

## **Dominant predictors of employee motivation in social services system**

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### **Abstract**

We are aware that employee motivation in every work is a critical factor influencing job performance, retention, and well-being. Understanding work motivation in social work and social services is important for numerous reasons. We suggest that the motivated social workers are more effective in providing care and motivation can positively influence employee retention. By understanding what drives motivation in employees in social services field, organizations and policymakers the opportunity would have to design better work environments and targeted interventions that support the participating in these professions. Thus the following study explores key motivation factors among social service employees. Statistical analysis confirmed that fairness ( $r = .520$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and organizational policies ( $r = .693$ ,  $p < .001$ ) are the most significant predictors of motivation. The survey was conducted in Varna, Bulgaria among 177 employees across 34 social service organizations, determining the strength of influence of various motivational factors.

### **Key words:**

Dominant motivational predictors, employee motivation, social services system

### **Introduction**

Motivation in social work organizations seems to engage as an issue not only the researchers, but also for the younger employees in social work system, as numerous YouTube channels have emerged in recent years where creators discuss their career choices in the field of social work. They share their motivations for pursuing this profession and their reasons for retention in it. The discussions sparked with viewers of these channels indicate a strong interest in the content, as well as a desire to share personal motivations for entering the profession and the

challenges that come with it. According to creators social work is a rewarding, but also challenging career and it can cause major burnout if you're not motivated. We come across content with advice on how to maintain your motivation which will allow you to overcome those challenging moments in social work, which seems very interesting and a new kind of approach for support between the employees in social work without any national and policy boundaries, just human nature in the professions of helping others.

### **Literature Review**

Findings from McCartan et al. (2022) indicated that over half (58.2%) of the 240 social work students surveyed in Ireland feared working in the profession, with concerns regarding stress, burnout, pressure, workload, and personal resilience. Attention has been paid to social work staff burnout, resilience, retention, and turnover for at least a couple of decades (McFadden et al., 2015; Ravalier et al., 2023).

Petersén, A. (2023) draws several explanations for high levels of turnover. Social workers themselves, unions and researchers have called attention to a problematic organization of social work that consists of heavy caseloads, demanding work tasks (Kim and Kao, 2014; Blomberg et al., 2015; McFadden et al., 2015), a lack of colleagues due to recruitment problems (Searle and Patent, 2013), scarce resources (Hamama, 2012; Lauri, 2016) and a lack of support from colleagues and supervisors (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Such circumstances lead to increased rates of stress (Travis et al., 2016), work-related mental illness (Kinman and Grant, 2011) and burnout (Astvik et al., 2013).

In a study with a nationwide sample of Swedish social workers, the most-cited reasons for leaving positions were problematic organizations and negative work environments, although poor prospects for professional development were also cited (Bruhn et al., 2020). Moreover, job satisfaction and whether the job is challenging enough and lives up to one's professional expectations may be important when deciding whether to stay or go (Petersén, A., 2023).

Findings during a UK wide survey (MacLochlainn et al., 2023), examining wellbeing and coping for health and social care workers, (January 2023) indicated that 36.2% of the social workers considered changing occupation. When asked to cite what conditions would change their mind about wanting to leave their employer or occupation, 39.5% wanted better support from their

line manager, 37.8% wanted a pay increase, 32.1% wanted support with their well-being, and 28.1% wanted safer working conditions (MacLochlainn et al., 2022b).

Confidence in skills and knowledge, value-driven practice, public perception, and respect from other professions also contributes to the transition and evolving identity of newly qualified social workers (Grant et al., 2022; Pullen Sansfaçon & Crête, 2016).

According to studies with newly qualified social workers in Scotland (Grant et al., 2022), Norway (Jansen, 2017) and Sweden (Petersén, 2023), social workers with ‘turbulent’ careers in child welfare often leave after a short period of time due to dissatisfaction with the organization, with management, and working conditions.

In Peterséns’ (2023) baseline survey of levels of motivation, well-being, and employment preferences of newly qualified social workers in the UK, the results are presented in relation to the three types of careers that were most prominent in the qualitative data: turbulent, goal-oriented, and safe careers. According to the most common reason for turnover in the quantitative material is organisational and working conditions, such as stress, workload and dissatisfaction with organisation and management (43.4 per cent). Several interviewees emphasised the importance of colleagues during difficult times; however, they also indicated that bad working conditions prevented them from seeking colleagues’ support, partly because they did not want to add to their colleagues’ burdens and partly due to a lack of experienced colleagues. The importance of good management becomes clear in the narratives and there are many examples of how good and bad managers can affect working conditions.

Based on the results of the interviews, the manager seems to be key in a newly qualified social worker’s decision to stay or leave. Most of the interviewees that described bad working conditions described their managers in negative terms: the manager could be viewed as the cause of the problems - as incapable of leading, incompetent in social work or allied with higher management governing the workplace without much insight into social work practice. In other examples, however, interviewees felt that their managers were struggling along with the employees and fighting on behalf of the social workers and clients.

Goal-oriented types find their salaries low but consider their jobs to be interesting, meaningful and fun, and feel that they have good - or reasonable - working conditions. Managers were not ascribed any particular importance for their working conditions.

Safe career the safe career group consists mostly of newly qualified social workers who work as welfare officers, a small majority of which work within financial assistance. They describe themselves as satisfied with their employment and as having a good relationship with managers and colleagues.

The analysis of Petersen's research (2023) indicated that the newly qualified social workers' motives for remaining at or changing their workplace were largely based on either their working conditions or their ambition to reach a particular employment or position. Those with safe careers seemed happy with their working life, providing information on what makes people stay at their jobs rather than what makes them leave. Those with turbulent careers illustrated how bad working conditions can affect newly qualified social workers' pragmatic or rational decision regarding whether to stay.

### **Methodology**

A study was conducted in 2019-2020 in Varna, Bulgaria, using a custom-designed survey. The survey on factors of motivation of employees in the social services system is based on the motivation theories which attempt to uncover which factors influence employee motivation – considering their expectations for external rewards, and the internal mindset and values of the individual, as both are considered important, including the theory of Public Service Motivation referring to the specific motivation in non-business organizations and the concept of the Mission Valence. The study includes 21 scales, 110 items, and respondent data.

The scales are: Compensation (Payment), Job Security, Relationships with Colleagues, Management Style (Direct Management), Organizational Policies, Working Conditions, Autonomy, Opportunities for Growth and Career Advancement, Opportunities for Self-Actualization and Learning, Utilization of a Variety of Skills in the Workplace, Job Content, Task Significance and Meaningfulness of Work, Ability to Follow Work and Its Results from Start to Finish, Power (Authority), Sense of Belonging, Responsibility, Recognition, Achievements, Fairness, Expectancy (Perceived Reward for Effort), Value of the Mission and respondent details.

To measure motivation effectively, the study is divided into two sections: value-based assessment of possible job characteristics and the actual presence of these characteristics in the workplace, as this framework helps assess which factors significantly influence employee motivation within the social services system.

The survey was conducted among 177 individuals from 34 social service organizations. The distribution of the surveyed employees in the social services system by position shows that the largest group consists of social workers, followed by psychologists, occupational therapists, and healthcare workers. The sample includes both specialized professionals and support staff employed within the social services system.

Empirical study is approached with the following working hypotheses.

H1: The more significant factors for motivation would include: job security, positive relationships with colleagues, sense of belonging, direct management style, autonomy at work, the content of the work, the meaningfulness of the work, and the value of the mission.

H2: A minor factor for motivation would be the possession of power in the workplace.

## Results

As *dominant predictors of employee motivation*, the research identified the following factors: relationships with colleagues, organizational policies, opportunities for growth and advancement, recognition, fairness, expectancy, and the value of the mission.

Motivation appears to stem from the *cohesion with colleagues*. During a transitional stage of the research, focus groups were conducted to explore key motivational factors in-depth. Some participants in these focus groups shared that maintaining friendly relationships with colleagues was the most important reason for their continued attachment to their workplace, despite the heavy workload. Friendly relationships with colleagues, mutual understanding within the team, cooperation, and receiving help from colleagues seem to be especially valuable to employees. Good relationships with colleagues are a strong motivating factor in the workplace, having a significant influence on employee satisfaction and engagement.

It appears that the *organization's policies* regarding core values, principles, and work rules have a significant impact on employee motivation. Employees' place within the organization, the ethical treatment they receive, the opportunity to participate in setting their future goals as members of the organization, and ensuring a smooth work process are all considered important factors that could potentially influence employee engagement.

The results indicate that *opportunities for advancement and growth* are crucial for employee motivation and satisfaction. The lack or presence of such opportunities can significantly affect their engagement and career development. Improving opportunities to satisfy high-level

needs such as personal development and self-actualization seems to be a strong motivating factor. The opportunity to advance in their careers could be a primary driving force for employees to put in additional effort in the workplace to grow in the hierarchy or receive a promotion.

*Recognition* also appears to be an important motivator in the workplace, with differences in its perception having a significant influence on employee engagement. It appears that work should offer employees the chance for recognition to keep them motivated. This could be a dominant motivating factor for employees whose work is not highly paid but respected and recognized by society.

*Fairness* plays an important role in employee motivation and satisfaction. The results suggest that significant differences in how fairness is perceived can strongly influence employee engagement and attitudes toward the work environment. While fairness ( $r = .520$ ) and supervisor relationships ( $r = .381$ ) strongly correlate with motivation, factors such as job security ( $r = .166$ ) show only minimal influence, indicating that extrinsic rewards play a secondary role in social work motivation.

The *expectancy* factor is also crucial for employee motivation and satisfaction, with differences in its perception potentially impacting their attitudes and engagement with their work. The tendency is that as confidence grows that employees' efforts are noticed and rewarded, motivation increases as well.

The data indicates that the *value of the mission* has a moderate to strong impact on employee motivation. It appears that employees' perception of the attractiveness and significance of the organizational goal or social contribution plays a significant role in their motivation and engagement, with even small changes in this perception potentially influencing their attitude toward work.

**H1:** The working hypothesis that *job security* would emerge as a more significant factor for motivation was not fully confirmed. Jobs in the public sector may offer many conveniences compared to those in the private sector – for example, fixed working hours and work-life balance, which could provide a more peaceful and satisfactory lifestyle; better job security and stability with a regular and predictable monthly income, additional leave, and social benefits. At a transitional stage of the research, focus groups were conducted to examine factors influencing employee retention. During these discussions, it was noted that good working hours, along with the ability to address personal commitments during the workday with the support of colleagues

and direct supervisors, contributed significantly to employees' decision to remain in their positions. However, the survey results show that job security could be considered a moderately motivating factor. It appears that job security is an attractive factor for employees, contributing to an overall sense of satisfaction and stability, but it is not of primary importance.

*Supportive management, sense of belonging, and autonomy* in work contribute to increased motivation among employees, but they are not dominant factors. The type of management appears to influence employee motivation, but it is not among the factors that lead to significant differences in employee engagement. Although it has an effect, it is stable and does not lead to drastic changes in how employees perceive their work. The data suggest that the sense of belonging is a relatively stable factor and has significance for employee motivation and engagement, but it does not lead to drastic changes in how employees perceive their work. Feeling like a meaningful part of the organization or guild can contribute to the overall motivation of employees, but it is not a dominant factor. Autonomy in the work is somewhat significant for employee motivation but is not a determining factor for substantial changes in their perception. It should be noted that autonomy plays a role in motivation, but not as a leading factor.

The hypothesis for predictors of high motivation related to job content, task significance, the meaningfulness of work, and the possibility to track work and results was not largely confirmed. It appears that the content of the work has a relatively stable impact on employees and contributes to overall motivation, but it is not a decisive factor for it. The significance of the task and the meaningfulness of the work play a role in the motivation of employees in the social services system, but they are not dominant. This factor is not among those that lead to significant differences in employee engagement. The possibility to track work and results from start to finish appears to influence employee satisfaction and motivation, but again, it is not among the factors that lead to significant differences in engagement. It appears that improving the ability for employees to track their own work and results from start to finish could contribute to motivation but would not lead to drastic changes in how employees perceive their work.

**H2:** The hypothesis that power in the workplace is a relatively insignificant factor for motivation was largely confirmed. The distribution of data shows that power in the workplace is present at average levels among the surveyed employees, and it is also considered valuable to them at average levels. The trend is that the perception of power matters to employees and can influence their motivation and attitude toward the work environment, but it has rather a weak influence on

their motivation. Power plays a certain role in the workplace, but it does not have a strong or even moderate impact on motivation; it rather remains in the background compared to other factors. Since work in the social services system often involves providing support to users in dealing with challenges in various aspects of their lives, and is carried out based on the principles of non-coercion and respect for the users' will, it appears that the possession of power is not highly valued by the employees.

## Conclusion

It appears that motivation in the workplace is strongly linked to relationships with colleagues in the results from the following research. As in Peterson's research (2003) where several interviewees emphasized the importance of colleagues during difficult times. The safe career group in the same research describes themselves as satisfied with their employment and as having a good relationship with managers and colleagues. On the other hand, social workers themselves, unions and researchers have called attention to a problematic organization of social work that lacks support from colleagues and supervisors (Mor Barak et al., 2001). In this research the data shows the organizational policies (regarding core values, principles, and work rules) to be more important in motivation than relations with direct management. As includes employees' place within the organization, the ethical treatment they receive, the opportunity to participate in setting their future goals as members of the organization, and ensuring a smooth work process are all considered important factors that could potentially influence employee engagement.

As job security, though valued, is not a primary motivator; rather, the ability to grow within the profession and be recognized for contributions holds greater importance. Opportunities for professional development, recognition, and the value of the mission affect social workers' engagement. The dominant predictors for employee motivation according to the research - *opportunities for growth and advancement, recognition* and the *value of the mission* correlate well with the findings that confidence in skills and knowledge, value-driven practice, public perception, and respect from other professions also contributes to the transition and evolving identity of newly qualified social workers (Grant et al., 2022; Pullen Sansfaçon & Crête, 2016). In the study with a nationwide sample of Swedish social workers, the poor prospects for professional development were also cited reason for leaving positions were (Bruhn et al., 2020).



Findings suggest that while job security, management style, and autonomy play a role, they are not the dominant motivators. Instead, strong collegial relationships and opportunities for advancement significantly drive motivation. Overall, the studies suggest that improving organizational policies would enhance social workers' job satisfaction and retention. Strengthening professional development opportunities, ensuring fair treatment, and fostering supportive work environments can mitigate turnover. Addressing these challenges is crucial for sustaining a committed and resilient social work workforce, ultimately benefiting both employees and the communities they serve. Public sector organizations should implement structured recognition programs and transparent policies to sustain employee motivation and reduce turnover.

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