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# Motivation and supra-organizational corporate social responsibility

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**Abstract.** This article explores the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) at both organizational and supra-organizational levels and its influence on employee motivation. While previous research has primarily focused on firm-level CSR, we argue that industry associations, federations, and other collective entities also play a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions. Drawing on self-determination theory and recent empirical insights, the study develops the proposition that supra-organizational CSR generates complex motivational outcomes depending on whether it is perceived as voluntary or externally imposed. A conceptual framework is presented that identifies interaction effects between organizational and supra-organizational CSR and discusses their implications for internal and external motivation. The article concludes with reflections on methodological challenges, practical recommendations for managers and associations, and avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, motivation, self-determination theory, supra-organizational CSR, employee attitudes, voluntary engagement.

Corporate social responsibility has long been recognized as a multidimensional concept that extends beyond legal compliance and profit maximization, encompassing ethical, philanthropic, and environmental considerations (Carroll, 1999; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Companies increasingly seek legitimacy and trust not only through their individual initiatives but also through membership in associations and industry-wide initiatives that promote socially responsible behavior. This development has introduced an additional layer of CSR, which may be termed *supra-organizational CSR*, reflecting the influence of federations, chambers of commerce, or trade unions in setting standards and expectations that go beyond individual firms.

The motivational consequences of CSR for employees are well documented. Employees tend to perceive socially responsible employers as more trustworthy, fair, and value-driven, which strengthens commitment and reduces turnover

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(Turker, 2009; Glavas, 2016). However, most existing studies analyze CSR at the firm level in isolation, neglecting the possibility that collective or industry-level CSR initiatives might interact with organizational practices in ways that either reinforce or diminish their effects on motivation. This article addresses that gap by theorizing how supra-organizational CSR signals influence employee perceptions of voluntariness, authenticity, and fairness, thereby shaping both internal and external motivation.

**CSR and Motivation: Theoretical Anchors**

According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020), motivation is driven by the satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Internal motivation emerges when these needs are fulfilled, while external motivation is shaped by rewards, sanctions, and social recognition. CSR can meet employees’ need for relatedness by demonstrating that the organization cares about broader societal stakeholders, including its workforce. It can also reinforce external motivation by signaling that employees will be treated fairly in terms of pay, benefits, and working conditions.

Supra-organizational CSR complicates this dynamic. When industry associations or federations demand CSR compliance, employees may interpret their firm’s engagement as less voluntary and more strategic. In such cases, the authenticity of the organization’s commitment may be questioned, leading to weaker effects on internal motivation. At the same time, the external motivational impact—linked to expectations of fairness and material conditions—may also be diluted, since perceived voluntariness is central to building trust. Thus, the interaction between organizational and supra-organizational CSR cannot be understood as merely additive; instead, a substitution or dampening effect may occur.

Table 1

Relationship between CSR type and employee motivation			
Type of CSR	Internal Motivation	External Motivation	Expected Outcome
Voluntary organizational CSR	High ↑	Moderate ↔	Strong positive effect
Supra-organizational CSR	Moderate ↔	High ↑	Positive but less authentic
Combined (both levels)	Moderate ↑	Moderate ↑	Interaction effect, weaker

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To illustrate these dynamics, we propose three scenarios. In the first, a company engages voluntarily in CSR without external pressure. Employees are likely to view this as authentic, satisfying their need for relatedness and enhancing internal motivation. In the second, supra-organizational CSR is emphasized, and firms participate largely because membership requires it. Here, employees may recognize fairness signals but remain skeptical about authenticity, leading to stronger external than internal motivation. In the third scenario, both organizational and supra-organizational CSR are present simultaneously. While one might expect additive benefits, interaction effects emerge: voluntariness is reduced, authenticity questioned, and the motivational impact weaker than the sum of the parts.

This reasoning is consistent with empirical observations in organizational psychology. Anderson et al. (1999) showed that experimental findings on motivational cues often translate reliably into field studies, suggesting that vignette-based research can provide robust insights. Linder (2010), for instance, compared vignette experiments with field studies in corporate entrepreneurship and found acceptable ecological validity, supporting the applicability of experimental designs for studying CSR perception. Nevertheless, the complexity of motivational dynamics calls for diverse methodological approaches, including surveys, field experiments, and longitudinal designs, to test these hypotheses more rigorously.

### **Conceptual Model**

The proposed model identifies voluntariness as the moderating variable that shapes the link between CSR initiatives and motivation. Voluntary organizational CSR strongly predicts internal motivation by satisfying employees' need for relatedness. Supra-organizational CSR strengthens external motivation when perceived as fair and supportive, but weakens internal motivation when seen as imposed. When both occur simultaneously, employees' interpretation of the authenticity of CSR is critical: where organizational leadership emphasizes voluntary alignment with supra-organizational values, negative interaction effects may be mitigated; where leadership stresses compliance, motivational benefits are undermined.

The analysis suggests several important insights. First, authenticity matters: employees distinguish between actions undertaken from intrinsic organizational values and those

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adopted merely to meet external requirements. Second, supra-organizational CSR has a dual character: it institutionalizes fairness across industries but risks reducing voluntariness at the organizational level. Third, employee motivation is not shaped solely by the presence of CSR initiatives but by how these initiatives are framed and communicated. Managers must recognize that participation in industry associations should be supplemented by clear internal messaging that highlights the organization's genuine commitment, not just compliance.

From a broader perspective, supra-organizational CSR plays a critical governance role in contexts where scandals, environmental controversies, or public scrutiny highlight the insufficiency of voluntary action. In such circumstances, employees may reassess the value of supra-organizational standards as protective mechanisms that ensure fairness and ethical conduct across the industry. This indicates that external shocks, such as environmental crises, can alter the motivational outcomes of supra-organizational CSR, making it appear more legitimate and necessary.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This article has argued that the motivational effects of CSR depend critically on perceptions of voluntariness and authenticity. Organizational CSR fosters internal motivation when employees believe it reflects genuine care for stakeholders. Supra-organizational CSR signals fairness and may strengthen external motivation, but risks undermining internal motivation if viewed as imposed. The joint presence of both forms produces interaction effects that are weaker than the sum of their parts, underscoring the importance of communication and framing.

Future research should empirically test these propositions through mixed-method designs, comparing laboratory experiments with field surveys across industries. Special attention should be paid to differentiating types of external motivation as defined by self-determination theory—introjected, identified, and integrated regulation—since CSR may influence these in distinct ways. Researchers should also examine the impact of external crises, such as environmental scandals, on the legitimacy of supra-organizational CSR.

For practitioners, several recommendations emerge. Organizations should avoid presenting CSR merely as compliance with industry rules; instead, they should integrate supra-organizational values into their own

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voluntary commitments. Managers should actively communicate the intrinsic motivations behind CSR initiatives to employees, emphasizing alignment with corporate identity. Associations, meanwhile, should design CSR frameworks that allow for flexibility and encourage member organizations to personalize their commitments, thus preserving a sense of voluntariness.

In sum, CSR at both organizational and supra-organizational levels is a powerful tool for motivating employees, but its effects are mediated by perceptions of authenticity and voluntariness. Only when employees believe that CSR reflects genuine organizational values, rather than external imposition, can its full motivational potential be realized.

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