Personal Purpose as a Key Driver of Commitment in Public Organizations: The Role of Purpose Identification

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In recent years, researchers have begun exploring the concept of purposeful business, in which employees' personal purpose plays a key role. Purposeful business significantly contributes to developing positive behaviors and outcomes, such as increased engagement, enhanced commitment, and improved individual and organizational performance. However, previous research has largely focused on observing purposeful business exclusively in private organizations. This study examines the relationship between personal purpose and commitment in public organizations, focusing on the moderating effect of purpose identification. A survey was conducted among 160 employees from seven Croatian public organizations. Moderation analysis revealed that purpose identification moderates the relationship between personal purpose and commitment. These findings underscore that employees' personal purpose is an essential psychological mechanism for increasing their commitment, but only with the support of purpose identification. This study is the first to introduce the concept of personal purpose into the Croatian organizational context, offering new insights into purposeful business. The results provide practical implications for managers, highlighting the importance of harmonizing employees' personal purpose with organizational purpose to enhance organizational commitment. However, limitations arise from collecting data from a single source in one time period and the involvement of only seven public organizations, suggesting avenues for further research.

1   Introduction

Business practices are evolving, and profit as the sole organizational objective is no longer enough. As a result, the focus in the business world is shifting toward creating purposeful business. Modern organizations need to adopt a broader perspective by clearly defining their purpose and integrating it into daily operations. This approach forms the foundation of purposeful business, which extends beyond profit as the primary reason for an organization's existence and plays a key role in rebuilding trust in business and making a positive contribution to society (Hollensbe et al., 2014). Ferreira Ribeiro et al. (2024) highlight several benefits of purposeful business for organizations and their employees, including higher employee engagement, stronger organizational commitment, improved individual performance, and enhanced organizational success. For that reason, it is inevitable that purposeful business will play an increasingly important role in the upcoming period. Building a purposeful business requires individuals to discover and align their personal purpose with the organizational purpose. Therefore, this paper examines the role of personal purpose and purpose identification in fostering employee commitment. However, existing research on this emerging concept has focused exclusively on private organizations. This study is the first to explore some components of purposeful business in public organizations, extending the concept to the public sector and bridging an important gap in the literature.

Public organizations differ from private organizations in many ways. A key difference lies in their fundamental mission and purpose. While the concept of business purpose is increasingly gaining attention, previous research has largely focused on private organizations. This paper examines the role of personal purpose and purpose identification in public organizations, which differ from the private sector in their fundamental mission and purpose. As early as 1982, Gold emphasized that private organizations are far more capable of clearly, precisely, and consistently articulating their fundamental mission and purpose than public organizations (Gold, 1982). Snir & Harpaz (2002) found that "public-sector employees had a weaker economic work orientation than private-sector employees, and they also attributed greater importance to the entitlement norm and to the notion that working was a useful way for them to serve society." For public organizations that advocate values tied to public service and the greater good of society, employees must be strongly committed to these values if public organizations effectively fulfill their purpose

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(Lyons et al., 2006). However, Lyons et al. (2006) found that public-sector employees were less committed to their organizations than were private-sector employees. For this reason, it is particularly important to explore whether public-sector employees' personal purpose and identification with the organization's purpose will influence greater commitment, highlighting the urgent need for further research in this area.

2　Theoretical Background

Personal purpose and purpose identification as key components of purposeful business

For organizations and individuals to discover their purpose, it is necessary to answer questions such as: "What does your organization stand for?" and "How would society be different without your organization?" (Rey & Bastons, 2019). A purposeful business is inspired by a clear role in the world that provides it with a reason for existence and, as such, is focused on the "WHY" (Zu, 2019), where this "WHY" represents the organization's purpose (Sinek, 2009). Additionally, Chinchilla et al. (2019) emphasized that "purpose refers to the identity of the organization, its DNA and *raison d'etre*, what makes it unique."

In order to understand the concept of purposeful business, it is crucial to consider the harmonization between personal and organizational purpose, as this harmonization is a prerequisite for productivity and overall business success (Kiefer & Senge, 1999). The harmonization of personal purpose within the organizational purpose represents the core of a purposeful business, where each individual must recognize their purpose, while at the same time, a shared purpose must be achieved, arising from the connection of individual purposes (Rey et al., 2019). Lleo et al. (2021) suggest that the success of shared purpose creation increases as employees become more aware of it, identify with it, and actively contribute to its development. Additionally, purpose identification is a key element in the process of building shared purpose and purposeful organizations (Lleo et al., 2019).

Previous research and hypothesis

There is a notable absence of empirical studies examining personal purpose and purpose identification, and such research has not been conducted in the context of public organizations to date. However, it is crucial to recognize the potential benefits

of overall organizational identification, which can lead to many positive outcomes for both employees and organizations. These benefits include lower turnover intentions, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, employee well-being, and enhanced job performance (Ashforth et al., 2008; Riketta, 2005). In addition, Guangrong et al. (2021) explored the impact of purpose and purposefulness on work engagement and commitment in a study of 879 employees. They found that employees with goals centered on helping others, advocating for causes, or career growth were more engaged in their work than those focused on fulfilling basic needs or achieving a comfortable lifestyle. More importantly, the study revealed that when employees felt a strong sense of purpose in their work, they were more engaged and committed (Guangrong et al., 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis (H1) was formulated: *Purpose identification moderates the relationship between personal purpose and commitment.* Figure 1 shows the conceptual research model.
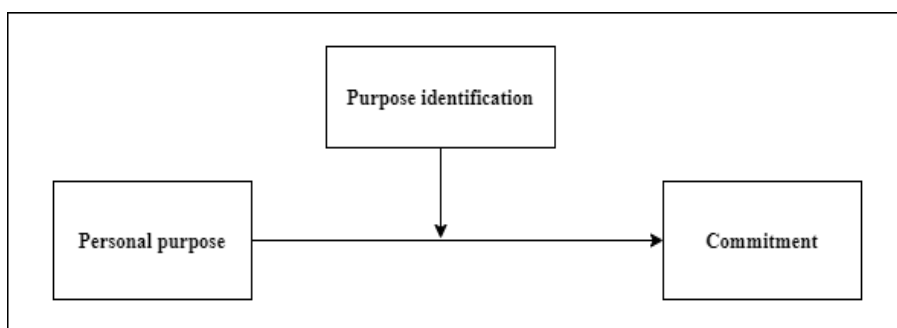

Figure 1: Conceptual research model

3   Methodology

Measures

The study aimed to test the moderating effect of purpose identification on the relationship between personal purpose and commitment, and the following well-validated measurement instruments were employed: the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (3 items, Cronbach's alpha = .97) developed by Steger et al. (2006) for assessing personal purpose; the Scale for Internalization of the Mission (3 items, Cronbach's alpha = .86) developed by Marimon et al. (2016) for assessing purpose identification; the Organizational Commitment Scale (5 items, Cronbach's alpha =

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.93) developed by Allen & Meyer (1990) for assessing commitment. All measurement instruments used a 5-point Likert scale (from *1=strongly disagree* to *5 = strongly agree*).

Table 1 shows the items' descriptive statistics (total mean scores and standard deviations). As can be seen, the mean values for all items are at sufficiently high and satisfactory levels. The lowest mean value is 3.31 (SD=1.11) for the item related to measuring commitment, and the highest mean value is 4.23 (SD=.83) for the item related to measuring purpose identification. However, it can be noted that the lowest mean values were recorded for the variable *commitment*.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of items

Item Code	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Personal purpose1	I understand my life's meaning.	160	3.98	1.00
Personal purpose2	I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.	160	3.93	.98
Personal purpose3	My life has a clear sense of purpose.	160	3.96	.97
Purpose identification1	I believe that my company's purpose/mission is important to society.	160	4.23	.83
Purpose identification2	My company's purpose/mission is aligned with my individual values.	160	3.74	.94
Purpose identification3	My company's purpose/mission is important to me.	160	4.03	.88
Commitment1	I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.	160	3.31	1.11
Commitment2	I feel a strong sense of belongingness to my organization.	160	3.59	1.04
Commitment3	I feel emotionally attached to this organization.	160	3.46	1.12
Commitment4	I feel like "part of the family" at my organization.	160	3.35	1.12
Commitment5	This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	160	3.66	1.09

Sample and procedure

In the study, a quantitative online survey questionnaire was used, and primary data were collected from October to December 2024. The data were collected from seven Croatian public organizations that employed a minimum of 20 staff members. Public organizations that participated in the study are education institutions (2), hospitals

(2), local and regional self-government units (2), and a non-profit public organization (1).

The final sample consisted of 160 respondents who participated in the survey. Regarding demographic characteristics, most respondents were between 45 years and above (45.00%) and between the ages of 30 and 44 (44.38%). Also, 118 respondents were female (73.75%), and 41 were male (25.63%). Most respondents had completed higher education - graduate, academy or postgraduate study (62.50%), and had 10 or fewer years of service in their current position (52.50%), and 10 years or fewer years of service in their current organization (48.13%). Most respondents worked as professional/administrative workers (41.25%).

Given that most respondents who participated in the research had 10 years or less of working experience in the public organization where they were currently employed, the lowest mean values for the variable *commitment* are expected. Previous research has demonstrated that the length of service in an organization is positively correlated with employee commitment (Bakotić, 2022; Meyer et al., 2002; Salami, 2008).

4   Results

Conditional process moderation analysis, as one of the regression analyses, was used to test the hypothesis using Model 1 in the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). This methodological approach allows for a robust examination of moderation effects and provides detailed insights into personal purpose effects on employee commitment. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of conditional process moderation analysis

	Coeff	SE	T value	p value
Constant	3.724	.844	4.411	.000
Personal purpose (X)	-.621	.248	-2.506	.013
Purpose identification (W)	-.356	.241	-1.474	.142
Personal purpose x Purpose identification (XW)	**.023**	*.063*	*3.549*	*0.001*
	R^2 = .546, MSE = .664			
	F (3, 156) = 22.058, p < .05			

The results indicate a negative relationship between personal purpose and commitment (β = -.621), as well as between purpose identification and commitment (β = -.356). However, when purpose identification was introduced in the model, a positive relationship emerged between personal purpose and commitment (β = .023). These findings suggest that purpose identification moderates the relationship between personal purpose and commitment. Specifically, there is no direct relationship between personal purpose and commitment, but rather this relationship is indirect and facilitated by the moderating effect of purpose identification. More precisely, as employees' personal purpose increases, they will be more committed to their organization if they identify with its purpose. We can conclude that the positive relationship between personal purpose and commitment will increase under the purpose identification moderating variable. This proposition is shown in Figure 2. Accordingly, Hypothesis H1 can be accepted. It is important to note that the ANOVA test results show significant differences between public organizations in all three variables, indicating that employees' personal purpose, purpose identification, and commitment vary across organizations. Although the study is focused on the public sector, the results can also be discussed in the context of private organizations, especially if the specific goals and strategies companies use are considered.
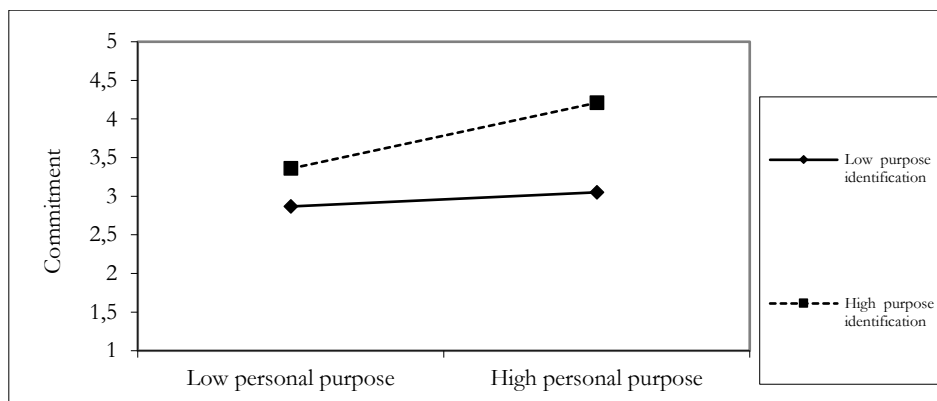

Figure 2: Moderation effect of purpose identification

5   Conclusions

This study highlights the crucial role of personal purpose in fostering commitment within public organizations, highlighting the moderating effect of purpose identification. The findings suggest that employees with a strong personal purpose are more committed to their organization when they identify with its purpose. The results contribute to the growing body of research on purposeful business by extending its scope to public organizations. This study is the first to investigate the relationship between personal purpose, purpose identification, and commitment in Croatian public organizations, providing valuable insights for both academia and practice. Public sector managers should actively work on communicating the organizational mission and its importance to society and on creating opportunities for employees to see how their individual work contributes to the realization of that mission, thereby fostering the alignment of personal and organizational purpose. However, the study has limitations, including data collection from a single source and focusing on only seven public organizations. Future research should explore these relationships in larger and more diverse samples, including longitudinal studies, to examine causal effects over time. Additionally, comparing the results with wage and benefits analysis in the public sector would provide a deeper understanding of how these factors impact organizational outcomes. Despite these limitations, the study provides a solid foundation for further investigation into the role of purpose in the commitment of public-sector employees. It offers practical recommendations for improving employee commitment and identification with the organization through purposeful leadership.

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