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Good Deeds Across the Board: How Organisations Can Foster Prosocial Behaviour Across Domains

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Abstract

There have been increasing discussions about the role that businesses play in mobilising their employees' and customers' prosocial behaviours to deliver social impact. However, previous studies tend to focus on one social issue and in one context. Our paper looks at businesses as employers, enablers of technology, and producers of goods and services, and showcases the triggers of and the boundary conditions for how organisations can affect prosocial behaviours across different domains.

Keywords: Prosocial behaviour, Employee experience, Technology consumption

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Good Deeds Across the Board: How Organisations Can Foster Prosocial Behaviour Across Domains

James has recently joined a new company. At work, James is given many opportunities to bring in new ideas and organise his work. James feels empowered to be his best self, not only at work but also outside of work. He actively participates in various voluntary work for his community. What James experiences with his company indirectly motivates him to engage in daily prosocial acts.

After work, Mary shops at Amazon Go. She enters the autonomous store, grabs what she wants, and exits without interacting with anyone. Amazon sends her a receipt and charges her automatically after each shopping trip. Shopping has been very efficient, and Mary sometimes feels that she does not need anyone else to function well. The company (i.e., Amazon) that Mary interacts with as a customer indirectly alters her need for establishing a meaningful social interaction with other humans.

What James and Mary experience are not uncommon. Life for anyone is a set of seamless experiences of switching between different roles, being employee, consumer, community member, and so on. One's experience in any of these roles may alter one's social engagement with others in subsequent daily life encounters. Such a cohesive connection of individuals' experiences in different life domains leads to an intriguing question: Can organisations, as facilitators and creators of various life experiences, mobilise their employees and customers' prosocial behaviours for the greater good?

Organisations are under increasing pressure to manage their social impact. Many are ramping up their focus on corporate social responsibility initiatives (CSR), such as championing women's rights, protecting the environment, or attempting to obliterate poverty on local, national, and global levels. These CSR initiatives are manageable and visible to the public, and much research has discussed their outcomes (i.e., corporate direct social impact). On the other hand, organisations may also indirectly exert social impact via influencing their employees' and customers' experience. Research, however, has not discussed this corporate indirect social impact extensively; and organisations may not be fully aware of the various ways they accidentally facilitate or impede social welfare.

Addressing this gap in the current CSR research and responding to the organisations' need for better management of their social impact, this paper showcases, through original research, how the experiences that organisations create for their employees and customers could indirectly foster or inhibit these stakeholders' engagement in behaviours with social impact. We focus on employees and customers as the two stakeholders whose prosocial engagements are indirectly influenced by organisations as these stakeholders tend to interact with organisations on a daily basis. Their experiences are, thus, constantly shaped by the organisations.

In the following, we discuss various instances where organisations indirectly alter their employees' and customers' prosociality. We follow this with a final discussion on how organisations should manage their social impact holistically across stakeholders and domains.

From Employee Experience to Social Impact

In their quest to become better citizens, businesses engage in social impact activities and embed these activities within the company culture. In this discussion, we focus specifically on employee volunteering – one of the activities that best delivers on the challenge that what is good for the community can also be good for the business. While volunteering has

an immediate positive impact on addressing social issues, it also helps businesses recruit and retain talent, especially young, socially-minded talent.

Creating volunteering opportunities is a step in the right direction, yet one that does not lead to significant impact if only a few employees volunteer or if those who volunteer engage only sporadically. To build better volunteering programs, organisations need to pay more attention to employees' work-related experiences and to how these experiences affect employees' prosocial behaviour, including their propensity to volunteer. Studying the link between workplace experiences and prosocial behaviours, we uncovered three areas in which organisations can intervene to increase their employees' participation in activities with social impact, such as volunteering.

Striving to improve employees' satisfaction with work experiences

In the past decade, levels of satisfaction with job experience have seen a downward trend, with negative consequences for organisational engagement (e.g., Gallup 2020). Furthermore, Millennials, soon to become the largest segment at work, report job satisfaction levels lower than other employees (SHRM 2014). The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has further accentuated these trends.

In addition to being profitable, by paying attention to job satisfaction, companies can keep their talents and, at the same time, create social impact. In the research that we conducted on employees in the UK, we showed that employees who are more satisfied with their job experiences are more likely to engage in volunteering activities in the community and volunteer more frequently (Lup and Booth 2019). There is a reason behind this: Individuals' satisfied experience in one domain (e.g., work) is a psychological resource that individuals can deploy in other domains (e.g., family and community-related domains). Furthermore, employees who have meaningful work experiences are more motivated to search for new but similarly satisfying experiences outside the workplace. Meanwhile, employees dissatisfied with their jobs are more likely to engage in behaviours that protect them from further resource losses rather than pursuing actions that would help others. As a result, dissatisfied employees are less likely to engage in prosocial volunteering behaviours.

Increasing management practices that encourage autonomy and decision making and reduce or eliminate practices that stifle employees' voices

Hierarchical decision-making, tight monitoring of work processes, and micromanagers are part and parcel of many workplaces. These practices might be inconvenient, but hardly any business would suspect that low levels of control over how employees carry out their job may affect employees' engagement in prosocial behaviour in a subsequent, private life setting. However, our research shows that contexts that reduce people's control over their tasks negatively affect their motivation to engage in subsequent prosocial behaviour, such as volunteering (Gagne 2003, Lup 2020).

How does job autonomy affect employees' prosocial behaviour and civic engagement? First, employees, who are actively involved in shaping their work and who can decide how to best structure their tasks, develop decision-making skills and tolerance toward uncertainty, skills very much needed in solving complex social issues (e.g., Verba et al. 1995, Pateman 1970). Addressing such issues is often the primary purpose of volunteering activities. Second, social-psychologists (e.g. Ryan & Deci 2000) show that when individuals' basic needs for autonomy and competence are not fulfilled, individuals aim to compensate for such unfulfilled needs by licensing behaviours that are self-centred (e.g., acquiring a status and individual financial gain). The more self-centred an employee becomes, the lower their inclination to engage in helping others at work or outside the workplace is. On the

other hand, when employees feel that organisations and their management trust them and do not impose strict control over their work, they are more effective and confident. This sense of confidence is beneficial at work; more importantly, it empowers individuals to seek civic activities outside the workplace.

Giving serious consideration to working from home requests

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, research has shown that, for many employees, working from home increases productivity. However, even when the benefits were clear, many managers were (and still are) reluctant to allow their employees to work outside the office.

Is it possible that by not giving due consideration to working from home requests, organisations not only undermine employees' productivity and morale but also affect their likelihood to engage in prosocial activities in communities?

In our research (Lup & Booth 2019), we found that commuting time has a detrimental effect on volunteering and that those, who commute longer, not only are less likely to take up volunteering activities in their communities but also volunteer less frequently than those with little or no commute (i.e., working from home). There are at least two reasons behind this finding. First, employees see high commuting time as stress-inducing, primarily since long commuting is associated with time lost in traffic and sub-standards conditions on public transportation at peak hours. Because stress depletes personal resources, it causes commuting employees to engage in activities that rebuild personal resources at the expense of activities oriented toward others. Second, employees with long journeys to work tend to become less attached to their local community and therefore feel less willing to engage in prosocial behaviour that benefits this community.

From Consumption of Technology to Prosociality

Besides working, another essential aspect of human life is consumption. Through consumption, consumers come in contact with businesses. Moreover, through providing products and services to consumers and facilitating the consumption process, businesses influence the consumer experience.

In recent years, technology has dramatically transformed how companies do business. New technologies have permeated the infrastructure and systems on which businesses are built, delivering values to production and procurement and creating new products and services. Products with smart, autonomous features are abundant, from smartwatches, smartphones, self-driving cars to smart homes fully equipped with automated gadgets. Self-service stores and human-less services are also ubiquitous, with examples including Amazon Go Grocery in the US, Henn-na robot hotel in Japan, nursing homes using companion robots in the Netherlands, and restaurants using drone waiters and robot bartenders in Singapore. Consumers are getting used to consuming more technologies and interacting less with other humans. Apparently, businesses play a significant role in shaping this new reality.

Technology-induced social disconnectedness

Some have expressed a concern that technology-enabled efficiency eventually causes social disconnection (i.e., disconnection between people). Everyone has the same amount of time per day; increased human-to-machine interaction means interaction with other humans, be it at work, in a store, or at home, is sacrificed. Increased isolation and overreliance on technology that lacks emotions have created a wall between people worldwide.

How does social disconnection, due to overuse of technology, affect consumers' prosocial behaviour? Our research, which was conducted on consumers across countries (i.e., US, UK, China, and Singapore), reveals a negative impact of automation on prosocial behaviour. Consumers who experienced automation (e.g., an autonomous bus, a robot restaurant, or a self-service store) exhibited lower engagement in prosocial behaviours, such as charity donation, volunteering, or behavioural helping (Hoang, Liuyan, and Ng 2021). Interestingly, such a negative effect of automation on prosocial behaviour can be attenuated or even reversed when consumers are reminded of the benefits of social distancing, such as reducing the spread of Covid-19 or removing unfavourable social judgment regarding the consumption of embarrassing products (e.g., condoms, medications for sexually transmitted diseases, etc.). While technology may cause social disconnection, such social disconnection may be beneficial in certain contexts and may serve to enable more prosocial engagement subsequently. Depending on how and where businesses choose to apply automation technology in serving their customers, they can foster or inhibit prosociality.

Consumer-technology interaction as a new type of social interaction

On the other hand, human-to-machine interaction can be seen as a new type of social interaction (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2008a-b). Consumers often attribute emotions to and derive social experiences from their interactions with technological products (Waytz, Gray, Epley, and Wegner 2010). Such a tendency of treating products as if they were human is more profound when products are designed with artificial intelligence and other smart features. By incorporating advanced technologies into their products, businesses can transform the relationship between consumers and products into a more social one.

How does the social aspect of consumer-product relationships affect consumers' relationship with other humans? Our research shows that as consumers treat a product in a social way, they are less likely to share the product with other people (i.e. lending the product to a neighbour or participating in a peer-to-peer sharing platform; Hoang et al., 2018). Consumers are willing to sacrifice their relationships with other humans (i.e., by not sharing) in order to 'protect' the product with which they have formed a social connection. On the one hand, sharing provides tremendous economic and social benefits; it fosters community, saves resources, and "alleviates societal problems such as hyper-consumption, pollution, and poverty" (Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen 2016). On the other hand, the development of technology, which enables products to be smarter, more autonomous, and more humanlike, seem to pose a new impediment to sharing. Businesses may need to carefully consider how to design smart products and how to communicate product smart features to consumers to avoid consumers' over-attachment to the product and to facilitate the sharing of it.

Shaping new perceptions of the self with technology

In addition to changing consumers' relationship with products and other humans, technology, especially self-tracking technology, has changed how consumers interact with the self. Self-tracking, especially tracking of one's physiological activities such as steps, heartbeat, blood pressure, and calories consumed, is on its way to becoming a new social norm (Lupton, 2014). Wearable devices such as Fitbit, Garmin, or Apple Watch and mobile applications such as Apple Health and MyFitnessPal have allowed for the interior of the physical body, which was previously undetectable by the human senses, to become "visible, knowable, and thereby manageable" to individuals (Lupton 2013). This has significantly changed how consumers see their physical body and how they manage it.

What could a social consequence of consumers' changing their perception of the self (i.e., as a result of their interaction with technology be? Our research documents an unexpected

consequence of physiological self-tracking on a form of prosocial behaviour—organ donation (Hoang and Ng 2021). We found that physiological self-tracking facilitates a greater acceptance of organ donation. This happens because self-tracking leads consumers to view their body as a conglomeration of multiple fragmented parts rather than as a singular inseparable whole. Notably, encouraging people to support organ donation is not an easy endeavour. Although many people profess to support organ donation, organ donors' percentage remains low worldwide (less than 50 donors per million of the population; IRODaT 2020). Self-tracking technologies may serve as a means for addressing the current acute shortage of donor organs; and businesses, which enable this technology, can contribute a critical role in promoting self-tracking practices and facilitating organ donation.

Final Discussion: From Corporate Social Impact to Collective Social Impact

At first glance, the proposition that what organisations do (or do not do) affects other domains of life, specifically individuals' prosociality, might appear far-fetched. The current paper, however, demonstrates that life spheres are not hermetically sealed from each other, and that what individuals experience in the work and consumption spheres affects their prosocial behaviour elsewhere. As such, organisations that create and influence individuals' experience at work and during consumption indirectly influence individuals' prosocial behavior in various ways. We show that organisations, which create high job satisfaction, empower their employees to take control at work, and enable their employees to work from home, indirectly contribute to their employees' higher engagement in general prosocial volunteering. We also show that companies, which deploy automation in their service delivery, produce products with smart features, or facilitate the self-tracking practice, indirectly influence their customers' prosocial behaviors in various way. As such, organisations, who wish to make a positive social contribution, need to be aware of not only their direct social impact (i.e., through CSR initiatives) but also the indirect social impact that they exert via influencing the experiences of their employees and customers.

Should organisations focus more on their direct or indirect social impact? While shouldering much responsibility, companies cannot solve complex social challenges alone. Prior studies have proposed a business model that emphasises mutual stakeholder relationships (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2020). This model specifies that the interactions among stakeholders, such as an organisation, its employees, customers, and partners, can lead to value co-creation, which aligns corporate social ambitions and stakeholder expectations, resulting in higher collective social impact. For example, companies can make positive social contributions by producing goods in a sustainable way (i.e., a CSR initiative), and customers can contribute by supporting these companies. This way, companies deliver positive social value while receiving consumers' support to achieve their business goals. This model works under the assumption that companies receive support from consumers for showing their goodwill through direct social engagements. However, in real life, companies who engaged in social causes, especially those not directly related to the companies' core business, often face societal scepticism. Consumers may think that companies engage in social acts for financial gain rather than for the general good, thus do not support the companies. CSR, therefore, does not always generate high collective benefits for the company and society.

Even when companies, which engage in CSR, gain consumer support, this does not always bring about positive collective social impact. Prior research shows how individuals attribute social responsibilities between themselves and the organisations with which they interact influences their engagement in subsequent social initiatives (Harvey et al., 2014). If

individuals believe that by supporting companies who engage in CSR, they have made a considerable social impact, they are likely to feel absolved from behaving responsibly in further interactions. Research has referred to this practice as 'moral licensing' (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015). Moral licensing raises the possibility that when companies are intentionally involved in certain social initiatives, their employees and customers may refer to such initiatives as an excuse to escape social responsibilities in other domains. Moral licensing, thus, reduces the collective social impact that companies make through engaging in CSR.

Although businesses have typically enabled social impact through direct CSR actions, our discussions regarding social scepticism and moral licensing demonstrate that engaging in CSR may not be the best way to create collective social impact. We claim that besides CSR, there are more ways to make a social impact, specifically by mobilising the prosocial behaviour of their key stakeholders, namely their employees and customers. Specifically, our research shows that by creating positive employment experiences or embedding technology in the products and services in the right way, organisations can facilitate their employees and customers to engage in various prosocial acts. Since the intentional organisation-led social initiatives may often end up being scrutinised by the public or licensing their stakeholders to behave less morally in other contexts, it may be more efficient for companies to create a collective social impact through indirect pathways.

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