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CSR UNDERSTANDING, ATTITUDES, AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG HR EMPLOYEES

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to explain how the attitude and understanding of the essence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by HR employees affect the actions they take in this area – engaging in and initiating CSR activities in the organization.
Methodology: An original survey questionnaire was developed, aimed at identifying how the company's responsibilities are perceived, determining the degree and form of respondents' engagement in CSR, and their perception of workplace conditions. The survey was conducted among 46 employees of HR departments. The analysis was carried out using linear regression.
Findings: The results suggest that the extent to which ethical values are embedded in the way CSR is understood significantly differentiates respondents' attitudes: individuals with well-established normative beliefs are more inclined to engage in CSR programs offered by the employer. At the same time, they are less inclined to undertake their own CSR initiatives within the organization.
Research limitations/implications: The study is constrained by the relatively small, purposively selected sample. Furthermore, engagement in CSR and the promotion of CSR‑related attitudes are inherently polymotivational phenomena and may be influenced by a range of individual, situational, social, and cultural factors operating at both the individual and organizational levels. These limitations underscore the need for further research into the microfoundations of CSR.
Practical implications: The analyses show that how CSR is understood strongly shapes related actions. Involving HR in CSR implementation requires allowing initiative and building CSR awareness among both beneficiaries and initiators. The results also indicate a spillover of CSR-related behaviors from private to professional life, suggesting implications for workforce planning, recruitment, and employee development.
Originality: The research indicates the importance of the way CSR is understood as a key factor differentiating an individual's motivation to engage in CSR in the workplace.
Keywords: corporate social responsibility, CSR initiation, engagement in CSR activities, HR department, attitude toward CSR.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Strengthening HR's role as a strategic business partner requires a deeper understanding of organizational expectations and challenges. The growing importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainable development, and ESG (environmental, social, governance) reporting creates new demands for HR. As shapers of organizational culture, HR departments can support transformation by embedding values into HR procedures and by using internal communication and training. A key challenge for both scholars and practitioners is clearly defining CSR and ESG (Dahlsrud, 2008; Meyer, Murray, 2022). Research shows these socially constructed concepts are interpreted and implemented differently across organizations.

This article examines how HR employees' attitudes toward and understanding of CSR influence their CSR-related actions, including engagement and initiative. A study was conducted among 46 HR staff. The first part outlines the HR–CSR relationship, emphasizing HR's role in implementing CSR. The next part presents the research methods and linear regression results, followed by a discussion of the findings, their implications for management practice, and a conclusion.

2. The Role of HR in Implementing the CSR Strategy

The growing pressure to engage in CSR stems from a crisis of trust in business, rising stakeholder expectations, and new regulations, including mandatory ESG reporting (Polish ESG Association, IBRIS, Quality Watch, 2024). Although HR is seen as crucial, its potential in supporting CSR remains underused. One reason is HR's position in organisations, as senior management does not always treat it as a true business partner. In many organisations, CSR is linked mainly to compliance and risk management, and thus is not viewed as strategic (Stahl et al., 2020). Research also shows that HR directors, striving to be seen as strategic advisors, often overlook CSR and sustainability, delegating these areas to communication and external relations departments. Sarvaiya, Ewje, and Arrowsmith (2018) note that the role of HR in CSR depends, on the one hand, on the internal recognition and competences of the HR department and, on the other hand, on the organisational culture. In organisations where the HR department has a strong position and possesses knowledge in the field of sustainable development, it becomes a leader of change, implementing sustainable people management practices and setting directions for linking strategic goals with social goals. In companies where HR is perceived only as an administrative function, CSR initiatives are usually led by other departments (e.g., PR, marketing) and do not permeate people management practices. Although the literature includes publications on employee involvement in CSR (Mirvis, 2012), studies

directly aimed at identifying the motivations and engagement of HR specialists are rare. Parkes and Davis (2013), in their study of HR professionals in the United Kingdom, found that although respondents understand the role of HR in promoting ethics and CSR, they often do not fulfil this responsibility. They more frequently identify with the role of “ethical guardians" while at the same time pointing to barriers that hinder the realisation of this role, such as conflicts between business and ethical roles. As a consequence, despite awareness of misconduct, they often remain silent witnesses to unethical practices. Research conducted in Poland confirms that HR professionals view CSR in terms of ethical values, while at the same time expressing a strong belief in the rightness of CSR activities, regardless of the benefits (or lack thereof) for the company (Klimkiewicz, Staszkiewicz, 2022). This normative notion of CSR, which implies that companies internalize CSR values in terms of obligation and compliance with social values and norms (Basu, Palazzo, 2008), seems significant for determining the individual's participation in CSR related activities.

3. Methods

A study was conducted among 46 participants employed in positions related to the HR function. Data were collected between March and April 2022. A purposive sampling strategy was applied. Participants were intentionally selected as HR specialists, ensuring relevance to the study objectives. Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire administered in paper form; questionnaires were distributed directly to the respondents and completed on paper. The analysis was aimed at verifying the following hypotheses:

H1. Individual normative perception and privet engagement in CSR, as well as perception of the workplace characteristics, jointly account for a significant proportion of the variance in the level of HR employees’ involvement in CSR activities in the workplace.

H2. Individual perception and privet engagement in CSR, as well as perception of the workplace characteristics, jointly account for a significant proportion of the variance in the level of initiation of CSR activities by HR employees in the workplace.

The respondents held various HR-related positions in enterprises and had differing levels of professional and managerial experience. Data were self-reported and collected anonymously to improve response reliability. The questionnaire included questions on attitudes, beliefs, and perceived opportunities for action in CSR. The analysis covered the following variables:

– Engagement in pro-social and environmental activities in the workplace – this scale comprised two indicators assessing respondents’ engagement in CSR activities initiated by the organization.

- Initiation of pro-social and environmental activities in the workplace – this scale comprised two indicators assessing respondents' initiative in implementing CSR activities.
- Normative understanding of CSR – this scale comprised four indicators challenging CSR principles (e.g., acceptance of unfair or unlawful practices) and was reverse-coded so that higher scores indicate stronger internalization of normative corporate obligations.
- Engagement in CSR in private life – this scale comprises seven indicators reflecting the importance of sustainable development and CSR in respondents' everyday lives, including attitudes, consumption choices, and personal engagement.

Given the specific nature of HR work, the possibilities for initiating social and environmental activities in this role were analysed separately, using the following indicators:

- Assessment of the possibilities of initiating activities for the natural environment in the position held.
- Assessment of the possibilities of initiating prosocial activities in the position held. All of the above variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree).

Data were analyzed using PS Imago Pro 10.0 based on total scale scores. Listwise deletion was applied, so only complete cases were included: 43 individuals in the first model and 45 in the second.

4. Results

The study included 46 participants, 6 men, and 40 women. The sample was dominated by middle-aged individuals with varying levels of work experience. Most of the respondents in the studied group worked in large and very large enterprises (Table 1). The largest proportion of respondents reported employment in the manufacturing sector, while other represented sectors included public administration, services, IT, sales, and finance and accounting. Nearly 60% of respondents had no managerial experience, whereas 40% were currently holding or had previously held managerial positions.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the research group

Variable	Category	N	Percentage share
Gender	Men	6	13%
	Women	40	87%
Age [years]	18–25	2	4,3
	26–30	14	30,4%
	31–35	10	21,7%
	36–40	10	21,7%
	41–45	8	17,4%
	46–50	1	2,2%
	50+	1	2,2%
Tenure [years]	<1	0	0
	1–3	4	8,7%
	3–5	9	19,6%
	5–7	6	13,0%
	7–10	8	17,4%
	10–15	12	26,1%
	15–20	3	6,5%
	20+	4	8,7%
Company size [number of employees]	Micro (1–9)	1	2,2%
	Small (10–50)	3	6,5%
	Middle (51–249)	7	15,2%
	Big (250–1000)	13	28,3%
	>1000	21	45,7%

Source: Own elaboration

First, a descriptive analysis was conducted. Table 2 presents the statistics for both models.

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics for the variables under study

	Model 1		Model 2	
Scales	**Mean [N=43]**	**Standard deviation [N=43]**	**Mean [N=44]**	**Standard deviation [N=44]**
Engagement in pro-social and environmental activities in the workplace [CSR ENGA]	3.27	1.26		
Initiation of pro-social and environmental activities in the workplace [CSR INITIATIVE]			3.02	1,22
Normative understanding of CSR [CSR normative]	3.27	1,69	3.35	1,68
Engagement in CSR in private life [CSR private]	3.12	0.91	3.16	0,84
In the position I work in, I can undertake pro-social activities [WORK soc]	3.16	1.43	3.20	1,41
In the position in which I work, I can take actions to reduce the organization's impact on the natural environment [WORK environment]	2,91	1,39	2,91	1,41

Source: Own elaboration

In the next step, a correlation analysis was carried out (Table 3).

Table 3.
Correlations of variables for Model 1 and Model 2

		[CSR INITIATIVE]	[CSR normative]	[CSR private]	[WORK environment]	[WORK soc]	[CSR ENGA]
Model 1	[CSR ENGA]		0.522** N=43	0,382** N=43	0,157 N=43	0,524** N=43	1,000
	[CSR normative]		1,000	0,300* N=43	-0,254* N=43	0,535** N=43	0,522** N=43
	[CSR private]			1,000	0,222 N=43	0,229 N=43	0,382** N=43
	[WORK environment]				1,000	0,211 N=43	0,157 N=43
	[WORK soc]					1,000	0,524** N=43
Model 2	[CSR INITIATIVE]	1,000	-0,368** N=45	0,195 N=45	0,405** N=45	0,106 N=45	
	[CSR normative]		1,000	0,324* N=45	-0,250* N=45	0,525** N=45	
	[CSR private]			1,000	0,176 N=45	0,161 N=45	
	[WORK environment]				1,000	0,184 N=45	
	[WORK soc]					1,000	

Note. **p < 0,01 (two-tailed), *p < 0,05 (two-tailed).

Source: Own elaboration.

The correlation analysis shows that in Model 1, employer-proposed CSR engagement is positively correlated with a normative understanding of CSR, CSR engagement in private life, and a positive assessment of opportunities for prosocial actions at work. A negative correlation appears between the normative understanding of CSR and perceived opportunities to act for the natural environment in one's current position: the stronger respondents' normative CSR beliefs, the less they see chances to reduce environmental harm in their role. In Model 2, a higher assessment of opportunities to reduce negative environmental impact is correlated with greater CSR initiative. However, normative perceptions of CSR are significantly and negatively correlated with such initiative, suggesting that viewing CSR primarily in normative terms reduces one's own CSR initiative.

To test H1, a linear regression analysis was conducted. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 38) = 6.87$, $p < .001$, and explained 42.0% of the variance in CSR engagement ($R^2 = .420$, adjusted $R^2 = .358$). Although the predictors jointly accounted for a significant proportion of variance in the level of engagement in CSR activities proposed by the employer, only one variable reflecting a normative understanding of CSR emerged as a statistically significant predictor: unstandardized coefficient $b = 0.282$ ($SE = 0.129$), standardized coefficient $\beta = 0.379$, $t = 2.181$, $p < .05$. The remaining predictors did not reach the required level of statistical significance, but were included in the model with positive signs. The regression diagnostics did not indicate any violations of the key assumptions. The VIF values for the predictors ranged from 1.23 to 1.97, which falls within acceptable limits for assessing multicollinearity. Similarly, the Durbin–Watson statistic (DW = 1.76) lies within

the acceptable range (1.5–2.5), confirming the absence of substantial autocorrelation of residuals.

The second model, testing H2, was also statistically significant, $F(4, 40) = 6.248$, $p < .001$, with an explained variance of $R^2 = .385$ (adjusted $R^2 = .323$). In contrast to the previously tested model, in Model 2 a larger number of independent variables emerged as significant predictors of CSR initiative-taking. As in Model 1, the variable Normative understanding of CSR was a significant predictor, but in Model 2 the direction of the relationship was negative: unstandardized coefficient $b = -0.461$ (SE = 0.127), standardized coefficient $\beta = -0.633$, $t = -3.643$, $p < .001$. This indicates that a normative understanding of CSR is a factor that reduces initiative aimed at undertaking CSR-related activities in the workplace. Two further variables that significantly explained the initiation of CSR activities were Private engagement in CSR, $b = 0.463$ (SE = 0.199), $\beta = 0.320$, $t = 2.321$, $p < .05$, and Positive evaluation of the opportunities to undertake prosocial activities in one's position, $b = 0.317$ (SE = 0.138), $\beta = 0.364$, $t = 2.288$, $p < .05$. At the stage of correlation analysis, the variable related to the evaluation of opportunities to undertake prosocial activities at the workplace did not show a significant correlation with the dependent variable; however, in the regression analysis it turned out to be a significant positive predictor, which may indicate a suppression effect. This refers to a situation in which a predictor increases the predictive validity (regression weight) of another variable by removing noise, even if the suppressor itself has a low correlation with the dependent variable (Cohen et al., 2013). The regression model diagnostics did not reveal violations of the key assumptions. The VIF values for the predictors ranged from 1.24 to 1.96, and the Durbin–Watson statistic (DW = 2.16) fell within the acceptable range. In contrast, the factor reflecting perceived opportunities to reduce negative environmental impact at work, although significantly positively correlated with the dependent variable, did not reach statistical significance in the full model. The analyses confirmed both hypotheses but also revealed important differences between the models.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal two distinct psychological mechanisms underlying HR professionals' engagement in the domain of CSR. A normative understanding of CSR fosters involvement in activities initiated by the organization, while at the same time being associated with a lower propensity to proactively initiate one's own activities. This indicates that normative knowledge and motivation strengthen prosocial values but differentiate their translation into behavior: they facilitate participation in institutional initiatives, while constraining actions that require individual responsibility. This mechanism may stem from the fact that the development of moral motivation is associated with increasing internalization of norms, which enhances

internal behavioral control and shifts its regulation from the external to the internal level (Reykowski, 1979). As this process unfolds, individuals may begin to adhere to increasingly stringent and self-demanding moral standards, which constitutes a potential side effect of moral autonomization. This explains why a deeply normative understanding of CSR—grounded in a strong sense of moral obligation—may paradoxically inhibit personal initiative and self-directed action. Strong internal control may, in fact, promote caution, risk aversion, and fear of failing to meet one's own, highly demanding standards. A similar effect has been observed in research on moral self-awareness, where a high level of such awareness can lead to a critical evaluation of one's own behavior as insufficient and, consequently, reduce the willingness to undertake self-initiated action (Reynolds, 2008).

At the same time, a normative perception of CSR does not constrain participation in CSR activities proposed by the organization. The literature confirms that a deeper understanding of CSR fosters identification with organizational values, which in turn increases employees' willingness to engage in corporate initiatives (Aguinis, Glavas, 2012). CSR activities initiated by the organization may also be perceived as formal programs that employees regard as coherent with their expectations and meaningful (Mirvis, 2012). From this perspective, knowledge and understanding of the essence of CSR help distinguish substantive initiatives from merely symbolic practices, thereby encouraging participation in such initiatives (Glavas, 2016). The results of the first regression model support this line of reasoning: clearly defined tasks, structures, and accountability frameworks reduce decision-making burden, provide normative legitimation, and decrease the risk of ethical misconduct. In line with the classic concept of action regulation, situational conditions and organizational tasks guide individual behavior, reducing uncertainty and decision conflicts (Tomaszewski, 2002). Bottom-up initiatives, by contrast, require an independent assessment of the value of the goal, the anticipated probability of success, and the assumption of full moral responsibility for the decisions made. The results of the second regression model therefore suggest that, for individuals with high normative standards, taking personal initiative in the CSR domain may generate substantial strain, inhibit spontaneity, and foster withdrawal from action.

6. Practical implications

Research shows that internalizing CSR principles strongly shapes employees' workplace decisions and actions. A normative view of CSR increases participation in company CSR initiatives by enhancing their perceived value. For HR-related roles, it is therefore important to collaborate closely with departments that design and communicate CSR. Effective internal CSR communication promotes employees' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (Dong, Zhang, Ao, 2024). Likewise, integrating CSR into HR practices (e.g., recruitment, training,

development) strengthens engagement by embedding CSR values in organizational culture (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, Romero-Fernández, 2019).

The findings indicate that extra-organizational prosocial and pro-environmental engagement promotes similar actions within organizations, suggesting a transfer of attitudes between private and professional life. Developing identity theory, Stryker and Burke (2000) argue that individuals seek behavioral continuity across life contexts. Recent research highlights a spillover effect, whereby phenomena originating in one domain have consequences in another (Bakker, Demerouti, 2013). Typically examined in work–life relations, this effect has also been linked to the emergence of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) (Erks et al., 2020). It helps explain why people involved in prosocial activities privately are more likely to draw on this experience to initiate similar actions at work. Pollack (2023) adds that this mechanism is bidirectional, as behaviors shaped in professional life also influence private attitudes.

The study shows that employees initiate CSR activities when they feel their role gives them enough autonomy. For organizations, this means that building structures and conditions that support CSR can strongly influence employees' behaviour. Bhatti, Iqbal, Santoro, and Rizzatto (2022) find that perceived organizational support and affective commitment mediate the link between CSR and OCB. When HR promotes a culture focused on social and environmental issues, it increases CSR awareness, facilitates participation in CSR initiatives, and can boost employee engagement. An empowering, autonomous HR environment that supports CSR strengthens individual initiative and helps build a coherent, values‑driven culture. Identifying—already at workforce planning and recruitment—and supporting employees who are highly engaged with environmental and social issues in their private lives introduces natural CSR ambassadors into the organization. This helps HR ensure the authenticity of CSR activities and address concerns about symbolic or superficial practices.

7. Limitations and future research directions

The study was based on a relatively small sample, which limits generalisability. It also relied on self-report measures, which may involve perceptual bias and declarative responses. To better understand the micro-foundations of CSR and related OCB, research on a larger sample is needed to verify effects that here appeared only at the threshold of statistical significance. Future studies should also consider additional individual and contextual factors. The literature suggests that HR specialists' readiness to act may be moderated by other dispositional traits not included in this study, e.g. self-esteem (Szpitalak, Polczyk, 2015), agentic and communal orientations (Szlendak, Wojciszke, 2010), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and hope as a motivational resource (Snyder, 2002) may likewise strengthen the tendency to take initiative.

Research further shows that Big Five traits are important determinants of OCB (Baka, 2016; Chiaburu et al., 2011). This suggests that different personality dispositions may modify the relationship between understanding CSR and workplace activity, both in initiating and engaging in actions and in avoiding them.

8. Summary

The article examines how HR employees' understanding of CSR shapes their behaviour—both their participation in employer-led CSR and their own CSR initiatives. The findings show that a normative view of CSR strongly influences CSR-related behaviours, but its effect varies: it boosts engagement in employer-proposed initiatives while potentially discouraging employees from starting their own. The study also reveals a spillover effect: private-life CSR engagement increases initiative-taking at work. The results confirm the importance of perceived agency at work, with implications for job design and training. Managers aiming to involve HR in CSR strategies—either to raise engagement in existing programmes or encourage employee-led initiatives—should foster a shared organizational understanding of CSR among both target groups and initiators. Establishing a clear, common CSR perspective can increase the likelihood of achieving the organization's sustainable development goals.

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