Driving Employee Engagement Through Responsibility: How to Design Effective Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives

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Purpose/Motivation: Employee engagement (EE) is a key driver of organizational success, as it enhances productivity, innovation, and retention. However, many organizations struggle to foster employee engagement in a sustainable way (Gallup, 2024). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is increasingly seen as a strategic tool to foster engagement by providing employees with a sense of purpose and meaningfulness (Glavas, 2016; Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). However, research on the CSR–EE link remains inconclusive, as individual and contextual differences shape how employees perceive and respond to CSR (Rupp et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2024). This conceptual paper examines how CSR initiatives can be designed to effectively promote EE by fulfilling employees' psychological needs, drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Kahn's (1990) engagement model.

Theories/Propositions: This conceptual paper draws on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Kahn's engagement model (1990) to explain how CSR initiatives can foster employee engagement by fulfilling employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are considered universal and fundamental across individuals and contexts (Meyer & Gagné, 2008). CSR is understood as a set of company-specific initiatives that address stakeholder expectations while promoting sustainable economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Aguinis, 2011). Employee engagement is defined following Kahn (1990) as the degree to which individuals bring their full selves to work through psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability. This paper proposes that the five CSR design factors - authenticity, participation, freedom of choice, CSR orientation, and transparent communication - positively influence the CSR–EE relationship by enhancing intrinsic motivation through the fulfillment of psychological needs, regardless of employees' individual and contextual differences.

Approach/Methodology: This conceptual paper is based on a literature review aimed at developing a theoretically grounded framework linking CSR design to employee engagement.

Findings: The study shows that all examined CSR design factors positively influence employee engagement. Internal CSR initiatives, such as those promoting well-being, fair treatment, and development, have a stronger effect than external CSR initiatives targeting stakeholders outside the organization. Furthermore, active participation, freedom of choice, authenticity, and transparent communication each contribute to employee engagement by fulfilling key psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Research Limitations: First, CSR and employee engagement are complex constructs with varying definitions and operationalizations, which may limit the generalizability of the theoretical conclusions. Second, the model is purely conceptual and has not been empirically tested. Third, the analysis focuses exclusively on intrinsic motivation through psychological need fulfillment, while extrinsic motivators such as bonuses, recognition programs, or promotion incentives are not considered. Lastly, the proposed moderators were examined in isolation, without accounting for potential interactions or cumulative effects.

Research Implications: The literature lacks an integrated understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which CSR fosters employee engagement. In particular, the role of intrinsic motivation and psychological need fulfillment has been underexplored, as most prior studies focus on macro-level outcomes or transactional frameworks. A more systematic application of Self-Determination Theory and Kahn's engagement model could advance theory development in this field.

Practical Implications: Organizations aiming to foster employee engagement through CSR should prioritize internal CSR initiatives that directly affect employees' well-being, development, and work experience. Human resource management should facilitate voluntary and meaningful employee participation in CSR efforts, provide structured yet flexible engagement opportunities, and ensure that CSR is communicated transparently and implemented authentically. Integrating CSR into core HR practices rather than treating it as an external image tool can help align initiatives with employees' psychological needs and strengthen organizational commitment.

Contribution: This paper contributes to the CSR and employee engagement literature by shifting the analytical focus from external outcomes to individual-level psychological processes. It introduces Self-Determination Theory as an alternative to social exchange theory and integrates Kahn's engagement model to provide a holistic framework. By identifying and conceptualizing multiple CSR-related moderators and linking them to autonomy, competence,

and relatedness, the study offers a comprehensive model for how CSR initiatives can enhance employee engagement.

Paper type: conceptual

Further readings:

Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2019). On corporate social responsibility, sensemaking, and the search for meaningfulness through work. *Journal of Management*, 45(3), 1057-1086.

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Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2015). Corporate social responsibility, multi-faceted job-products, and employee outcomes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 131(2), 319-335.

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