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What's the Purpose? Employee Perspectives on Being 'Purpose-driven' in Hybrid Organisations

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Abstract

The notion of being purpose-driven and wishes for doing good in society has gained increased attention. This is mirrored in the upsurge of hybrid organisations balancing both social and financial value. Seen through the theoretical lenses of alternative organising purpose rests on autonomy, solidarity and responsibility. The article investigates how these dimensions are outlived and perceived through a case study. The main findings are: 1) societal responsibility is enacted differently in respect to multiple purposes, 2) organisational purpose is also nurturing reflections on autonomy and solidarity, 3) being 'alternative' might diminish negative organisational and societal affairs, but may obscure negative work conditions.

Key words

Hybrid organisations, Alternative organising, Purpose-driven, Social Enterprises, Employee perceptions

Introduction

Across research disciplines an acknowledged challenge is the increase in 'wicked' problems, that is, complex societal and global issues that call for cross-disciplinary and cross-sectorial answers. Hence, many businesses have embraced the rhetoric of the 'triple bottom line' in the face of growing pressure from governments and communities to account for their social,

environmental and economic performance (Wright and Nyberg 2015). In addition, and as a response to the economic crisis in 2008, social and solidarity economy has entered the scene as a way to transform society by offering an alternative to prevailing understandings and practices regarding e.g., organising, production and innovation (Moulaert and McCullum 2019). This had led to an upsurge in social enterprises, which from the outset stress the creation of social value over financial value. Moreover, they are characterised by managerially combining logics, practices and resources from each of the three traditional sectors: the private, the public and the non-profit sector. Thus, social enterprises are widely referred to as hybrid organisations and are seen as triggers for the rise of a fourth sector of organisations based on hybridity (Yaari, Blit-Cohen and Savaya 2021). In this manner, hybridity refers both to the organisational form and/or to the objectives and management of achieving both financial and social goals – with an emphasis on the latter (Dacin, Dacin and Tracy 2011; Doherty, Haugh and Lyon 2014).

Literature on hybrid organisations has mainly focused on conceptualisations (Doherty, Haugh and Lyon 2014) or managerial implications of balancing a dual purpose (Al-Taji, Adel and Bengo 2019; Yaari, Blit-Cohen and Savaya 2021), but less on employee perspectives relative to work conditions and perceptions of being purpose driven. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that working within the social economy is of an inherently different nature relative to social motivations, values and expectations than mainstream businesses (Amin 2009). Moreover, research on organisational purpose from an individual perspective has mainly focused on how individuals may internalise the organisational purpose (Dupret and Pultz 2021) – based on the assumption that if employees incorporate or mirror the organisational purpose in their own viewpoint, it will give more meaning to and increase their efforts (Rey, Bastons and Sotok 2019). However, understanding purpose from an employee perspective and how such social

responsibilities are related both inside and outside organisational borders (Caringal-Co and Hechanova 2018; Cruz, Alves and Delbridge 2017; Pfeffer 2010), are still somewhat underexplored.

Therefore, to clarify the link between perceptions of purpose and hybrid organising the authors of the article argue that the principles of alternative organising are relevant to apply - as they offer a theoretical framework to unfold and concretise key aspects of what is meant by creating social value.

Hybrid organisations are by some scholars conceptualized as ‘alternative’ ways of organising (Grant 2017). Alternative has in this context at least two meanings. One that is neutral, reflecting that it is ‘not typical’ and one that is strongly normative in the sense that the organisational rationale differs in one or more ways from that of a ‘traditional’ organisation or enterprise. The organisational principles in such alternative forms of organising are designed to reflect values connected to ideals of democracy, ethics, individual needs for fulfilment, social or environmental sustainability and political influence (Pestoff 2014; Andersen et al. 2021). Parker et al. (2014) further clarifies what the ‘alternative’ of alternative organising entails – based on the distinction between ‘conventional’ organisations in which *‘decisions are made by those with power and status’*, and organisations in which a democratic and slow process of decision-making is an aim in and by itself (Parker et al. 2014, 35). Parker et al. thus propose three alternative organisational principles, which reflect a desire to create fundamental changes to the functioning of organisations, but also to society at large: autonomy, solidarity and responsibility.

Therefore, to better understand how employees perceive, understand and relate to the notion of being purpose driven when employed in hybrid organisations, we apply the theoretical

principles of alternativity to answer the following research question: *How is the notion of purpose and being ‘alternative’ perceived and enacted among employees in hybrid organisations?*

The research question is addressed through a holistic multiple case-study (Yin 2014) analysing three different hybrid organisations: an employee-owned cooperative, a non-profit organisation and a for-profit organisation based on partner ownership. The organisations have approached the strong commitments to value-driven purposes in diverse ways; agile and democratic organising, ensuring collaboration with multiple stakeholders and as the organisational form itself: being employee-owned. As such the cases at hand will act as backdrop for exploring the employee perspectives on ‘purpose’ in relation to the organisational dimensions of hybridity.

Theoretical Lenses

In the following sections, we will dive into the analytical framework of the study to provide definitions that will be used in delimiting and analysing the empirical material from the case study. The study was highly abductive, going back and forth between analytical concepts and empirical insights, thus the key analytical concepts were derived from data to get a deeper understanding of what it means to be employed in different forms of hybrid organisations. Therefore, we first present the notion of being purpose-driven and how this relates to both the individual and the collective, and second, and subsequently we dive into the concept and dimensions of alternative organising.

Being Purpose-driven

For decades organisational and social psychological scholars have been working with conceptualising purpose and value driven organisations (Grant 2017), and the literature draws on purpose both understood in an individualistic and an organisational sense.

Organisational purpose is related to strategic considerations, based on the assumption that if employees can incorporate the organisational purpose in their own viewpoint, it gives higher meaning to their efforts. The impact of working explicitly with purpose to affect the individual worker, is thus founded on the following logic: *“When companies are true to their purpose, ordinary employees can do extraordinary things”* (Rey, Bastons and Sotok 2019, 5). This is in congruence with a classical management logic where the strategically defined purpose is to be communicated to the individual employee with the prerequisite that the individual employee will identify with the overall formulation of that same purpose. With the internalization process, individual employees conduct not just simple tasks, but experience that they contribute to a higher cause through their work (Rey, Bastons and Sotok 2019). This individual perspective on purpose has also been the focus of White et al. (2017), but with a more distinct focus on organisations as first and foremost comprised of individuals. Hence, the focus changes from how organisations can internalize an organisational purpose among employees, to how the subjective value commitments and self-actualisation of the employees frame the organisation itself. White et al. argue that this more employee-centric perspective, where purpose and performance go hand-in-hand, is somehow missing in literature on purpose-driven organisations (White et al. 2017).

Following the points from White et al. imagining organisational purpose to be neutrally transferred to employees’ personal purpose needs to come with some reservation – as this is argued to work badly for two reasons: 1) managing tensions between current changes in external surroundings and the technological development and 2) the personal purpose of

independent workers is likely to be more diverse and even different from a strategically defined vision of purpose. In the same vein purpose is not presumed as a stable one-on-one transfer (from the organisation to the individual employee) or as being based on motivation that is purely individual (Reedy, King and Coupland 2016). On the contrary, some scholars stress that individual employees to an increasing extent define their own purpose focusing on more purposeful living as well as a shift toward collectivistic values (Grant 2017; Dupret and Pultz 2021; Andersen et al. 2021).

Another aspect of redefining purpose into an orientation that is more collective and sustainable has to do with the notion of purpose, as not only related to economic growth of the organisation itself, but to a broader definition of doing good in society (Rey, Bastons and Sotok 2019; White et al. 2017). But in spite of this greater inclusion of sustainability in the definition of organisations' purpose, there is still a primary focus on the output of the organisation and not on the human factor - or what is also called social sustainability i.e., well-being, equality and solidarity within the organization (Dupret 2020). Rather, management and organisation studies have looked at the possible links between profitability and sustainability as well as the factors that cause organisations to pursue different sustainability strategies (Ambec and Lanoie 2008). Still, the concerns highlighted are mostly directed to the consequences of economic development and resource exploitation and less on the consequences for employees' health and well-being (Pfeffer 2010). Therefore, it becomes apparent to turn the gaze towards alternative ways of organising to better understand the interplay between collective and individual purpose and the organising in itself.

Alternative organising

New social movements and their alternative organising practices have received increasing attention (Fournier 2008; Parker, Fournier and Reedy 2007; Reedy and Learmonth 2009).

Engagement with such movements is seen as an important part of critical organisation studies (Spicer and Böhm 2007; Willmott 2008; Zald and Lounsbury 2010), and it is argued that the emerging predominance of immaterial labour will provide a further impetus to a shift away from traditional work organisations and towards self-organising networks (Reedy, King and Coupland 2016). The notion ‘alternative’ is in literature and practice approached as both alternative 1) relative to organising, and 2) due to its orientation towards a purpose attuned to human and environmental needs (Parker et al. 2014).

The former is referring to radical reinvented organisations and organisational practices. They are still fairly novel, creative and untried, and as such different from those to which a part of, or the whole, society is accustomed (Parker, Fournier and Reedy 2007). These alternative organisations are often getting inspiration from the ‘digital natives’ which are organisations that came into existence with and as a result of the new technologies. Such organisational forms are characterized by a fundamentally different way of work organisation that is *“more agile, structured in project mode, more open on to an ecosystem, and much more efficient, in particular with regard to the spread of innovation: open space, co-working sites, etc.”* (Mettling in Degryse 2016a,17). The latter promotes itself as a counter movement to traditional organisations; namely ways of employment and organizing with a primary focus on equal distribution of goods and profit through democratised decision-making processes, and organisational models such as social economic enterprises and cooperatives (Eurofond 2015). These types of organisations are alternative in the sense that they are purpose-driven and inspired by new ways of organising that support values based on (social) sustainability. Frequently, the organisations are experimenting with horizontal hierarchies, they redefine the role of stakeholders to equal relationships, and they work with participatory methods in design and production development processes. As a response to the technological and global

development and the extensive call for organisations to take responsibility in terms of sustainability, such ‘alternative’ organisations, or forms of organising, can be framed as:

- Various new ways of employment within the field of knowledge work that challenge and help re-invent ways of organising (Degryse 2016b).
- New ways of organising focusing not only on product and services, but also on the processes in which they are produced (Parker, Fournier and Reedy 2007).
- Being based on principles of autonomy, solidarity and responsibility (Parker et al. 2014).

Dimensions of alternative organising

In the context of this article especially the principles of alternativity (autonomy, solidarity and responsibility) identified by Parker et al. are applied in the forthcoming analysis. These three dimensions are especially suitable in the context of the presented study as they contain both an organisational and an individual dimension. Autonomy relates first and foremost to individual autonomy and is as such linked to individual freedom to make choices about how to live one’s life within a certain social system (Parker et al. 2014). Solidarity refers to the individual’s duty to others, that is, the collective. Inherently are ethical concerns and hence solidarity is both about how we as humans are together in the world, but also how we want to be as such prospectively. Parker et al. (2014) stress that these two dimensions, the individual and the collective, are to be seen as co-produced encompassing both freedom ‘to’ and freedom ‘from’ (Parker et al. 2014, 37). Lastly, responsibility denotes the responsibility to ensure future conditions for the well-being of the individual and the collective. Hence responsibility implies a concern for future generations, herein the organisational arrangements that we create – e.g. work places. The three principles of being alternative are to be understood as interrelated and as a mutual conditioning of alternative organising, while also implying a normative stand

insofar ‘alternative’ is not only different, but in addition; ‘better’ (Parker et al. 2014). But, to what degree the principles are to be endorsed proportionately is a scholarly debate, which is mirrored in the different approaches to and foci relative to each principle. Just, De Cock and Shaefer (2021) pinpoint how autonomy has mainly been explored from the perspective of alternative organising as offering spaces for individual self-expression to counter alienating consequences of work conditions in the era of capitalism. Solidarity is mostly approached by scholars focusing on the specific form of organising; democratic, cooperatives etc., and responsibility is a primary concern among scholars concentrating on alternative organising as means to ensure ecological sustainability as opposed to the consequences of cooperative capitalism (Just, De Cock and Shaefer 2021, 92).

These different theoretical angles on the ‘alternative’ of alternative organising still rest on the same ground; that alternative organising offers a frame and a platform for discussing potential future visions of how to warrant sustainable ecological, social and economic objectives (Parker and Parker 2017).

Methodology

To empirically explore the research question, a holistic multiple case study has been conducted (Yin 2014). The case study is holistic since there is one unit of analysis, that is, employee perspectives on being purpose-driven when employed in hybrid organisations, and multiple since three different case organisations illustrate various contexts of the phenomenon under scrutiny. The case study was part of a research project investigating socially innovative

knowledge work¹. The field work has been conducted over a period of three years; from fall 2018 to winter 2020.

To obtain as nuanced an understanding as possible a main sample criterion was to ensure organisations with differing hybrid characteristics. Based on the often referred to ‘Social enterprise hybrid spectrum’ (Alter 2007), three Danish cases positioned within the continuum were chosen.

Figure 1: Social enterprise hybrid spectrum

Figure 1 to be inserted here

Moreover, the organizations selected were all compliant to the selection criteria of the project, which were:

1. The organisation consists primarily of knowledge work(ers). As a minimum the section that participates in the research project deals with analytically and independent working tasks).
2. The organisation faces at least one of the following problems in relation to the future of work: a) new technologies with associated organisational and personal challenges, b) extensive precarious work and/or significant inequality in the employees' terms and opportunities, and c) work intensification, e.g., as a result of workflow reorganization, expansion of areas of responsibility and/or stress.

Case 1 is a digital bureau, which works explicitly for a democratic way of organising and stress people over finances, while also having conventional profit maximation goals. Hence, the case can be analysed as a ‘socially responsible business’. Case 2 is a non-profit foundation, which can be positioned as a ‘non-profit with income generating activities’ – since it has established a niche business to ensure financial and social value to the organisation. Case 3 is a consultancy firm based on democratic ownership. The case is a ‘social enterprise’ due to its establishment

¹ <https://www.futureknowledgework.com>

as an answer to societal challenges of non-sustainable work lives in the consultancy industry alongside its focus on generating social value. Moreover, the case organisations of the study mix elements, value systems and action logics of various sectors of society, that is, the public sector, the private sector and the third sector (Johanson and Vakkuri 2017).

The explicit focus on social purpose over financial gains, besides the mentioned characteristics, position the three organisations within the social entrepreneurial field in Denmark (where the term social enterprise does not merely refer back to a legal entity), and they are all, relative to organising and purpose, highlighted as inspirational. Moreover, the employees of the case organisations are mainly knowledge workers, which in a Danish context accounts for approximately 15% of the work force (Andersen, Hartung and Kongshøj 2019). It is argued that knowledge workers are vulnerable in specific ways in the current job market; on the one hand their competences are highly requested, but on the other hand these same competences, a high degree of independence and autonomy, may lead to work intensification and poor wellbeing directly connected with the increased complexity of individualised responsibility (Reedy, King and Coupland 2016; Eurofond 2016; Eurofond 2020). As such the cases are somehow critical since it can be argued that employees' experience of what is at stake in the three organisations has strategic importance in better understanding how organisational purpose is translated into every day working lives in hybrid organisations, and moreover that the findings of the cases most likely will be identified in similar organisational contexts (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Cases and data material

Case 1: Reload

In 2010 the digital bureau Reload was established. The company offers digital solutions and specialises in agile technologies and processes. Reload engages 23 employees of which six are

partners. The organisation is based on a somewhat democratic hierarchy with a high degree of joint decision-making reflecting the purpose statement, which is to create an environment that spurs a positive difference not only to the organisation, but also to others.

Case 2: The Roskilde Festival Charity Society

The Roskilde Festival Charity Society (RF) has since 1971 organized the annual Roskilde Festival event that is the second largest music festival in Europe. RF is a non-profit organisation and donate the entire profit after each festival to humanitarian purposes. The administration consists of approximately 80 paid employees and 1000 volunteers besides mobilising 30.000 volunteers during the running of the festival. The organisation works explicitly with a sustainability approach comprising social, environmental, artistic and economic sustainability.

Case 3: Analyse & Tal

Analyse & Tal (A&T), was established in 2014 as an employee-owned cooperative. Currently there are 18 full time worker-owners situated in Copenhagen, Aarhus and in Oslo, Norway. The company offers analyses and evaluations, primarily based on quantitative data. At the core is a wish to support and create a more democratic and just society, which is also the argument for their democratic way of organising; based on equal salary and ‘one employee, one vote’. The company is legally formed as a limited liability company.

Table 1 gives an overview of data material collected in each case.

Table 1 to be inserted here

Analytical strategy

The data material has been subject to a cross-case analysis (Yin 2014), focusing on different aspects of how alternative organising influences knowledge workers thriving in the context of their specific organisational challenges. Therefore, the comparison of each case vis-à-vis the other cases is of key interest in the analytical process: *‘What this means is that, because there are several, each individual case is less important in itself than the comparison each offers with the others’* (Thomas 2011, 141). Thus, the comparative element is not to be understood as representing a sample of the specific phenomenon, but rather as a way to delve deeper by analysing the cases in their entirety based on the shared research question.

In the analytical process a research team of eight researchers reflected upon and discussed; first, what was at stake to the interviewees, among informants in focus groups and at observations, and how it was articulated and expressed. The data material was systematically processed through the use of Nvivo12². The development of analytical categories was done from synthesising empirical material into themes juxtaposing existing research within studies on hybrid organisations and alternative organising. The analytical points of analysis were presented and discussed with staff and management from the three companies and adjusted accordingly. In turn the research group was engaged in an iterative process of cross-reading the different organisational documentation on purpose, i.e. company websites, year reports and overall organisational strategy papers. Together with the accounts from employees on their experience of work conditions and perceptions of purpose, this led to a number of themes summing up the key elements in the data set of each case. Finally, the links and patterns across the three case companies were identified and the following three overall analytical themes were derived going back and forth between employee perspectives in the data and the theoretical

² NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software package.

framework: 1) The notion of purpose, 2) Alternative – how? and, 3) The ‘good work life’ as a social value.

Analysis

In the following the analytical findings based on the main themes identified in data are presented.

The notion of purpose

Employees express that all three organisations are strongly driven by pursuing values, however, these are materialised and build around slightly different practices and narratives, both internally and externally. In relation to the IT-consultancy company, Reload, their purpose statement is as follows: “Continuously creating and improving an open environment, which constitutes the framework for and freedom for professional and personal development, so that we together can make a positive difference for ourselves and thus also for others”. These values are translated into organisational practices where for example customers are invited into frequent team meetings to discuss the progression of the project. Likewise, customers are named partners to signify the equality of the relation. Further, personal and social relations are practiced through sharing of professional and leisure interests on their online ‘flowdock’ channels, and narratives of different aspects (than core professional competencies) are presented on their publicly accessible profiles. Office spaces are designed as cosy living rooms, and software programmers are working in the lounge wearing slippers, as if at home. The high valuation of honesty and transparency spurs a moral commitment and organisational practice where collaborating with customers is based on principles of shared responsibility.

Here we are actually trying to say: Listen, you can't get that for a million. There's no way, but we really want to help you, and do this with you, and we really want to be with you all the way,' and I just love that, Software developer, Reload

The commitment to honesty as a central purpose is thus both expressed as a brand in the overall vision of Reload, but is also embedded in the daily practices and the self-understanding of the employees.

In respect to RF the overall organisational purpose is officially: 'To support initiatives for children and youth and to support humanitarian and cultural organisations'. Through their donations and collaborations, they encourage a more equal society, and the visions of the organisation address all aspects of sustainability; cultural, social and environmental. In practice this means that employees, volunteers and stakeholders together develop the strategies and concrete projects around for example inclusion and diversity, accessibility to the festival for people that are impaired, and ensuring scenes for art-talks and art-activism. The sustainability agenda is embedded in the working tasks, but the personal purpose and commitment is also related to social relations and collaborative processes, herein a strong sense of community:

One thing is the politically correct, our common good purpose; that we help change for young people... My tradition is that every year, on one of the last days of the big event, I stand in front of the big stage and weep for the sake of everything we have created and built together... It's so wild, Employee, RF

Thus, while the sustainability agenda and the aim to support young people through humanitarian and cultural projects is important, the sense of community in the actual experience of the shared enjoyment of the result of shared work, might be as strong.

In A&T the overall organisational purpose is expressed as the urge to: ‘create a more democratic and just society’. At an organisational level they have agreed to give all employees shared ownership, equal remuneration and fairly strict procedures of shared decision-making processes that they have developed together; not only about how to conduct projects but concerning all aspects of the company, including how to use the profit, and how to reinvest it. The methodologies in A&T are not particularly inclusive. They do not work with participatory governance or participatory design processes as in RF and Reload, but the personal purpose is strongly related to the organisational purpose to live out the ambition of more sustainable, just and democratic work lives. They engage in writing media posts and lobbying about building cooperatives, where they for example insist on not having long working hours despite working as consultants.

So, the feeling of creating responsible companies, that are brought into the world for the sake of the employees, to give people lives that are beautiful and which produces something good... It is another motivation that drives people here; to respond critically to customers, like: these customers might pay an arm and a leg, but they are truly bad for our work environment,
Worker-owner, A&T

In sum, the aspect of bringing the organisational purpose close to the actual working processes and social dimension is prevalent in all three organisations. The sense of social identity, the sense of belonging and the work commitment is high, and they all have an outspoken idea of

what is of importance relative to social sustainability (e.g. fairness, equality and solidarity inside their own organisation). The nuance has to do with what the purpose is translated into, in the organisational practices. The overall organisational value in Reload is closely related to creating a business where the technological development has forced the organisation to scrutinise new ways of organising, while remaining focused on the human factor and thriving among employees. In RF the overall purpose is both about social and cultural sustainability, and employees do engage with this in the way it is organized, but the personal purpose seems highly related to the strong sense of community. In A&T the overall purpose of democracy and equality is embedded in the organisation as a focus on fair work conditions for all, including economic influence and decision-making power in all aspects of the company.

Alternative – how?

All three companies can be seen as alternative, due to the explicitly stressed and continuously negotiated focus on autonomy, solidarity and responsibility; albeit they expose slightly different characteristics and weighing relative to each dimension. RF is a mature NGO with a traditional organisational structure but is alternative in the sense that social sustainability is a main driver. Also, employees emphasise how the organisation seek to enhance and foster collective engagement and decision-making autonomy across a diverse set of employees encompassing: permanent staff, temporarily employed and volunteers. The alternative characteristic of Reload is linked to the collaborative relations with costumers and extensive autonomy in their application of agility in both their service offering and in internal organisational development processes. Lastly, A&T is alternative due to the co-owned organisational set-up in itself, coupled with a radical practice of democratic decision-making where worker-owners are legally entitled to collectively direct the organisation based on the cooperative principle: ‘One person, one vote’. As such they ensure that decisions are made in

the interest of all members/co-owners regardless of the amount of capital they put into the enterprise. These traits of alternative organising are mirrored in understandings and practices of leadership and management respectively. All cases are to differing degrees concerned with distributed processes of decision-making to ensure that actors have access to power and resources - despite enacted in various ways - regarding organisational strategies and visions.

At A&T the worker-owners have the right to fundamentally and continuously alter the organisation since all decisions, from everyday issues to strategy are taken jointly. In Reload strategic development and appointment of projects are to some extent collective, but the partner group (consisting of six people) are having meetings on a steady basis to take general economic decisions and develop the overall strategies of the company. In RF there is a somewhat similar managerial culture, where for example the strategy of the organisational future is presented to the steering group, and subsequently the implementation of it is based on the inclusion of both employees and volunteers. With A&T there is no division in who is deciding in terms of the overall strategy and its implementation.

Another difference in how alternative organising is enacted is mirrored in the balance between individuality and collectivity, and herein how the individual choices are related to the interests of the colleagues, the organisation and a shared sense of solidarity. In Reload they strive for a flat hierarchy and the quest for autonomy is to a great extent oriented towards an individual choice and freedom: *‘We are maybe a little normative, we have this goal that is about self-management; more autonomy, more equal organization’*, Partner, Reload.

When talking about the collective in Reload it is about accepting each other as whole persons with individual free choices, more than orienting oneself towards a greater agenda of

sustainability outside the organisation. In A&T narratives about oneself in relation to choices of work are to a greater extent related to sense of community where the collective is always reflected.

There is a rather big agreement about the issue of solidarity – to take on board the tasks also in a solidary manner: ‘okay, I have some time, I would be able to fulfil the role, somebody like me is needed.’ The community means a lot in terms of how we commit to tasks, I think. Without having any laws or rules about it..., Worker-owner, A&T

In RF they urge their employees to be engaged and to take responsibility also in relation to strategic development. In that manner the sense of community extends to being committed to the whole organisation and stakeholder collaboration.

You are a fiery soul when you work on the festival throughout the whole year. Voluntarily. But everybody who works here, permanently or temporarily on a project, are also fiery souls. So that's important to us. After all; it's a community thing, right?, Employee, RF

In sum, RF and Reload push forward a high degree of autonomy regarding processes and activities enacted by employees, but still the overall strategic decisions are made by either the top management or the partners. In A&T the sense of autonomy is related to an orientation towards the collective social dynamic, where individual choices are continuously mirrored in the concerns and needs of the group.

Despite the urge to downplay hierarchies in favour of collective decision-making processes, the aspect of informal power dynamics and social relations are to a wider or lesser degree

explicitly reckoned across cases. At A&T most worker-owners are sociologists and thus familiar with theories on informal power dynamics – to address this, they try to formalize decision-making procedures very explicitly, and they hold recurrent meetings where preparation of decisions is discussed. The managers and partners at Reload are experienced project managers and also acknowledge that informal hierarchies are critical to whom holds the final saying, but they are more in a development process discussing the ways decisions should be made prospectively. Both A&T and Reload are fairly young organisations that have been steadily growing in size, hence they are concerned with how to maintain a flat hierarchy and democratic decision-making when becoming bigger.

Since we started, I have had a concern about how many we actually can become, while at the same time have a great time and feel we know each other - and still make sure that people have the mandate and the influence and that they have this feeling of being equal..., CEO, Reload

Trust is fundamental for this form of organizing, and we are simply anxious about that the more we grow the more vulnerable it also becomes. That is why we are budding..., Worker-owner, A&T

In RF the informal power dynamics are moreover enacted between volunteers and employees; long-term volunteers have more authority, whereas employees are conducting diplomatic relational work in their collaboration with volunteers. Another informal power dynamic is amongst senior and junior staff and among staff with short-term employment and staff with permanent positions; where professional and social insecurity tend to affect the short term and younger employed. However, despite these variations in regard to leadership perceptions and practices, all three organisations stress and favour autonomy and individual initiatives.

The 'good work life' as a social value

Across cases there is a shared understanding that they are living out 'the good work life', both at an individual and a collective level. The good working life is related to meaningfulness at work, good work conditions, autonomy in working tasks and influence on the organisation.

In RF the perceptions of a good work life are highly related to a sense of belonging to the organisational community, strongly materialised in shared experiences around celebrations, social interactions and events. Despite a sense of influence and autonomy, frustrations around lack of transparency in decision-making processes and future employment possibilities for temporarily employed also exists: *'I have had this feeling, that this (voluntary work ed.) would lead to something exciting. I am still not panicking about it, but it is something that is lurking at some point...'*, Temporarily employed, RF.

Across cases there is an understanding of the organisation being different from other work places, and hence they all attempt to build up a narrative that seeks to redefine what a good work life entail. As such they define themselves in relation to either similar companies, organisations in their own sector or to the job market in general.

It's not often that you find such a place, where we have customers who just trust in us perfectly. They trust us blindly, it's so nice to know, and this gives us the drive to do our best and to be honest. Especially in the IT industry, it's really a doggy industry because you have a lot of opportunities to lie about how much time things take and lie about what you are doing,
Software developer, Reload

A&T emphasises that they formerly did not advertise so much about them being a cooperative, but now it has become trendier and less regarded as being ‘hippie-like’, so now they lobby about their organisational form. Every year RF offers guided tours to cooperate companies and gives talks about managing and collaborating with volunteers. In this manner the perspective on the good work life based on a strong collective, also offers new approaches to a general societal understanding of how alternative organising, and herein work lives, might be and look like.

Among employees and partners in Reload it is emphasized that the familial atmosphere supports an attachment to the collective supported by a positive story of being able to work with ones’ own personal interest. The work identity is that of inclusion, which is moreover reinforced by the distribution of knowledge and interests at their shared digital platform ‘flowdock’.

Many of us have it on our smart phones too - so if you are away from the computer, you can constantly have a look anyway. But it is also a social thing where you can share things you find on the web, whether it's for fun or professionally..., Software developer, Reload

Nevertheless, the digital platform also becomes a challenge to some employees since it is time consuming to be online - hence what is meant as an inclusive tool, has some inherent mechanisms of exclusion. At A&T the idea of a good work life is focused on striving for work-life balances. They stress the importance of 37 work hours a week, and as such they counter RF and Reload - i.e., rather than valuing the convergence of work and private life, they emphasise the separation of domains as key to good work conditions. At RF there is also an awareness of how work intensification can cause stress and different kinds of exclusion

mechanisms are at stake: *'In the past, I just worked like crazy. Today I cannot do that. I cannot cope with it physically – I am still suffering from that (stress sick note ed.)'*, Permanent employee, RF.

At Reload the constant connectivity has consequences. Participating continuously in both social and professional discussions online *'is not dictated from above'*, but data shows some important consequences when not participating, that is, employees feeling excluded. If staff members refrain from participating online, they risk missing out on important information.

I'm not exercising my opportunity for influence (when logging off flowdock ed.). That way, I isolate myself as an employee. It is a waste of time and ineffective. It has a consequence for me, but also to the organization, Software programmer, Reload.

Thus, constant availability may to some employees result in negative high work intensity and a decrease in work commitment (Dupret and Pultz 2022). A solution to this is rather complex as highly committed staff often have internalized the organisational purpose and made it their own. Which at the same time may risk, that negative well-being consequences fall invisible to both employees and management.

Albeit the overall perception of enacting the good work life, an important aspect in this regard is that employees in all three cases work intensively in periods. But work overload and stress are handled differently. At RF the employees used to work intensively in the spring up until the Roskilde Festival and then have a calmer and less burdening fall. This is still explicated in the employment contract, but the reality is that RF today, due to new forms of services and tasks,

do not have the same annual cycle of work. Worker-owners in A&T register work hours, but mainly on personalised level, lacking an official and corporate time tracking system.

The work intensity is extremely high. And that is also an issue to me. I stick to work, perhaps not 37 hours a week, but 41-42 hours. So, it is not like I have a crazy number of hours, but I am really in the spotlight, so often when I return home I have to lie down because everything spins around, Worker-owner, A&T

In Reload the agile methodologies create a new work flow and a new temporality. On the one hand the insensitivity in the work pressure is not (only) by the end of the project period. On the other hand, the continuous ‘sprints’ and prototyping that has to be presented and prepared to costumers are creating a continuous sense of urgency. This can be translated to an increased sense of intensification, even though there is also a culture of solidarity and honesty in terms of tolerating mistakes and adjustments along the way.

In sum, the dynamics of the interplay between private life and work life seems related to the grand organisational narratives of collectivity, which also brings about issues of individual well-being. On the one hand there is room for the individual to become part of and included in a strong work place culture and collective, but on the other hand the responsibility for entering this and balancing one’s own work tasks and engagement seems to be individualised. In this manner alternative organising as offering conditions for good work lives seems to diminish negative aspects of current organisational and societal affairs - but being ‘alternative’ might also counter pluralistic perspectives on and deliberation about the downsides of existing and future work conditions.

Discussion

In the scholarly debate about alternative organising, the construct is both approached as a theoretical framework and as referring to specific organisational set-ups (Parker and Parker 2017). The foundation in a neo-liberal critique open on the one hand for exploring alternative organising as ‘allies’ in pushing forward a certain critique of mainstream management and neo-liberal logics ingrained in traditional organisational set-ups (Parker and Parker 2017; Just, De Cock and Schaefer 2021). But on the other hand, the focus of academia might in itself run the risk of obscuring what is actually going on at a micro-level and narrowing down possible critical aspects of being alternative and purpose-driven. These potential pitfalls will be further discussed in the following.

The cases of the study reveal different dimensions of a specific societal concern; that especially knowledge workers are exposed to the current development of work intensification and poor wellbeing due to increased complexity and individualised responsibility, while also presenting proposals for other ways of organising and creating more sustainable work lives to counter this. They mirror the principles of alternative organising, that is, autonomy, solidarity and responsibility (Parker et al. 2014) and show positive aspects in creating a sense of belonging (Bryer 2019). Moreover, the insights from the cases underscore that what is alternative is not solely related to the hybrid form of organising, but rather to reflections on how being alternative can be outlived and enacted. Nevertheless, we see some points of concern in terms of how to balance being purpose-driven at an organisational level and at an individual level, while at the same time ensuring good work conditions. Since it is hard to be in opposition to the idea of ‘a good work life’, we argue that it risks becoming an empty signifier. Instead, more relevant questions are how the good work life is perceived and how hybrid organisations might condition such a life – so the work conditions are in congruence with the ideals and ethical

orientation exposed at both an organisational and individual level (Nguyen, Lee and Hu 2019; Amin 2009). The analysis in the present study shows that the notion of a good work life somehow refers back to conflicting ideas and tensions between individual needs and the collective.

To exemplify, a good work life as ideology is in the case of A&T related to a clear divide between work and private life, with an emphasis on the former not eroding the latter. On the contrary, in the cases of RF and Reload, the good work life is related to being a 'whole' person where individual interests and aspirations are mirrored at work, and hence the divide between personal and work life is rather diminished. Moreover, across cases a key concern of employees and actors is that your personal values are in line with those of the organisation and vice versa. In their effort to ensure such a balance we see e.g., in Reload that the agile way of working can create value for customers, but also potentially create difficult working conditions to the employees. Likewise, in RF the emphasis on the great societal value that the organisation supports through donations somehow makes it difficult to deliver criticism - being in an environment with insecure employment and many freelancers and volunteers the internalised purpose can make one overlook the potentially critical work conditions (Dupret and Pultz, 2021). In the case of A&T the success of the democratic way of organising is to some extent dependent on a high degree of homogeneity, relative to political persuasion, age, ethnicity and level of education. Thus, they mainly employ a certain kind of employee that fits into that homogeneity, but they are not necessarily inclusive in a more general sense of the term.

These rather underexposed aspects across cases are important to keep in mind in order to understand the employee perspectives of working in hybrid organisations. With the complexity in work relations, collaborative conditions, high degree of autonomy and self-management,

and a quest to survive on a market, the continuous struggle to redefine organisations in the direction of solidarity fundamentally requires that a lot of not only strategic aims are formulated, but indeed also formalised daily practices and structures of e.g. employment and working hours.

All organisations presented in the analysis act on market terms, hence their form of organising might outline future avenues for both existing and upcoming organisations. As such, they offer a possibility for re-thinking the interplay between organisational form, individual and societal purpose, and work lives. But the rhetoric of being purpose-driven and the need to talk up against traditional companies and ways of organising may give little room for counter-narratives and explicit critical reflections. An aspect, which is in line with Granados and Rosli (2020), who stress that hybrid organisations are involved in legitimisation exercises to be able to both ‘fit in’, to ensure stability, and to ‘stand out’ as they address social change (Granados and Rosli 2020).

So, despite overall purpose-driven visions at a macro-level offers alternatives, we argue that an open and lively dialogue in addition to a room of trust to discuss and negotiate values and work conditions at a micro-level is as important.

Conclusion

The findings point towards some key aspects or conditions to be inspired by relative to the role of hybrid organisations in adding social value to the future work market: a high degree of decision-making power, a work life imposed by a clear link between purpose of the organisation and the value set of the employee and the ability to propose alternatives that are prefigurative for future organising (Caringal-Co and Hechanova 2018; Parker et al. 2014). But, when the urge to be purpose-driven is spanned for different agendas and ideas of what a good

work life is, we argue that it becomes important to research what it really means to the actors involved and what the pros and cons of outliving a ‘social purpose’ are. In practice, hybrid organisations, as the ones presented, might need to pay attention to these nuances, in order to ensure consistency in reaching the objective of social value creation – both externally and internally (Dupret and Pultz, 2021). The study clarifies how the way of organising, that is, the differing aspects of hybridity, influence how employees experience not only what it means to be purpose-driven, but also more importantly their work life in a broader sense. As such the cases expand the literature on purpose-driven organisations having a focus on how to manage and motivate employees (Lleo et al. 2021), as they illustrate how purpose also comes from within the organizational actors, in the form of organising and in the deeper structures of decision-making processes. In this manner, there is a great responsibility in terms of operationalising the balance among internal and external values to ensure the link between organisational form, work conditions and the purpose of creating social value.

Final remarks

The article set out to explore the following research question: *How is the notion of purpose and being ‘alternative’ perceived and enacted among employees in hybrid organisations?* Through a holistic multiple case study of three organisations from Denmark it became clear how the notion of being purpose-driven is enacted in different ways and within dimensions relative to values external to the organization, values internal to the organization and values at an individual level. Applying the principles of alternative organizing, that is, solidarity, responsibility and autonomy, in the data analysis helped unfold what is meant by, and experienced as, purposeful among organisational actors. Also, the case study explicates that purpose as key aspect in hybrid organisations, not only relates to processes, practices and outcomes of the organization, but also as supportive of an on-going reflection of what a good work life is. Nevertheless, there might be discrepancy between the *idea* of a good work life and

the way the employees react to and experience their current work. As such the focus on being purpose-driven as part of the organisational narrative and the urge to stress ‘the alternative’ might blur and narrow down a space for discussing aspects of power, work load and dimensions of inclusion/exclusion.

By analysing these dilemmas through the lenses of alternative organising, herein the analytical concepts of solidarity, responsibility and autonomy, the article contributes to the theory base on hybrid organisations and social enterprises due to a nuanced understanding of what being purpose-driven refers back to and how this is enacted at a micro-level.

Future research agenda

As the study highlights the employee perspective, we see a need among scholars to further explore negotiating practices relative to aspects of being purpose-driven in hybrid organisations. Especially to ensure that the positive rhetoric concerning subjective and collective ideals of doing good in and for society also embed and embrace potential challenging aspects of being employed in such contexts. Theoretically more conceptual clarification relative to the interlinkages of the concepts: purpose-driven, hybridity, alternative organising and social sustainability could help build up a more refined framework for analysing what is at stake in practice, at which levels in the organisation, to whom and for what reasons. Hopefully the presented study can act as foundation for such future studies.

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