

# **Necessary Sisyphus Work: Work Satisfaction, Workload and Motivation of Employees in Social Service Organizations**

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This paper presents the results of an empirical study of the situation of employees in homes and mobile services for elderly people in Austria (Simsa/Schober/Schober 2003). We concentrated on overall work satisfaction, motivation and the specific strains of working as home assistants and nurses for the elderly. I would like to give you the conclusions right at the beginning: the study showed that the employees surveyed were to a high degree intrinsically motivated. Nonetheless, it also revealed that their work strain is significantly higher and their overall work satisfaction is significantly lower than that of average employees. Another interesting finding was that our sample employees of NPOs were under greater strain and less satisfied with their work than those of governmental or profit-oriented organizations.

The research presented in this paper shows that working conditions in third-sector organizations are often very precarious. Furthermore, a comparison of the working conditions at organizations in the same fields but from different sectors clearly showed that NPOs are often less sensitive employers and more demanding on their employees than other organizations.

**Background: Social services and specialized services for the elderly as a growing sector – undesired or “avoided” by employees.**

The third sector often is seen as a promising field for the creation of more jobs, which could be particularly satisfying for employees. These jobs are considered to be more satisfying, because employees would not work just for money, but also for values and would be in direct and intensive contact with clients in need. Moreover, NPOs are expected to moderate – or even solve – the disintegrative tendencies in labour markets, which are the cause of growing unemployment.

At the same time, in certain fields of social services NPOs are confronted with the growing difficulties of finding qualified personnel. This is very true for organizations offering services for the elderly. They are hardly able to get enough qualified personnel and the fluctuation

rates are extremely high, i.e., between three and five years on average. In the light of demographic developments, this problem will become more severe over the next few years (Schneider/Österle 2003). For Austria, it is estimated that the need for qualified personnel will rise by 100% until 2010 (Schaffenberger et al. 1999).

Furthermore, the severe scandals of the last few months – especially at old people’s homes where clients were mistreated or severely neglected – make the significance of the topic clear. Newspapers and politicians readily admit that there is not enough staff and that many employees are extremely overworked. One of the reasons for this situation is the working conditions.

At the same time, social organizations are often confronted with substantial financial cuts, and this trend is already affecting employees. In connection with changing policies of the state towards social service NPOs, one conclusion that can be drawn from the findings of the study is the high importance of structural and financial public support as well as a greater focus on human resource management.

### **Method of Research**

In Autumn of 2002, a number of 11 comprehensive case studies were conducted: six of them at organizations offering mobile services, five at large homes for elderly people (all consisting of more than 100 beds). As regards homes for the elderly, we distinguished between public, private profit-oriented and nonprofit organizations. The case studies consisted of the following activities:

- Analysis of secondary material
- Interviews with managers concerning human resource management, organizational strategies and leadership styles
- A survey based on written questionnaires was conducted, comprising all employees of the respective organizations (valid questionnaires returned: 1,182)

We handed out 2,460 questionnaires: 1,993 at mobile services and 467 at homes. It was possible to evaluate 918 questionnaires from the mobile services, and 264 from the homes for the elderly. Thus, 1,182 questionnaires were used for a bi- and multivariate analysis.

The questionnaire was co-ordinated with the general Austrian “Working Climate Index”, an instrument designed by the chamber of Labour OÖ, which regularly generates significant statistical data on the working conditions of all Austrian employees.

Regarding old people’s homes, a comparison of working conditions in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations was performed.

### **Motivation, Work Pressure and Work Satisfaction of Employees – Findings of the Analysis**

#### **- Motivation**

In the light of a rather underprivileged industry with a poor image, the motivation of the employees questioned is quite high at 76.3%; only 5.3% declare themselves as not motivated or only slightly motivated.

The strong motivation results largely from the sense of being able to engage in a meaningful (mobile of services 92.3% strongly and/or rather applicable, homes 89.4%) and responsible (mobile services 92.1%, homes 87.5%) activity. Over 80% of the persons asked stated that they enjoy their work. In contrast, the lack of clarity regarding achievement criteria and support from the organization was perceived as rather negative. A share of 20.1% of the persons asked found it to be hardly or not at all applicable to say that clear criteria existed for the measurement of success. A share of 17.4% felt that they received little or no support at all from the organization.

The work itself is for most employees the greatest incentive. A share of 76.4% regards it as a high or very high incentive. A further 70.8% of the employees asked regarded the clients or patients as a high or very high incentive, and 65.0% the colleagues. In contrast, potential upgradings or incomes were not an incentive for 36.4%, **nor for 30%.DA WEISS MAN NICHT WER DIE 30% sind.**

**Table 1: Incentives**

	Very high incentive in %	High Incent .	Incentive	Little incentive	No incentive in %	Missing in %
Working hours	27.3	33.5	21.5	7.8	6.0	3.9
Income	13.1	23.2	29.4	15.1	15.0	4.3
The work itself	41.5	34.9	14.8	2.0	2.2	4.6
Colleagues	30.9	34.1	19.0	6.1	5.0	5.0
Superior	24.1	31.7	20.7	8.4	9.4	5.7
Vacation	28.8	29.3	21.7	6.7	7.3	6.3
Further training	26.1	28.4	21.4	7.4	8.6	8.1
Opportunity for advancement	11.8	16.4	22.4	14.6	21.8	12.9
Patients	37.0	33.8	16.2	2.5	4.1	6.4

### - Work-Load

Answers to the question referring to different aspects of work strain show that strains result mainly from time pressure (57.9% perceive this as a great strain) and from emotional requirements and strains; 43.9% feel strained by this aspect, and almost 30% suffer from the demands of difficult clients or their relatives.

**Table 2: Work pressure**

	Highly strained in %				Not strained in %	Missing in %
Time-pressure	33.2	24.7	24.1	8.9	6.1	3.0
Emotional requirements and strains of the work	20.7	23.2	25.2	16.4	9.4	5.1
Bad health conditions at the working place (noise, dust, dirt etc.)	8.3	15.1	21.6	23.3	26.8	4.9
Danger of accidents or injury	4.9	11.5	23.2	27.1	28.5	4.8
Isolation	4.1	7.5	11.5	15.3	56.7	4.9
Technical or organizational changes	6.3	9.6	22.9	21.4	29.1	10.7

Changes in demands or working processes	11.3	13.3	21.3	21.9	24.9	7.3
Demands of difficult clients or their relatives	17.3	22.7	25.0	19.2	12.7	3.0
Agendas and duties not related to the basic job	5.1	9.6	18.8	23.9	34.5	8.1

### - Satisfaction

When questioned how satisfied they were overall with their jobs, 81.2% of the employees in our survey said they regarded themselves as satisfied or very satisfied, while only 3.7% were hardly or not satisfied at all. The most important single aspect of work satisfaction is the relation to colleagues: almost 80% are very satisfied or satisfied with this aspect. The image of the organization is for more than 70% satisfying. The lowest rates of satisfaction can be found regarding participation and opportunity for advancement.

These results match the results of a study in extramural services in Vienna (Bronneberg et al. 1997), which showed that contact with people, the opportunity to help and the possibility of working autonomously were seen as the main advantages of the job.

**Table 3: Work Satisfaction**

	Very satisfied with.. %	In %			Not satisfied with.., in %	Missing in %
Fringe benefits	17.4	33.5	27.7	10.9	6.2	4.3
Opportunity for advancement	13.1	23.4	25.9	14.4	15.0	8.3
Further training	24.5	26.9	21.7	10.9	9.5	6.6
Leadership style of the superior	28.8	28.8	21.1	9.5	7.4	4.4
Relations to colleagues	42.6	36.2	13.5	3.7	1.6	2.5
Image of the organization	35.9	37.1	16.2	3.7	2.6	4.5
Chances of participation	14.2	24.6	26.1	14.6	12.5	8.0
Possibility to decide about work processes (how to do the job, time structure, pace of work...)	22.0	36.8	22.8	6.0	4.0	7.1
Cooperation with other professionals	22.0	36.8	22.8	6.0	4.0	8.5

Thus, overall a relatively high work satisfaction and motivation were found to exist in the work field investigated. However, this finding must be viewed in a different light if one compares the results with employees from other branches.

### **Work Satisfaction in the Care of the Elderly in Comparison with Other Employees**

Selected questions of the questionnaire used in the investigation were coordinated with the Austrian Working Climate Index<sup>1</sup> so that a comparison of the overall Austrian data with work satisfaction and load is possible. The Working Climate Index tries to summarize the effects of economic change on the subjective experiences of the employees in a yardstick (Hofinger/Michenthaler 1998).

It goes back to a proposal of the Chamber of Labour in Upper Austria, and was developed by the Institute for Empirical Social Research (IFES) and the Institute for Social Research and Analysis (SORA), and was commissioned for the first time in 1997. Approximately a total of 900 employed persons were requested to complete the questionnaires.

The most interesting aspect of the Working Climate Index is the one relating to work satisfaction and loads. Additionally, the enterprise and the basic social benefits are also referred to. The index consists of four sub-indices. The sub-index of society investigates attitudes, e.g., regarding social developments, while the sub-index of enterprise investigates the assessment of future economic development, social security benefits, the image or the style of leadership in the respective enterprise; the sub-index of work refers to the satisfaction and assessment of the occupation, the timing, stress and loads, isolation, the income, etc. and the subindex of expectations inquires about the assessment regarding career and job market chances of the persons asked.

The higher the index number is, the better the working climate and satisfaction. In 1997, the standardized Working Climate Index for the overall Austrian figure was 100 points; in the year 2002 which is relevant for the comparison with our data, it amounted to 107 points. If one counts only the persons employed in the health and social welfare sectors, it is revealed that their satisfaction at 109 points is somewhat higher than the average of all employees.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.arbeitsklima.at](http://www.arbeitsklima.at)

The Working Climate Index for the organizations offering elderly care of our sample was 96 points. The satisfaction of the persons employed in the care of the elderly is thus much lower than that of persons employed in Austria altogether (107 points). It is also lower than the satisfaction of persons employed in the health and social welfare sectors (109 points).

Apart from job market chances, which the persons in our sample regarded as better than those of other employees (difference: 2 points of index), in all the other aspects the satisfaction in our sample is lower than that of other employees. Persons employed in the sector of the care of the elderly feel, in particular, due to the psychological stress (difference: 19 points of index!) that they carry a significantly much greater load and are significantly less content with income (difference: 15 points of index) and timing (difference: 13 points of index).

In a comparison with the data from the health and social welfare areas, the values from the sector of the elderly care examined here exhibit even greater differences. Apart from the aspect of job market chances, persons employed in the health and social welfare areas are clearly more content in all aspects and/or feel less strained than persons employed in the elderly care. The differences in the points of the index are distributed relatively evenly between five and ten points. The largest difference concerns the physical loads (13 points of index).

### **Differences between Public, Private and Nonprofit Sector**

If one regards only the homes of our sample by sector, the Working Climate Index shows clear differences between the different sectors: Persons employed by NPOs are therefore at 98 index points less content than those employed by the public sector where the index value is 102 points. Employees in profit-oriented homes are even more content with an index value of 109 index points than the total of persons employed in Austria.

The largest differences between the sectors relate to the organization itself. Here, the employees in NPOs asked were around 17 index points lower than in the profit-oriented organizations of our sample. The persons employed were particularly less content with the image of their enterprise were significantly at NPOs than those in PMOs (difference: 20 points). Furthermore, persons employed at NPOs feel significantly under greater strain than persons employed in the two other sectors. The smallest difference between the sectors (3 index points) relates to satisfaction with incomes.

The standardized working climate index for all organizations from the NPO sector is 95 points. In this case, it is mainly psychological stress, income and timing that are responsible for the lower degree of satisfaction of the persons employed at NPOs. NPO employees in our sample were under extremely higher strain from psychological stress than persons employed in the total of Austria (difference: 20 index points). Moreover, as regards income (difference: 16 index points) and working hours (difference: 15 index points ) persons employed in NPOs are clearly less content.

### **Conclusion:**

To secure a sufficient supply of persons to provide care, the working conditions of employees in the field must be improved.

In the public sector, training conditions must be improved and offered to a greater extent. Image-promoting measures can also be meaningful for the medium term. The public support of volunteers or the informal work of relatives (Rubisch/Philipp/Wotzel/Enge 2001) can be only accompanying measures. A further aspect concerns the income situation. Apart from the regulation of collective contracts, the handling of service contracts is a substantial starting point. Some organizations in the mobile services suffer from extreme strain, in particular, from financial cuts. In organizations in which productivity reserves are already exhausted, an undifferentiated financial pressure can lead to excessive demand on the organization and its employees. Apart from the frequently only alternative strategy of reducing the service quality, the workloads of employees rise and the possibilities for compensatory measures such as bonus payments or additional social security benefits sink.

At the organizational level, the possibilities of developing strategies and instruments of human resource management are revealed in many organizations. Some of the organizations examined clearly stand to gain attractiveness from clearer guidance structures and personnel management strategies. There is a high correlation between work satisfaction and motivation with the clarity of guidance structures as well as the commitment of the high-level personnel.

Further necessary starting points are continued training and development of personnel – here the differences between the organizations examined are large – as well as the organization of

working hours, the definition of clear success criteria as well as the support extended to employees by the organization.

Altogether - not surprisingly - higher satisfaction values show up in those organizations, which develop strategies for handling personnel problems actively and in the context of organizational self-reflection development.

The high loads from time pressure and emotional stress create the tendency of a greater risk of burnout. The identification with the occupation and the responsibility towards clients intensify this risk, since it makes employees feel a particularly high commitment and this may even result in self-exploitation. In order to improve the work quality - also the quality of life of employees - far more support is needed from the organizations and direct superiors than provided thus far. Personal support in emotionally stressful situations from superiors, the development of clear success and/or quality yardsticks and of favourable working hour regulations becomes an important and urgent task.

Working in the field of elderly care causes a high measure of physical and emotional strain, which must be ameliorated by the organizations in order to maintain the quality of the support and care desired. Persons who are under great workloads and strain themselves cannot help others enduringly and provide high quality, as shown by the high fluctuation rates.

- Employees in our sample are under significantly greater pressure and less satisfied with their work than Austrian employees in general.
- Compared with employees in the health and social services sector in general, the disadvantages of employees in old people's homes and mobile services are even more severe.
- Employees at NPO-homes are significantly less satisfied and more strained than those working at profit-oriented and public organizations.
- Work pressure is mainly a result of psychological and physical stress, working hours and the growing demands of clients.
- Still, 92% of the interviewees consider their work as very meaningful and important.
- As regards human resource management, enormous differences between the investigated organizations were found, especially concerning the further training of employees and working hour arrangements. Apart from these aspects, a clear relationship between the

motivation and satisfaction of employees with the clarity of leadership structures was revealed.

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