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Employee Needs and Expectations in the Irish Voluntary Sector

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EMPLOYEE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS IN THE IRISH VOLUNTARY SECTOR

ABSTRACT

Little research exists on the work needs and expectations of employees in the Irish Voluntary Sector. The paper presents the preliminary findings of the first nation-wide survey of voluntary organisations, focusing on the psycho-social variables underpinning work. The survey employed the Meaning Of Working (MOW) questionnaire, widely used in European work-values research. Results from the 259 respondent voluntary organisations are compared with a private sector population, and indicate significant differences in employee work values, reward expectations and job involvement. The results are discussed and implications for the management and development of the Irish Voluntary Sector are advanced.

INTRODUCTION

The success of any social system depends on the involvement and cohesion of its members, with a collective identity and common purpose. Traditional organisational thinkers have, until recent times, attempted to study and describe the functional dynamics of organisational arrangements classified as either private or public sector organisations. However, Levitt (1973) reproached this bipolar classification as denying the positive existence of the significant 'third sector' *****. Levy (1993) highlights this significance when he claimed that membership of this sector in the USA is upwards of 561,000 organisations, with an estimated spending power of over $300 billion per annum. There is little doubt that third sector organisations are also making a direct and substantial contribution to contemporary Irish life. For instance, Fleishman (1995) indicates that the expenditure of this sector in Ireland, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, is approximately 3.4%.

Several writers have identified the Irish third sector as the organisational domain within which significant growth would take place over the next decade (see for example O'Connell, 1994), a trend which is acknowledged as a global one (Salamon, 1994). Thus, research which adds to the understanding of the functioning of third sector organisations would appear integral to the productive evolution and development of this sector. Armstrong (1992) has supported such a call, expressing a view that an understanding of the dynamics of third sector organisations, particularly variables such as member values and commitment, may lend a clearer comprehension of the distinct culture which permeates this unique sector. He goes further to suggest that if such an understanding is gained, then it would benefit not just those leading and working in the sector, but it could also provide valuable insights for managers in public and private sectors on alternative approaches to the facilitation of member commitment and establishment of co-operative organisational culture.

* For the sake of clarity, the term *third sector* refers to organisations which may occupy a domain of organisational orientation that is unique from State and private sector enterprises. This encompassing term, third sector, is intended to include all organisations that are sometimes referred to as *Non-Profit*, *Independent*, *Voluntary* or *Charities* , that is, third sector organisations : (i) do not necessarily exist to generate profits for the owners, but they may generate income that is spent; (ii) may be outside the realm of government and private enterprise, but they may rely on both for funding or expertise etc.; (iii) may be staffed by unpaid volunteers as well as paid employees, and ; (iv) they may be exempt from taxation on income or property and may generate revenues through charitable donation.

Growing evidence supporting the individual nature of the third sector, indicates that some organisational characteristics, particularly issues such as employee reward and appraisal, do not mirror those present in the private/public sectors. For instance a common characteristic of the third sector in international terms is its high labour intensity (Oster, 1995). Some evidence from the USA indicates that upward of 44% of total expenses of the sector are in the form of labour payments (Hodgkinson et al., 1992). However, it is also notable that the third sector pays its employees considerably less than its for-profit counterparts (Preston, 1989). Frequently the assumption is that the nature of the actual work and the goals of the employees differ in the third sector, and that a trade off exists between extrinsic remuneration and intrinsic satisfaction gained from working in the sector (see for example : Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Preston, 1989).

While such writings possess an intuitive logic, a review of available literature indicates a shortfall of published empirical research in the area. The present paper advances the principle that a true understanding of the dynamics which drive the third sector can only come from a thorough cognisance and appreciation of the socio-psychological factors which influence member participation and performance.

The present study delivers data from the first major nation-wide survey of the Irish third sector utilising Meaning of Working (MOW) variables such as Centrality of Work, Work-Role Identification, Work Goals, and Valued Working Outcomes.

THE CONCEPT OF 'MEANING OF WORKING' APPLIED TO THE THIRD SECTOR

MEANING OF WORKING (MOW)

If it is accepted that working is fundamentally important to individuals, to organisations and to society, then an understanding of the 'meanings' which individuals attribute to their work is of significant value to our understanding of the dynamics of working. This is one of the basic tenets of the international Meaning of Working (MOW) project, one of the most extensive work based research projects conducted in recent years (see MOW-Meaning of Working International Research Team 1987).

While the significance of MOW results were immense, tracking work meanings in eight countries, it is notable that no assessment of the underlying 'work meanings' of employees in the third sector was attempted. Thus we lack any clear insight or understanding of the relative importance of work meanings of employees in the sector. As the present chapter aims to fill this gap, a fuller understanding of the MOW model and its implications for work related behaviour is necessary.

A 'Meaning of Working' Model

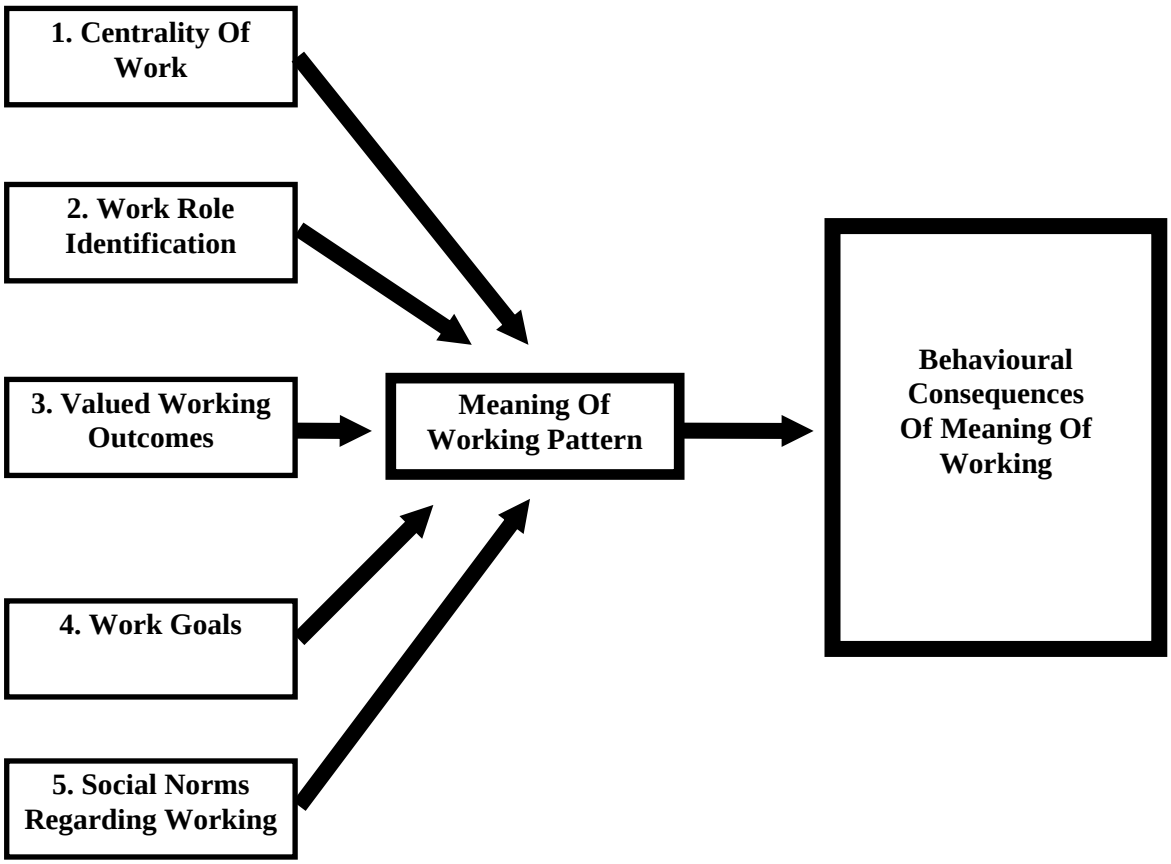
"A well-articulated theory of the meaning of working (MOW).is not available" (MOW, 1987), therefore a 'heuristic' model, containing variable sets and relationships between variables which were considered of primary importance, was developed by MOW International Research Team (1987) (See Figure. 1).

This 'heuristic' model is the most logical starting point for the assessment of 'work meanings'. The variables inherent in the model are said to be interdependent, therefore it may be possible to evaluate 'work meanings' using a combination of these variables.

There are five distinct *Meaning Constructs* which describe the different bases for the attachment of individuals to the phenomenon of working. These are :

1. Centrality of work
2. Work role identification
3. Valued working outcomes
4. Work goals
5. Societal norms with regard to an individual's obligations to work and entitlements received from work;

Figure 1: Meaning Of Working Heuristic Model

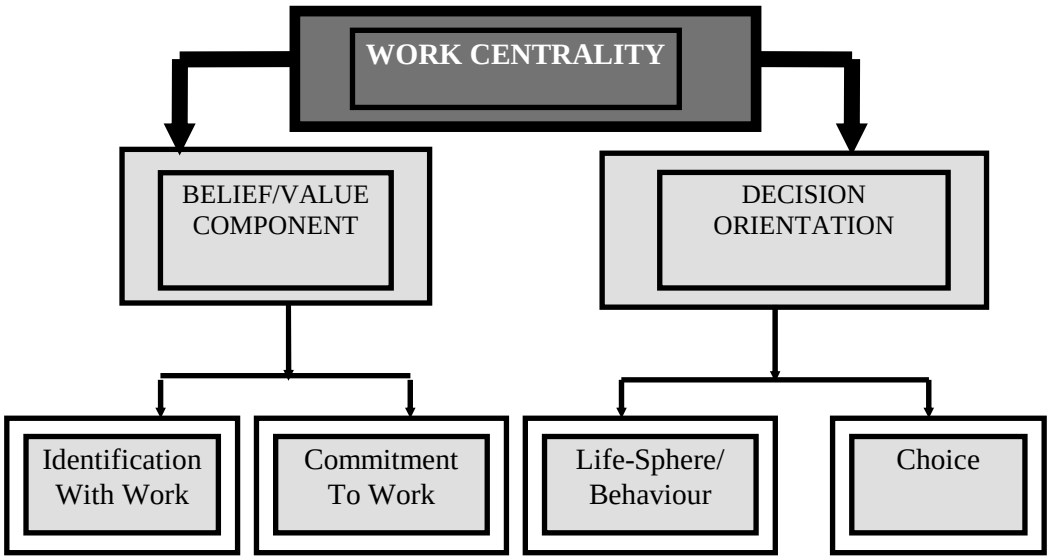


It is the understanding of these five 'central variables' (as defined by MOW, 1987) which lies at the centre of our conceptualisation of what work is for us, and thus forms the starting point of the present project. Their potential usefulness for delineating 'work meanings' has been established (see for example, Basini & Hurley, 1994; England, 1991), and within the context of this study have the capacity to yield a rich base of data from which a fuller understanding of third sector work meanings can be established. This fuller understanding may thus allow us draw inferences regarding the possible work based behavioural implications of such work meanings.

1. Centrality of Work

Work Centrality 'is a measure based on cognitions and affects that reflect the degree of general importance that working has in the life of an individual at any given time'. (MOW International Team, 1987, p. 19).

Figure 2: Centrality of Work Model



Two separate theoretical components of this work centrality construct have been identified, a belief/value component and a decision orientation component (MOW, 1987).

The Belief/Value Component of Work Centrality

The Belief/Value Component is comprised of (i) the level of identification one has with one's work roles and (ii) the affective commitment one has to one's work. Both identification with work and commitment to working are seen to be linked with important work related behavioural outcomes such as work performance (Larson & Fukami, 1984; Mottaz, 1988), absenteeism (Steers, 1977) and turnover (Angle & Perry, 1981; Blau, 1985).

An insight into these issues would be particularly useful in gaining a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of employee behaviour in the third sector, particularly as the sector has been characterised as suffering from significantly high levels of employee turnover (Bottger, 1990; Pearson, 1995) and quite differentiated levels of commitment (Pearce, 1993).

The Decision Orientation Component of Work Centrality

The decision orientation component of work centrality determines the primacy of life choices and behaviours associated with these decisions, with the assumption that

individuals' lives are segmented into different subspheres. This component of work centrality determines individuals' relative preferences for life subspheres such as working, family, leisure etc.

To date, very little evidence exists to indicate whether employees in the third sector rate the centrality and importance of their work in their lives any differently to employees in the traditional private sector.

2. Work Role Identification

Work role identification is "the extent to which an individual defines and identifies working in terms of various roles such as task role, organisational role, product or service role, and occupational/professional role" (MOW, 1987, p.57). Work role identification is seen as a function of work centrality (See Figure 2).

In the present context, it might be assumed that employees in the third sector may identify with distinct aspects of their work, when compared to private sector employees, as the stated mission of voluntary organisations are frequently unique from those of private sector organisations.

3. Valued Working Outcomes

Valued, in the above context, means "importance evaluations which are defined to include what the person knows about each of the work outcomes and the preference relationship among outcomes " (MOW, 1987). Evaluations of relative importance, or preference for outcomes implies the notion of choice. Choice is taken to mean the implementation of values for outcomes and a specific type of identification with working.

It appears that the 'importance evaluations' which individuals make regarding outcomes received from work are multi-faceted and not entirely income dependant. If one could eliminate the necessity for income, which is perceived as important in individuals' working lives, other factors (e.g. expressive rewards) may become paramount. This may be especially true for employees in the third sector where organisational mission and goals are frequently closely correlated with employee goals, perhaps more so than with private sector employees (Oster, 1995). Also of interest is the accepted evidence which indicates that third sector organisations pay their staff

less than their for-profit counterparts (Preston, 1989), perhaps indicating that valued working outcomes may differ for the sector.

4. Work Goals

In tandem with working outcomes, another domain which gives insight into what is important to individuals in their working lives, is the absolute and relative importance of work related goals. The relevant literature on the operationalisation of work goals covers issues such as job satisfaction, work values, and incentive preference.

The outcomes individuals seek from working and the identification of the functions served by working may shed light on the basic question of why individuals work, and to some degree why individuals may be effective or non-effective workers. Further analysis of these work goals may provide a rich source of data which may assist in understanding why many employees consciously choose to work specifically in the third sector.

5. Societal Norms about Working

From traditional work ethics it is possible to derive one orientation of work-related social norms that refers to working as an individual or collective *obligation* to society, whether such social standards are religiously or otherwise underpinned. A second normative orientation might be considered the compliment of the obligation norm in that it reflects social standards regarding the rights and *entitlements* of the working individual.

While both norms are seen a important components of the MOW concept, there is little evidence to link these orientations with explicit behavioural consequences. As the present study aims to identify the behavioural consequences of MOW orientations, it was decided not to include the societal norms results as they are not seen as relevant to the research objective.

Implications of Establishing Work Meanings

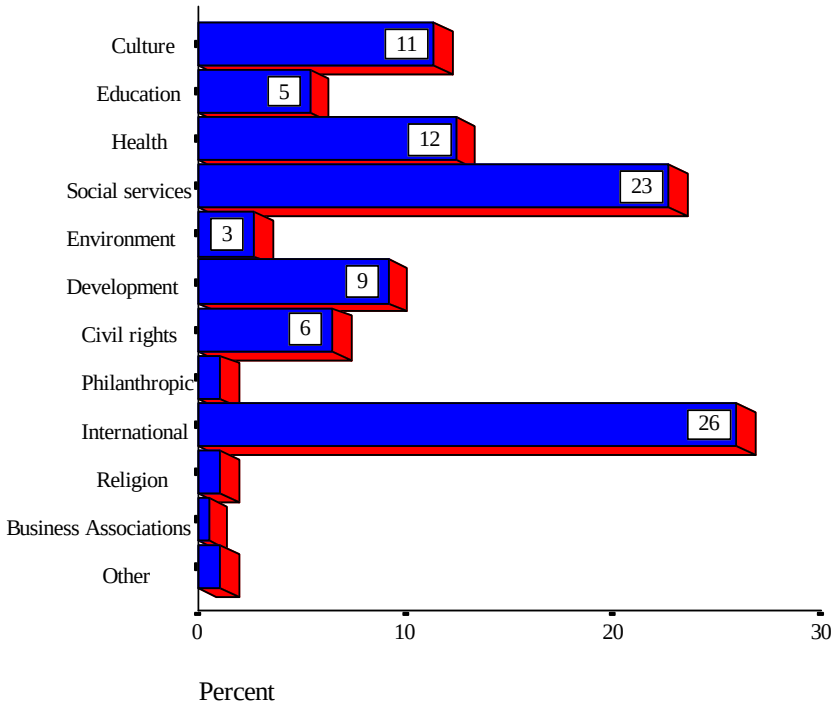
The benefits of data gained from a thorough MOW analysis of the third sector could be of great service to many practitioners and leaders in the third sector. It may assist management gain an understanding of the motivational dynamics and incentive models of organisational members. This understanding may lead to clarification of issues as diverse as job design, member development, strategic human resource management, organisational leadership and reward systems.

BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study sought to gain an understanding, for the first time, of the concept of meaning of work for employees in the third sector. As previously stated, the absence of such data has led to a tacit presumption that the work meanings in the sector mirror those of the workers in the private sector. However if the third sector does have distinctive organisational aspirations and landscapes then ascribing private sector work meanings to third sector employees might well be erroneous.

From combined sources, a database of circa 1500 third sector organisations in existence in the Republic of Ireland was compiled. From this database a random sample of 800 organisations were surveyed using a postal questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to elicit data on (among other issues) the work meanings of paid employees and managers in the third and private sectors. Relevant data was received from 259 third sector organisations. The sectoral classification of the respondent third sector organisations (following Salamon & Anhier's (1992) classification system) is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Classifications of Respondent Third Sector Organisations By % (*n*=185).*



*** Note** : Only third sector managerial respondents were asked to complete the classification item on the instrument.

While there is a wealth of data available on MOW scores in the private/public sectors (MOW 1987; Basini & Hurley, 1994; Claes, 1994), the present study included a private sector population for comparative purposes. The comparative private sector sample was established by a survey of employees in a financial services organisation and a computer hardware manufacturing/assembly firm (*n*=110). While this population is small it was included to insure that the private sector MOW scores reflected those of the previous research cited.

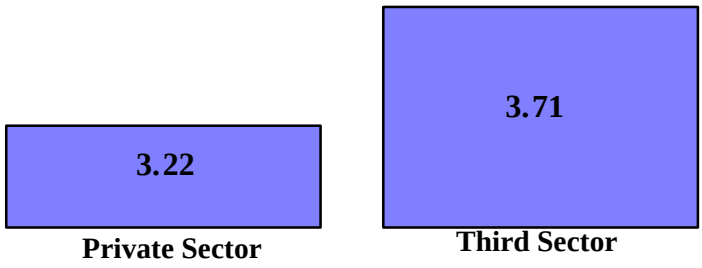
RESULTS

Interval and ordinal variables were analysed using parametric methods, primarily Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). This section outlines in sequence, the comparative results of third sector and private sector MOW scores. Evaluation and interpretation of these results is presented in the discussion section.

1. Centrality of Work

Figure 4 below indicates that work is significantly more central in the lives of third sector paid employees than in the lives of private sector paid employees.

Figure 4: Centrality of Work Comparison: Third Sector Employees and Private Sector Employees**



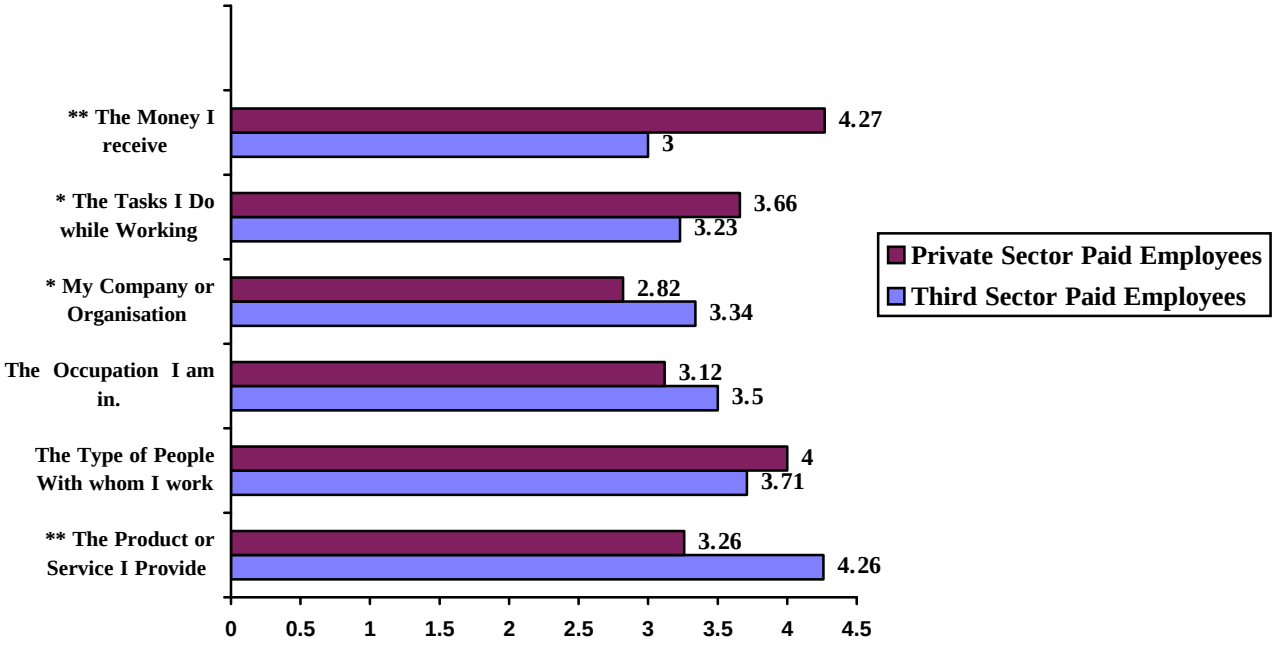
****** Significant at *p*<.001

2. Work Role Identification

Work Role Identification is the extent to which an individual defines and identifies working in terms of various roles. Subjects were required to rank from 1 'least significant' to 6 'most significant', six aspects of working which seemed most important to them. Figure 5 shows the mean work role identification rank scores, in which the

greater the numeric value attributed to a role the more significant and important these roles are in the working lives of subjects.

Figure 5: Work Role Identifications of Private Sector and Third Sector Employees



****** Significance Level=p<.001

***** Significance Level=p<.05

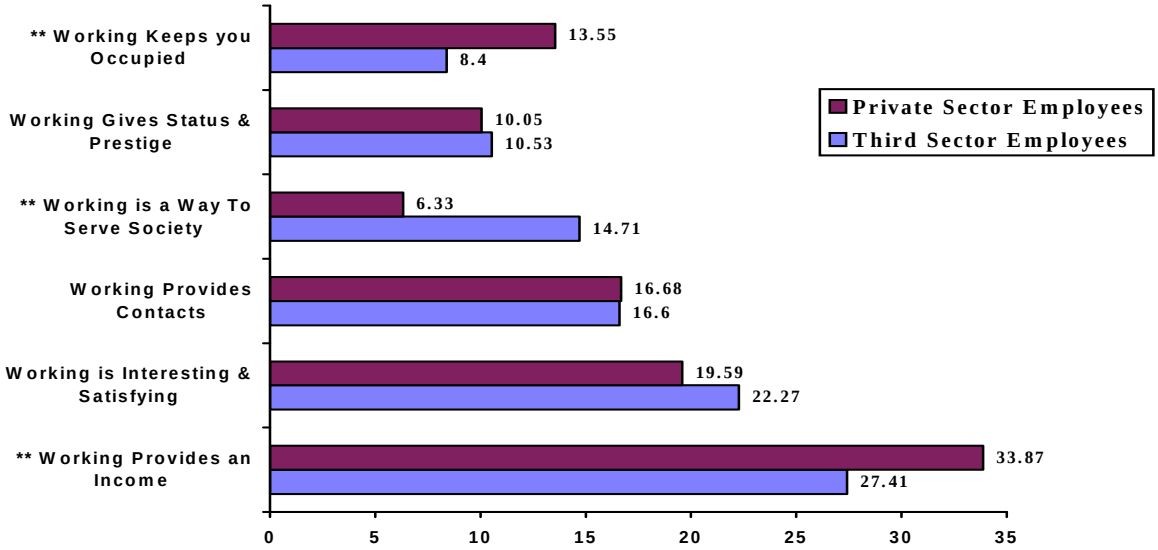
Figure 5 above indicates that 4 of 6 work role identification variables show statistical differences across the two groups analysed. Third sector employees identify, to a greater extent than do private sector employees, with (i) the product or service they provide and (ii) the company or organisation they are in. Private sector employees identify, to a significantly greater degree than third sector employees, with (i) the money they receive from working and (ii) the tasks they do while working.

3. Valued Working Outcomes

Subjects were asked to assign a total of 100 points to 6 statements, in any combination that expressed their thinking, with respect to the functions of working. Figure 6 below indicates statistically significant differences across respondents of third and private sector organisations on three valued working outcomes of working variables: (i) the 'income providing' function of work : private sector employees, to a significantly greater extent than third sector employees perceive working as fulfilling an income producing function; (ii) the 'serving society'function of working: third sector

employees, to a significantly greater extent than private sector employees, perceive working as a useful way to serve society; (iii) the 'keeping occupied' function of working : private sector employees, perceive to a significantly greater extent than third sector employees, that working has an occupying function.

Figure 6: Valued Working Outcomes of Private Sector and Third Sector Employees



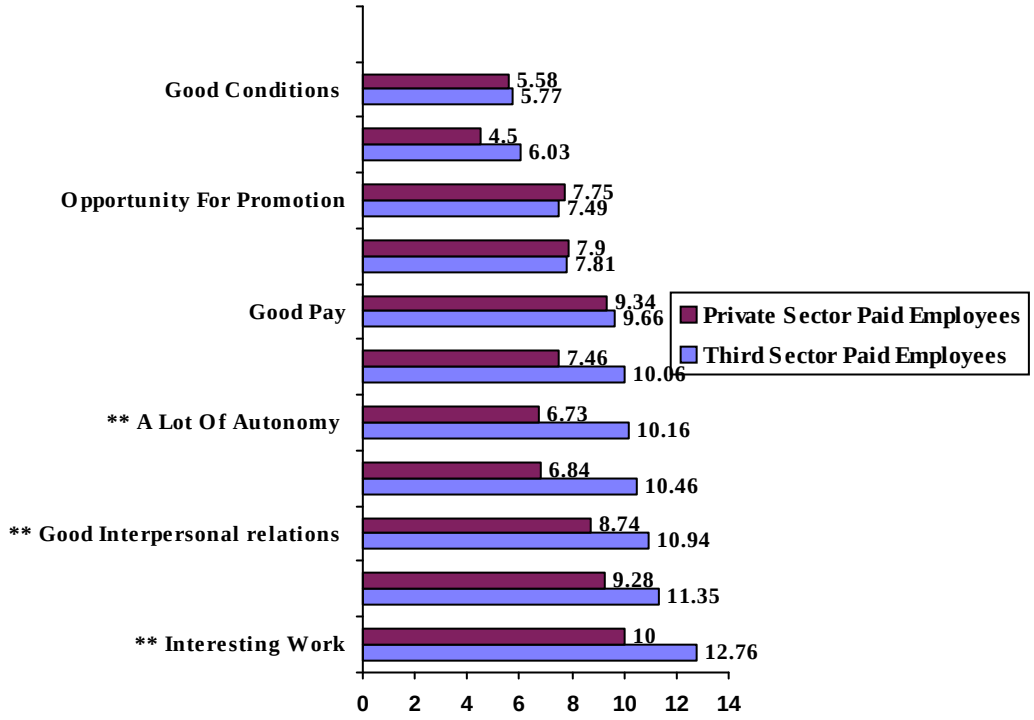
****** Significant at *p*<.001

4. Work Goals

In tandem with valued working outcomes, another domain which is integral to an understanding of the facets which individuals see as important in their working lives, is 'work goals'. The figures shows mean importance scores of subjects. The higher the numeric value of a work goal. the more important that work goal is relative to the others analysed. Subjects were required to rank eleven work goals in any order they felt reflected their thinking.

Figure 7 below indicates that there are statistically significant differences between respondents from the two sectors on 7 of the 11 work goals. Six of the seven work goal differences appear on what could loosely be termed self-expressive variables, i.e. interesting work, autonomy in work, match between skills and job demands, good interpersonal contacts, variety in work, the opportunity to learn. The remaining variable that indicates statistically significant differences between groups could be termed an instrument or context factor, i.e. convenient work hours. The 'direction' of all seven differences indicates that third sector employees seek, to a significantly greater extent than private sector employees, the above work goals.

Figure 7: Comparisons of Work Goals for Private and Third Sector Employees



***** Significance Level=p<.05

****** Significance Level=p<.001

Although similarities exist across variables, Figure 8 below indicates that to a significantly greater extent, private sector employees attribute more importance to leisure in their lives, relative to other life subspheres. Third sector employees attribute significantly greater importance to work relative to other life subspheres, in comparison to private sector employees.

Figure 8: ANOVA Comparisons of Relative Centrality of Work

	Mean Score Third sector Employee	Mean Score private sector Employee	Significance Level
Relative Centrality Of Work			
My Leisure (hobbies, sports, recreation and contacts with friends)	**19.63**	**25.76**	**p<.001**
My Community (like voluntary organisations, union and political organisations).	**8.00**	**7.44**	**NS**
My Work	**29.95**	**23.50**	**p<.001**
My Religion (like religious activities and beliefs).	**5.25**	**6.65**	**NS**
My Family.	**37.14**	**36.62**	**NS**

DISCUSSION

The results presented indicate, that in many important areas, the meanings of work ascribed by employees in the third sector differ significantly from those of private sector employees. These differences imply that an implicit contrast may exist between issues such as centrality of work, levels of identification with work roles and valued working outcomes for those working in the third and private sector. The implications of these differences may have a significant impact on our attempts to understand the dynamics of workers in the sector, which we can now see as a distinct and separate body. This may have significant implications for the sector, most notably in terms of selecting appropriate approaches to management and leadership in third sector organisations.

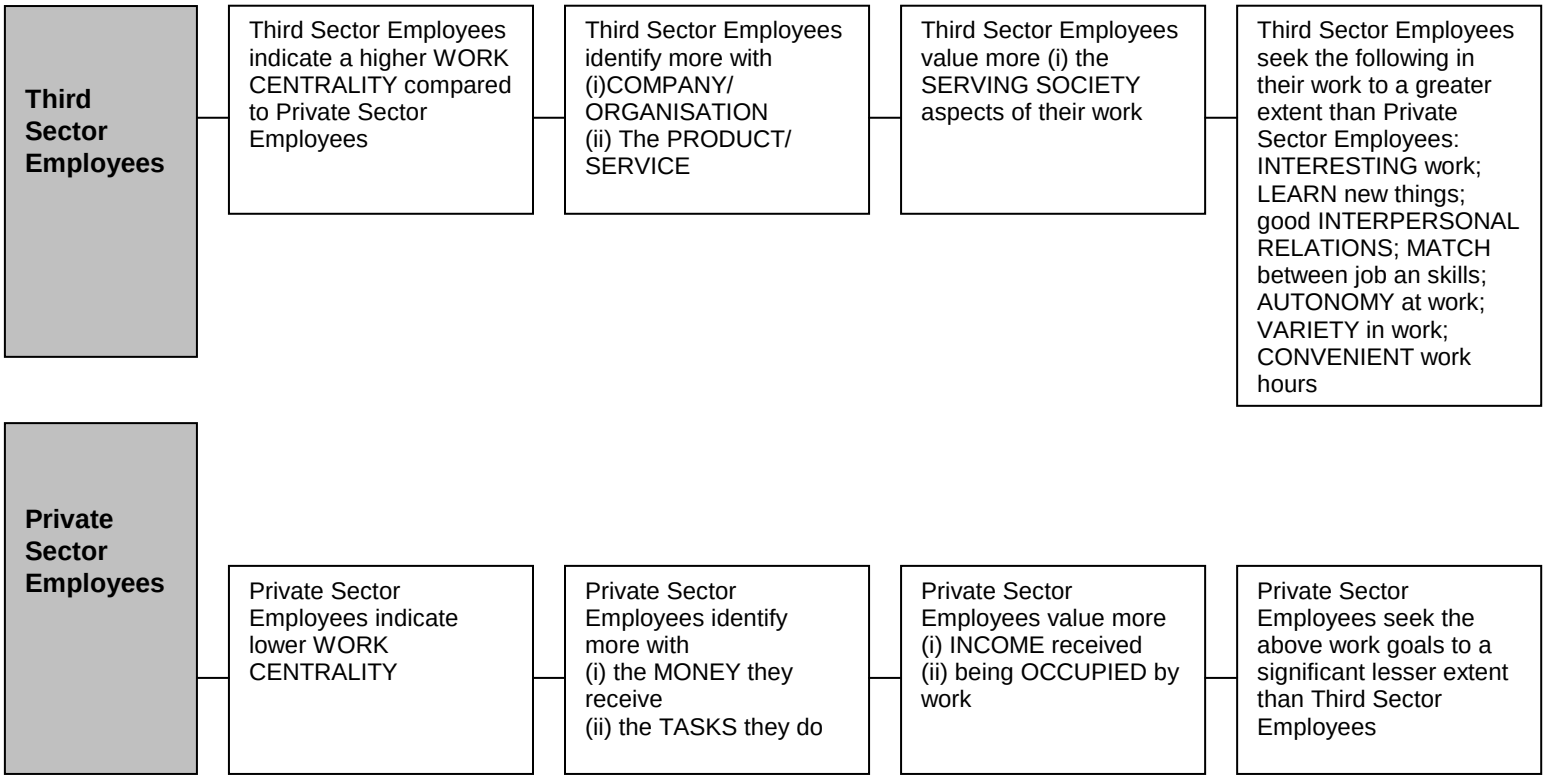
Reviewing the results, it is clear that employees in the third sector see their work as being much more central to their lives than employees in the private sector. This would appear to support the evidence which indicates that employees in the third sector possess a much higher personal identification with the goals of their organisation than private sector employees (Pearce, 1982). Third sector employees also identify more significantly with the product/service they provide than their private sector counterparts. Significant differences also occur under the heading of valued working outcomes, indicating that while salary is important to employees in both sectors, it is significantly more important to private sector employees. The

explanation for this difference may be illuminated by the fact that third sector employees place a much higher value on outcomes such as seeing their work as a useful way of serving society.

A fuller understanding of these differences may be gained from a review of the important work goals of the two groups. Third sector employees indicate significantly stronger importance of work goals such as the interesting nature of their work and the opportunity their work gives them to learn continuously. Interestingly, they also identify autonomy levels and the importance of positive interpersonal relations with colleagues as critical work goals, these again being significantly more important to third sector employees than to the private sector population. Thus it appears that many of the intrinsic facets of work are being rated as more important to the third sector employees' overall conception of what work is and what it means to them. This is not to say that these issues are not central to private sector employees concept of work and its meaning, on the contrary these issues were recorded as being consequential, but they were significantly less important than for the third sector population.

The following model (Figure 9) summarises areas in which significant differences occur between third sector and private sector employees. This depiction indicates the qualitative differences in conceptions of work meaning which exist between the two populations, stressing the more intrinsic and less instrumental nature of work meanings for third sector employees.

Figure 9: Differences between Third sector and Private sector MOW variables



CONSEQUENCES OF MOW DIFFERENCES

The behavioural implications of the results are difficult to identify, although some previous researchers have provided some insights (e.g. Bottger, 1990). What is clear is that those who are drawn to work in the third sector demonstrate significantly different associations with their employing organisation than private sector employees. Such ascriptions may not have easily discernible behavioural consequences but may be reflected more in affective psychological outcomes such as improved levels of organisational commitment (see, Wiener, 1982), motivation and satisfaction (Daily, 1986). In fact, many of the work meaning ascriptions offered by third sector employees in the present study actually appear to mirror more closely those usually ascribed to volunteers in the sector than by paid employees in the private sector (see, Pearce, 1993; Van Til, 1988). This finding is particularly significant as it could have been previously hypothesised that professional paid employees in the sector would view their work quite differently from volunteers, more akin to employees in the private and public sectors. The implications of this finding for managers and leaders in the sector may be far reaching.

Management and Leadership Implications

It is apparent that third sector employees, while actively seeking external rewards (salary, good working conditions etc.) just as their private sector compatriots, also expect their jobs/organisations to provide them with a greater number and level of intrinsic and personal rewards. Managers need to actively integrate such expectations into the roles of their employees if the sector is to avoid the downside of employee goal denial (e.g. high turnover, loss of commitment, disaffection). This insight into the expectations of third sector employees recalls the work of House and Mitchell (1974) in their exposition of the Path-Goal model of leadership. Effectively the model proposed that productive leadership involved the selection of a style which enhanced employee motivation and satisfaction with their jobs. The model suggests that when a leader is aware that employee needs for autonomy, responsibility and development are strong then participative and achievement oriented leadership styles are most appropriate. This approach suggests leader behaviours such as the active consideration of employee ideas in decision-making, or consultation on work design and procedures, thus enhancing work variety and strengthening the motivational aspects of work. The adoption of such a style helps remove obstacles to employee goal attainment and ultimately to task accomplishment (see Wofford and Liska, 1993 for a comprehensive review of Path-Goal research implications).

The implications of such differences may be significant in terms of design and shaping of work in third sector organisations. It is clear that employees in the sector actively seek more expressive and intrinsic rewards from their work than do private sector employees. Thus, senior management must be aware that the work they give employees should allow workers achieve these intrinsic goals. Included in this would be an awareness of the fact that employees need to be allowed the opportunity, if possible, to interact with the client base or at very least, to feel their efforts are impacting on the client recipient. This allows employees satisfy the need to associate with both the organisational goals and the product/service being delivered.

On a more fundamental level, senior managers must realise that employee goals, as recorded in the present survey, call for the provision of not just interesting work, but work which allows the employee develop and learn. The awareness of this developmental goal offers a challenge to managers to structure both employee roles and areas of responsibility in such a way as to meet employee learning needs. Practical aspects of this challenge include the design of tasks and roles which offer

increasing variety and autonomy as well as the opportunity to interact and work with others in the organisation. Recognising these employee needs and expectations puts increased demands on management in the third sector as it implies not just the maintenance of equitable employee relations but the evolution of relationships characterised by openness and collaboration.

To summarise, the research has indicated that paid employees in the Irish third sector possess work meanings which are significantly different from those of their private sector counterparts, identifying them as a distinct and separate population. This strengthens the call for the treatment of the sector as unique and of consequence in the Irish organisational and economic landscape. Our understanding of these differences has indicated that employees in the sector associate closely with the goals of their organisation and that many intrinsic work motivators, such as autonomy, developmental potential and affiliation needs, are as important and sometimes more important than issues such as salary or work conditions. These goals translate into high expectations, thus challenging managers in the sector to ensure that organisation systems and procedures integrate and incorporate employee needs. Meeting this challenge will ensure the maintenance of employee commitment to the organisation and its stated mission. Such congruence of aims and efforts should lead to the further development of dynamic and flexible organisations in the sector, capable of facing a future characterised by change, with confidence and belief.

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