***A brief commentary on the relevance of public service motivation***

How to motivate employees is a timeless issue in managerial practice. Classic distinctions between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and how they can be addressed are well-known. But what about other facets of motivation? The findings briefly reported below focus on the effects of public service motivation (PSM) which is an important but neglected form of motivation. While the study of motivation itself has a long history, PSM is rather a newbie in this space.

Colloquially speaking public service motivation is a form of prosocial motivation and refers to an individual’s desire to contribute to society. More specifically, Perry and Hondeghem (2008, p.6) define PSM as „an individual‘s orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society“. Hence its main point of reference is a collective, i.e. the wider community, organization or society.

But why should practitioners care about it? As with other forms of motivation, the key questions for practitioners arising from this line of research are related to how PSM affects behavior and to what extent it influences other psychological states such as work engagement, or job satisfaction. In the following paragraphs I summarize some key insights emerging from a series of studies conducted together with colleagues at the University of Hamburg (Germany), University of Southern Denmark, and Bournemouth University (UK) which underscore the many positive implications arising from the presence of a large amount of public service motivated individuals for both organizations and society.

***Where does PSM generate added value?***

Our research over the past years identified three domains in which PSM yields tangible benefits for organizations. These domains are recruitment, effort in form of volunteering intensity and organizational change.

First, implications relate to recruitment and selection where selection mechanisms can be designed such that they filter for highly public service motivated individuals. As shown in Asseburg, Homberg and Vogel (2017) a starting point is the appropriate formulation of recruitment messages appearing in job announcements. Approaching recruitment initiatives from this perspective could be particularly useful for public sector organizations because it allows them to assume a distinct positioning when competing for talent with private sector firms.

Obviously, gearing recruitment processes towards PSM rests on the assumption that it is desirable for organizations to have employees displaying elevated PSM levels. A good argument supporting this reasoning are several studies that offer empirical support for a positive link between PSM and performance conducted by colleagues elsewhere.

Second, aligning with work on PSM and performance, our own work allows for inferences on effort displayed at work. In our most recent article (Costello, Homberg and Secchi 2020) and book (Homberg & Costello 2019) we find PSM drives volunteering intensity - a measure of effort in volunteering activities. Volunteering is a common activity with a potentially high impact on the recipients of the volunteering activities. Many organizations advance their corporate social responsibility agenda through participation of their employees in volunteering programs. Therefore, understanding how PSM relates to volunteering intensity is important for volunteer managers in both public and private sector organizations. Furthermore, we would argue that tasks characterized by a high impact on society or the beneficiary as commonly found in public sector organizations display characteristics similar to those ones found in volunteer settings. Consequently, PSM is likely to yield positive effects on work effort related to such tasks.

Third, and of more general relevance to any organization, several studies generated evidence for a positive association of PSM with job satisfaction, and the boost it can give to individuals when implementing organizational changes. Following a large change initiative in a regional police service we illustrate the positive influence of transformational leadership on PSM and PSM’s subsequent trickle on effect on taking charge behaviours (Homberg, Vogel and Weiherl 2019). This finding underscores that public-service motivated employees engage to a stronger extent in internal changes to work-related procedures – or put differently, PSM can serve as a platform to reduce resistance in change initiatives. However, one needs to bear in mind contextual factors and acknowledge potential negative effects arising from PSM. For example, we found PSM to display a negative relationship with deviant employee behaviors in public sector settings whereas this link becomes positive in private sector contexts (Vogel, Homberg and Gericke 2016).

***Conclusion***

Over the past three decades research studies on *Public Service Motivation (PSM)* increased steadily Originating in public management PSM has become a more widely relevant issue crossing disciplinary and sectoral boundaries with relevance in the domains of personnel marketing, and HRM in general. Judging from the few findings summarized above, PSM appears to be of key importance for decision makers in organizations and society as it associates with several outcomes commonly sought for in all kinds of organizations. Overall, public service motivation emerges as an impactful construct. Hence leveraging PSM through thoughtful consideration of triggers that help to activate and nurture PSM is likely to yield positive effects for organizations and society. We do not deny that also negative effects may arise from PSM. But in any case, it is worthwhile paying more attention to this facet of motivation.

Got interested? – have a look:

[Asseburg, J., Homberg, F., & Vogel, R. (2018). Recruitment messaging, environmental fit and public service motivation. International Journal of Public Sector Management. 31(6), 689-709.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJPSM-08-2017-0217/full/html)

[Costello, J., Homberg, F., & Secchi, D. (2020). The Public Service Motivated Volunteer: Devoting Time or Effort?. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 49(5), 989-1014.](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0899764020911200)

[Homberg, F., & Costello, J. (2019). Public Service Motivation and Civic Engagement. Palgrave.](https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783030024529)

[Homberg, F., Vogel, R., & Weiherl, J. (2019). Public service motivation and continuous organizational change: Taking charge behaviour at police services. Public Administration, 97(1), 28-47](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/padm.12354).

[Vogel, R., Homberg, F., & Gericke, A. (2016). Abusive supervision, public service motivation, and employee deviance. In Evidence-based HRM: A global forum for empirical scholarship, 4(3), 214-231](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EBHRM-08-2015-0034/full/pdf?title=abusive-supervision-public-service-motivation-and-employee-deviance-the-moderating-role-of-employment-sector).