or community service nature of public organization goals and activities, employees with public service motivation should be more likely to view their organization's mission as important because its congruence with their own values encourages employees to incorporate the organizational goals into their own sense of identity and view those goals as personally meaningful (Weiss & Piderit, 1999).

Several recent studies have found state government employees to be more committed to goals when there is evidence that a goal can be achieved (Wright, 2007) and their work makes a meaningful contribution to the organization and its external constituents (Buchanan, 1974; Vinzant, 1998). Other research, however, has found that government employment provides more opportunity to "help others" or be "useful to society" (Frank & Lewis, 2004) and that public service motivation increases public employee perceptions of the organization's mission valence (Pandey et al., 2008).

James Perry (1996) developed a measurement scale that empirically reduced this typology to four dimensions: attraction to public policy-making; commitment to the public interest and civic duty; compassion; and self-sacrifice, including altruism and prosocial behavior. Key indicators of public service motivation (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Carson et al., 2005) rest on the assumption that past behavior is likely to predict future behavior. For example, in their recommendations for selecting healthcare professionals, Carson et al. (2005) suggest looking for individuals with a history of engaging in activities that demonstrate high levels of social motivation - such as volunteer work, community activities, or university-based initiatives - i.e., those showing altruism or a strong identification with the organization's mission.

METHODOLOGY

The surveyed employees were divided into two groups based on the type of social services in which they work. The first group is the social services personnel working with older adults, the second one is the social services personnel working with children and adults.

The first group consisted of employees from 2 social services for older adults, including both – a residential facility and a community-based organization – a home social care service and a nursing home. **The second group** worked in a broader range of other 32 services, including those types of social services: Complexes for social services for children and youth; Rehabilitation and integration centers for persons with disabilities (intellectual, physical, sensory, or speech and language impairments) and for adults with mental disorders; Sheltered housing of socially disadvantaged individuals; Temporary accommodations for homeless; Day centers and complexes for social services for children, youth, and adults with disabilities; Family-type residential care centers, family support services, including centers for public support, "Mother and Baby" units, and early intervention programs to prevent child abandonment; Specialized rehabilitation services for individuals recovering from alcohol dependence.

Subject of this study is **the differences in the impact of mission valence on employees** working in those two types of social services – social services for older adults, and social services for children and adults.

Object of the study is the personnel working in organizations providing social services.

Research Objectives - This study purpose is to explore if there is a difference in the impact of mission valence on employees working with seniors, and those working with children and adults.

The study's objectives will be achieved through the following tasks:

- Analyzing existing literature on the motivational impact on employees of non-profit organizations of Public Service Motivation theory and Mission Valence.
- Examining the results of scale “Mission Valence” of previously constructed and conducted survey, examining various factors and their impact on the motivation of employees in the social services system.
- Performing statistical data analysis.
- Analyzing the data and drawing conclusions.

Methods for Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics (frequency/percentage distribution)

The original survey consists of 21 scales with a total of 110 items. To measure motivation effectively, the study is divided into two sections: value-based assessment of possible job characteristics and an actual presence of these characteristics in the workplace. This approach follows the methodology of Jonev, S. (Social Psychology, Vol. 5, Sofia, 2004, p. 225). The motivational strength of a specific factor depends on the combination of two components: high value perception and high resource availability would mean strong motivational impact; high value perception and low resource availability - reduced motivational impact; low value perception and high resource availability - reduced motivational impact; low value perception and low resource availability - minimal contribution to motivation.

This framework helps assess which factors significantly influence employee motivation within the social services system.

The “Mission Valence” **scale items** are 6 as follows:

1. “Personal commitment to the mission of the organization I work for.”
2. “Alignment between my personal values and those of the organization.”
3. “Work that allows me to help others or those in need.”
4. “I seek to work for a higher purpose beyond earning a salary.”
5. “I am willing to accept lower pay if I can do work I enjoy.”
6. “Participation in volunteer projects or activities related to the organization’s mission.”

First, participants indicate the extent to which it is important for them that their job offers or enables each of these aspects. Next, they indicate the extent to which their current job actually offers or enables them.

In this study the researched participants are 10 employees from social services supporting older adults and 80 employees from social services supporting children and adults.

The empirical study is approached with the following working hypotheses.

H1: Social services personnel working with children and adults would perceive a higher degree of alignment between the importance they place on mission-related motivational factors and the extent to which their job actually offers/enables these factors, compared to personnel working with older adults.

Why: It is possible that work involving children and adults might more visibly match altruistic motivations (like education, prevention, development, etc.), leading to a stronger perceived connection between the importance they put into mission valence and what the job offers/enables in reality. I expect the extent to which the job offers or enables the mission valence to be more significant in the group of employees working with children and adults, compared to those working with seniors. The probability is that there would be more opportunities to participate

in volunteer projects; employees may see quicker or more tangible results from their work, reinforcing their perception that they are truly helping others. Also certain sectors of children/adult services might involve visible societal impact (e.g., prevention, empowerment), reinforcing the sense of higher purpose; services for children and adults often have more proactive, developmental programs where value alignment is more visible. All those aspect can impact the results of their experience in the work and impact their relationship with mission valence in the organization they work for.

Results

The following charts explore how social services personnel perceive the importance to which their job offers/enables personal commitment to the organization’s mission and to what extent to does their job offers/enables it. Two groups are compared: **social services personnel engaged in work with older adults (10 participants)** and **social services personnel engaged in work with children and adults (80 participants)**.

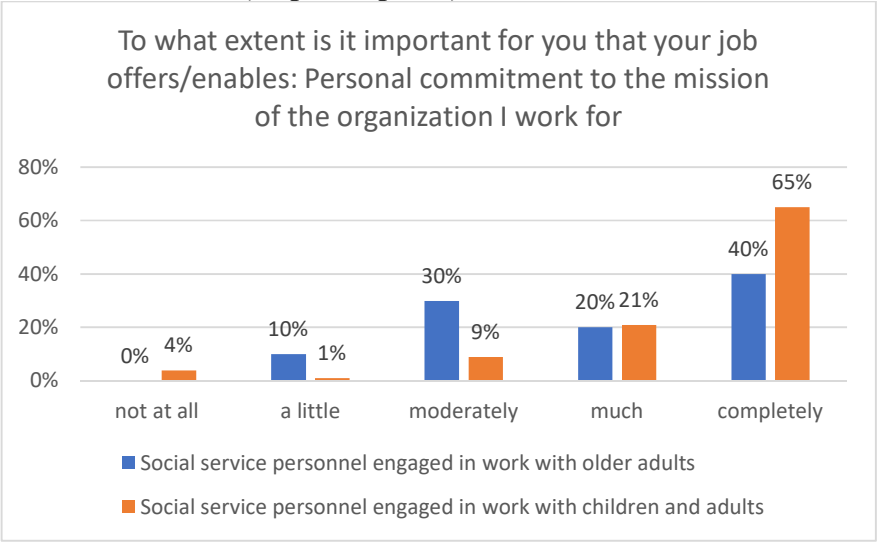


Figure 1

The importance of personal commitment to the mission of the organization the participants work for seem relevantly highly important for them. The highest percentage (65%) of personnel working with children and adults shows that personal commitment to the mission is "completely" important to them. This is substantially higher than the 40% in the group working with older adults. A larger portion of personnel working with older adults (30%) rated the importance of personal commitment as "moderate". However, the data suggest that social services personnel working with children and adults place somewhat greater emphasis on the importance of personal commitment to the mission than those working with older adults.

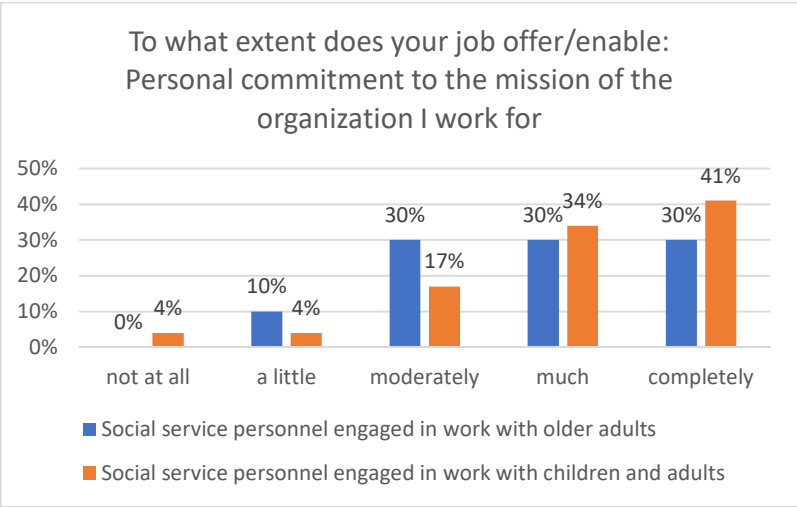


Figure 2

The difference between groups is less pronounced but still notable. Among personnel working with children and adults, 41% believe their job completely enables personal commitment to the mission, compared to 30% of those working with older adults

Findings suggest that personal commitment to the organizational mission is highly valued by social services personnel across both groups, with those working with children and adults placing even greater importance on this factor. Notably, personnel working with children and adults also report higher levels of job enabling for mission commitment compared to those working with older adults. The difference possibly reflects variations in the perceived meaningfulness of mission engagement between the personnel of the two groups. The relatively lower enabling scores among the group working with older adults suggest potential areas for organizational development to better support employees’ personal mission engagement.

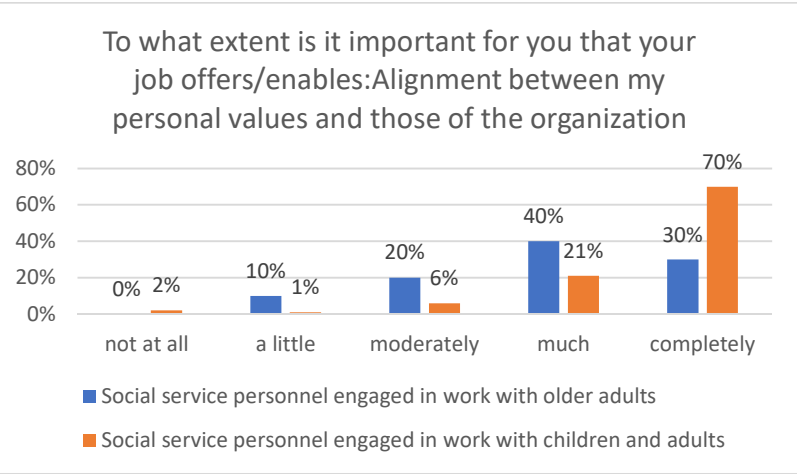


Figure 3

The "Completely" category is much higher for employees working with children and adults (70%) compared to elderly services employees (30%). It seems that the value alignment is more of a high priority for those employees working with children and adults. The group of social services personnel engaged in work with older adults shows a more even distribution, with

significant portions in “Much” (40%) and “Completely” (30%), but also higher percentages in “A little” (10%) and “Moderately” (20%). However, across both groups, very few respondents said “Not at all” or “A little,” indicating that value alignment is generally important in both fields. Analysis reveals more varied opinions and possibly less consensus on the critical importance of value alignment.

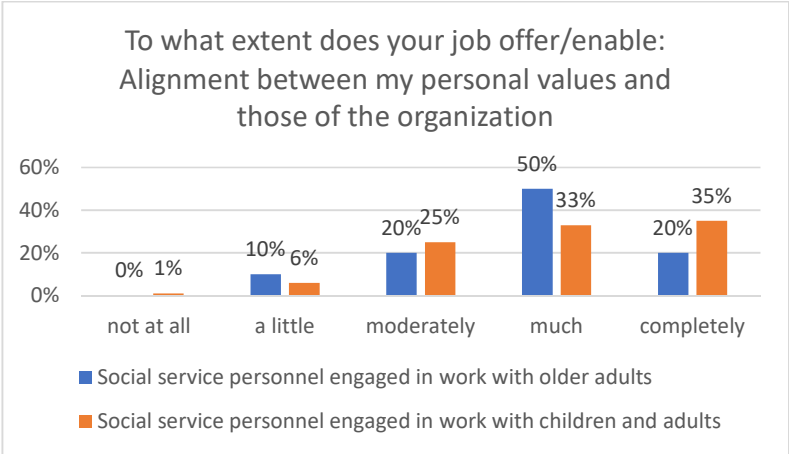


Figure 4

We see highest share in “Much” (50%), followed by “Moderately” (20%) and “Completely” (20%) in the answers of personnel engaged in work with seniors. This suggests most of them feel a strong but not perfect alignment. In the results of the personnel working with children and adults the “Completely” share (35%) is highest, but still much smaller than the 70% importance reported earlier. Many fall in “Moderately” (25%) or “Much” (33%), showing alignment exists but often not to the desired extent.

It seems that the both groups value alignment, but employees working with children and adults value it more strongly — and therefore, they have a bigger gap between what they want and what they get. Elderly services employees show a smaller gap - possibly because their expectations are being more moderate and easier to met, or their organizations’ values are in reality easier to match in practice.

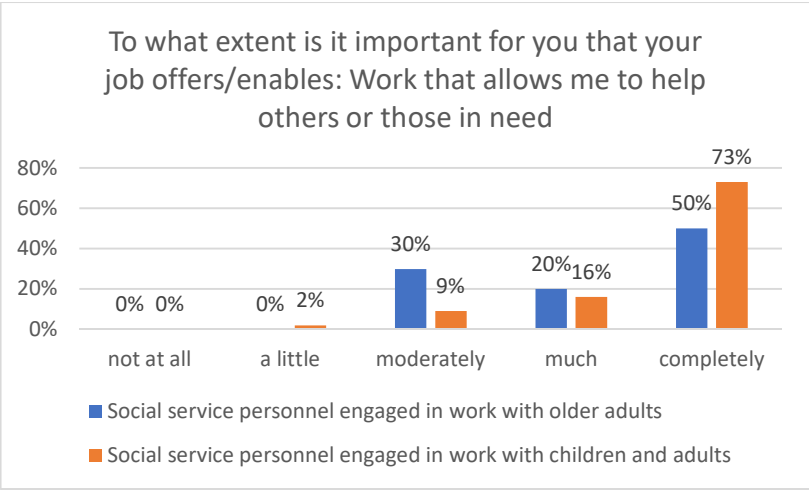


Figure 5

The largest proportion of social services employees caring for seniors rated the help to others or those in need as completely important (50%), indicating a high level of intrinsic motivation towards helping others. A further 20% indicated “Much” importance, meaning 70% overall place strong emphasis (Much + Completely) on this aspect. Other 30 % answered that the importance of having a job allowing them to help those in need is moderately, suggesting a sizable minority who value helping others but may not see it as the central defining feature of their work, or suggesting greater diversity in their motivational drivers.

While both groups place high importance on helping others, the group of employees working with children an adults has a stronger concentration at 73 % in the “Completely” category, and 16 % in “Much”category.

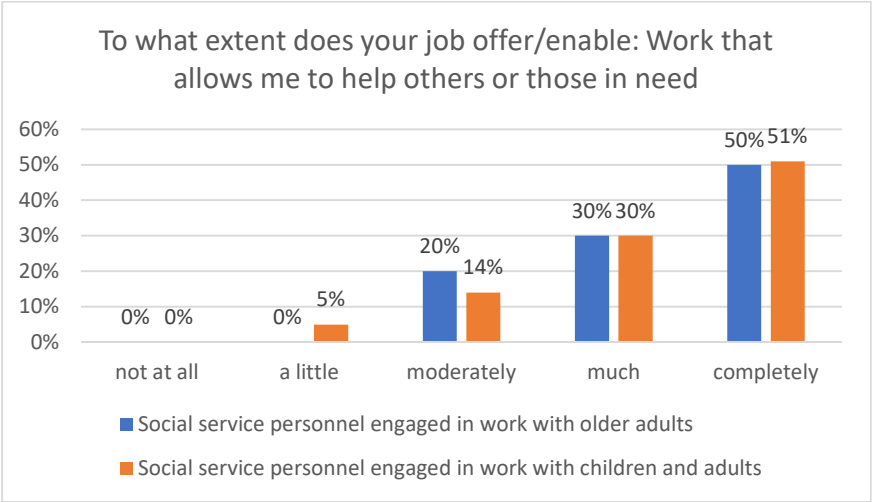


Figure 6

The majority of employees supporting older adults (50%) report that their job completely enables helping others, with an additional 30% selecting “Much.” Only 20% chose “Moderately,” and there are no responses in “A little” or “Not at all,” indicating universally high perceived opportunity for prosocial work. In the group of employees working with children and adults the largest category is also “Completely” (51%), followed closely by “Much” (30%). A combined 81% report high levels of opportunity. 5% report “A little” opportunity, which may indicate isolated cases where employees may think that the work doesn’t allow helping those in need enough.

Analysis reveals that the both groups of social services deliver strongly on enabling employees to help others, but the data of employees in social services caring for seniors show a slightly higher match between ideals and practice.

The employees supporting children and adults seem to have higher aspirations, but a larger proportion **point** their role falls short of that ideal in comparison with the other group.

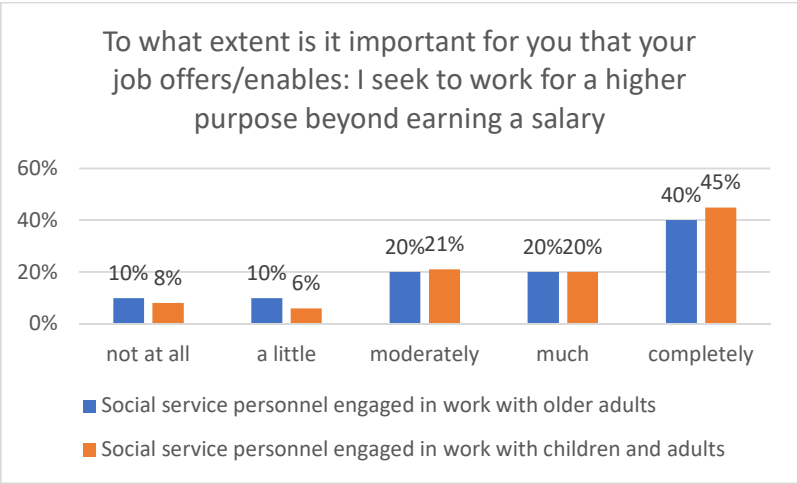


Figure 7

40% of employees caring for older adults rate that working for a higher purpose beyond earning a salary is “Completely” important for them. 20% of them rate “Much”. There is 20% combined in “Not at all” and “A little,” indicating some workers may see their job primarily as an income source rather than a job with higher purpose. 20% of the group answer it is “Moderately” important for them suggesting a balanced yet less mission-driven stance.

45 % of employees caring for children and adults rate that working for I higher purpose is “Completely”, and 20 % answer “Much”, The data shows that this aspect is overall of high importance for them. There are slightly lower rates of “Not at all” and “A little” (14%) compared to the answers of employees working with seniors (20%).

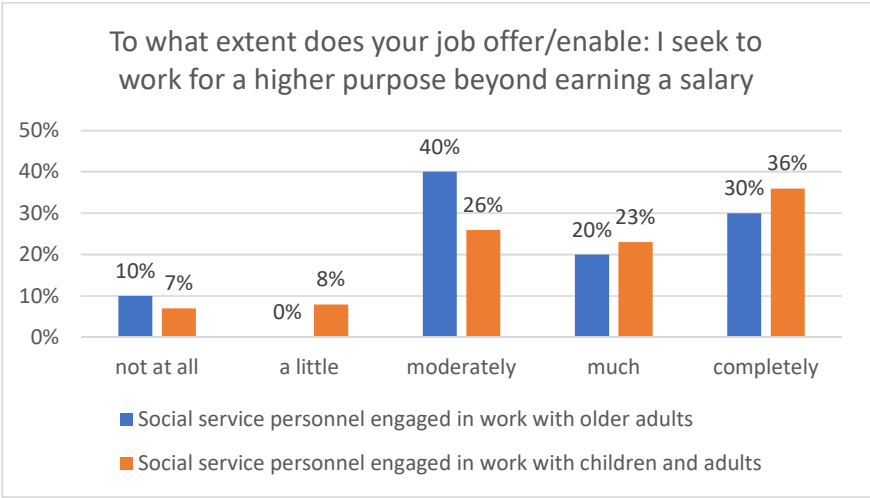


Figure 8

30% of personnel caring for older adults answer that their job offers “Completely” higher purpose, 20% answer “Much”. The largest category is “Moderately” at 40%, indicating that while purpose exists, for many it is not central to their daily work. “Not at all” remains at 10%, matching the proportion in importance, suggesting no improvement for those who may be uninterested in higher purpose in their job.

36% of the personnel caring for children and adults answer that their job offers higher purpose beyond earning a salary “Completely”, and 23% “Much”. 26 % are chosen “Moderately”,

lower than in the group of employees supporting seniors, suggesting that more people in this group experience stronger alignment with purpose. 7% report “Not at all,” close to the 8% in the importance scale, indicating expectations and disinterest are consistent in both scales.

Across both occupational groups - employees in social services caring for seniors and those working with children and adults - the pursuit of a higher purpose beyond financial remuneration emerges as an important for their motivation. However, subtle but notable differences exist between the two sectors. Employees working with children and adults display a slightly stronger orientation toward working for higher purpose, with 65% rating it as either “Much” or “Completely” important, compared to 60% among employees working with older adults. This difference, while modest, suggests that the nature of work with children and adults may inherently attract individuals with a more pronounced mission-driven orientation, potentially due to the developmental and protective aspects of the role.

In terms of actual workplace experience, both groups report lower levels of fulfillment, indicating the presence of a gap between their assessment for importance of this aspect of the work and the extent to which the aspect is present in practice. For elderly services employees, the gap is more pronounced (10%), with a large proportion (40%) rating their experience only as “Moderately” aligned with higher purpose.

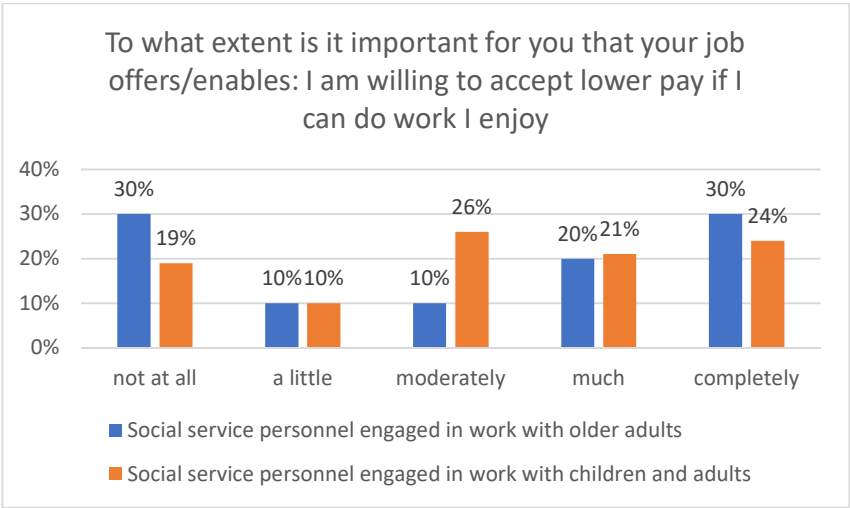


Figure 9

The willingness to sacrifice a higher pay for a job which you enjoy shows moderate variation between the two groups of employees. In terms of importance, the data of personnel working with seniors shows more polarized distribution, with 30% selecting “Not at all” and an equal 30% selecting “Completely.” This suggests a split between those strongly prioritizing intrinsic satisfaction and those primarily motivated by financial considerations. In contrast, employees working with children and adults cluster more in the middle, with 26% “Moderately”, also 24% “Completely” and 21% “Much”, and lower proportions at the extremes (19% “Not at all”), indicating a more balanced or ambivalent stance toward the pay-enjoyment trade-off.

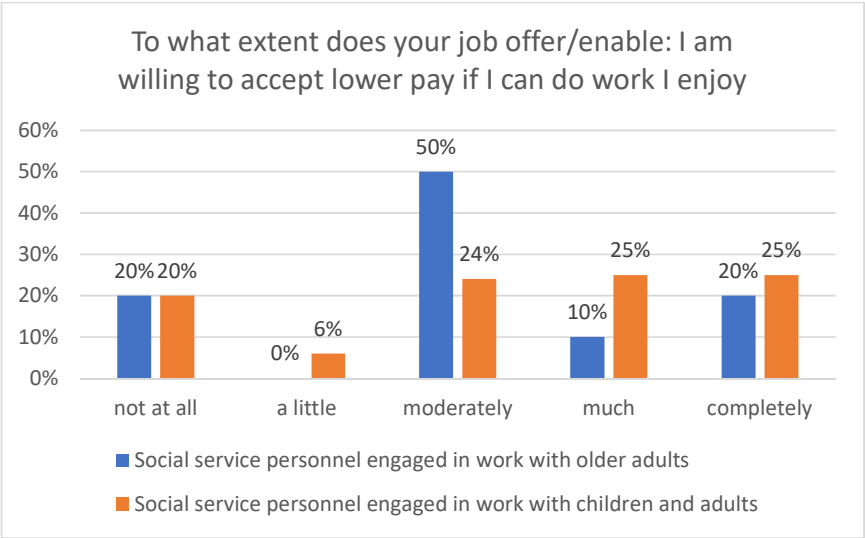


Figure 10

When considering actual job experience, social services employees predominantly report “Moderately” (50%) that their role enables them to do enjoyable work despite potential lower pay, with fewer in the “Much” (10%) or “Completely” (20%) categories. This reflects a mismatch between the higher proportion who rate this factor as “Completely” important (30%) and those experiencing it fully (20%). For employees working with children and adults, the reality distribution is more even across “Moderately” (24%), “Much” (25%), and “Completely” (25%), producing a closer alignment between importance and delivery.

In comparison, the expectation and reality gap is greater in employees working with seniors, where the strong value placed on enjoyable work is not consistently matched by actual experience. For personnel working with children and adults, the smaller existing gap suggests a better alignment between intrinsic motivations and the work context.

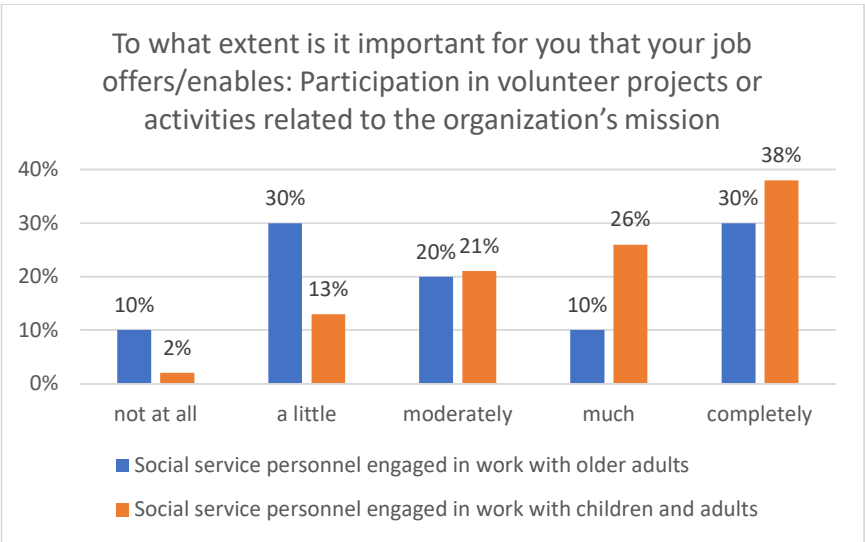


Figure 11

The perceived importance of opportunities to participate in volunteer projects related to the organization's mission varies between the two groups of employees. Among personnel caring for older adults, responses are widely dispersed, with shares at low (10% "Not at all," 30% "A little") and high (30% "Completely", 10% "Much") importance levels. This distribution suggests a mixed orientation toward volunteer engagement, with quite significant proportion of employees showing limited interest. In contrast, employees working with children and adults demonstrate stronger overall importance ratings, with 38% selecting "Completely" and 26% "Much," indicating that voluntary mission-related participation is more closely aligned with their professional and personal priorities in this group.

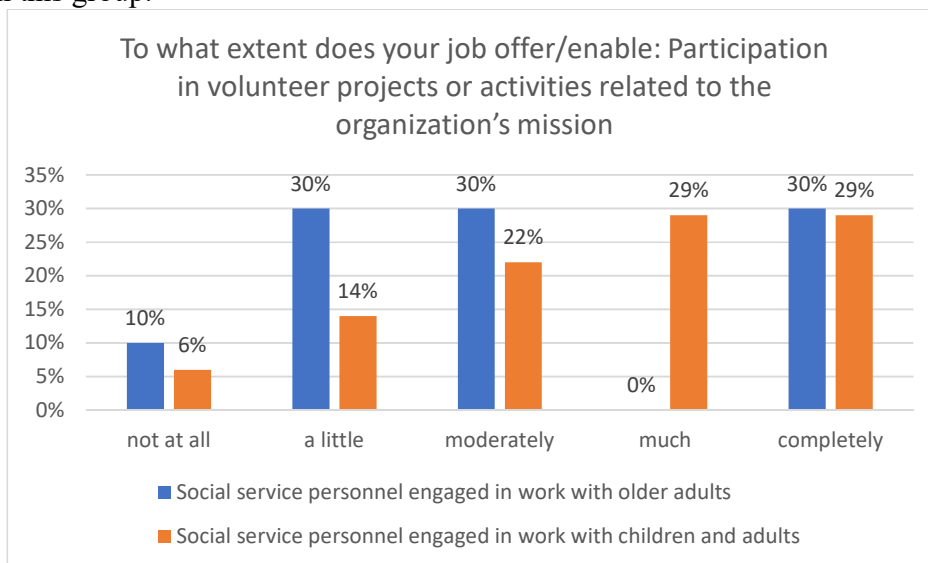


Figure 12

When assessing actual provision of such opportunities, employees working with seniors again show polarization, with 30% "Completely" and an equally high 30% "A little." Notably, no respondents selected "Much," and 30% rated their experience as "Moderately," pointing to limited integration of volunteering into their roles. For employees working with children and adults, the distribution is more balanced, with 29% "Completely" and 29% "Much," suggesting greater possibilities and participation in volunteer involvement.

Comparing the importance for the employees and how they assess reality, the gap is modest for employees supporting children and adults, where the presence of high ratings in both measures indicates reasonable alignment. In personnel caring for older adults, however, the combination of high importance for some employees and low for others points to uneven willingness for volunteer engagement, leading also to lower access of volunteer engagement, both as a motivational and developmental tool.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis reveals that social services personnel in both groups - those caring for older adults and those working with children and adults - value mission-driven work, alignment between their personal and organizational values, and opportunities to help others. However, the strength of these motivations and the degree to which they are fulfilled in practice vary between groups.

Across multiple measures, employees working with children and adults tend to place greater emphasis on intrinsic motivations such as personal commitment to the organizational

mission, value alignment, helping others, working for a higher purpose beyond earning a salary, and participating in volunteer activities related to the mission. This group generally reports that their work more effectively supports and enables alignment with mission valence factors. However, notable gaps between expectations and reality persist - particularly in the area of value alignment, where strong aspirations are not always reflected in day-to-day practice.

Personnel in elderly services demonstrate strong but somewhat more moderate levels of importance for these aspects of mission valence, often with more evenly distributed responses. In several areas (e.g. helping others), this group experiences a closer match between what they consider important and what their job offer. However, in other aspects, such as finding a higher purpose and enjoyment despite a possibility of lower pay, the alignment is weaker, suggesting unmet motivational potential, as it seems employees value these aspects, but their work environment or job conditions fails to provide them sufficiently.

The willingness to accept lower pay for enjoyable work and interest in volunteer opportunities show the greatest divergence within personnel working with older adults, indicating polarized attitudes and less consistent access to these experiences. For employees working with children and adults, responses in these areas are more balanced, with smaller gaps between importance and reality.

Overall, the findings suggest that while both groups value meaning and mission in their work, the social services with personnel working with children and adults may attract more strongly mission-oriented staff, whereas the social services for older adults presents a more diverse motivational profile.

To strengthen motivation, satisfaction, and retention in both contexts, organizations could focus on narrowing expectation–reality gaps by making organizational values and purpose more visible in daily activities and expanding opportunities for volunteer involvement. In line with Rainey and Steinbauer's (1999) expectation—that mission valence increases when employees perceive the organization's mission as both worthwhile and engaging—such strategies could foster a deeper connection between staff and organizational goals, ultimately enhancing performance and commitment.

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