

Public sector not more effective in attracting socially motivated workers than private sector

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Research by the University of Southampton has found workers in the public sector are more likely to engage in socially motivated activities than their private sector counterparts. However, their findings also show this is only because public services employ more highly educated and skilled people – characteristics that increase the likelihood of being socially engaged.

Economists Dr Mirco Tonin and Dr Michael Vlassopoulos conducted a study which used workers' levels of involvement with volunteering as a yard-stick to measure their 'prosocial behaviour' – in other words, their inclination to benefit others.

Dr Tonin says: "There is a commonly held belief that those working in the public sector are more socially oriented than those in the [private sector](#). We were interested in finding out whether this is indeed true."

The research showed people working in the public sector are indeed more likely to carry out volunteer work in absolute terms, but their results also showed that comparing like-for-like (i.e. people with similar education, skills and so on) makes such an advantage disappear, with public sector workers being just like their private sector counterparts.

The study authors used data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), a survey of people who are aged over

50 years, and analysed data from 12 countries in continental Europe. They focussed specifically on information about older workers and those in retirement, judging them as a more reliable measure of career choices compared to young workers, who may still be moving jobs.

Initially they found that public sector workers were 20 per cent more likely to volunteer than the average worker in private jobs. However, they also found the type of jobs which make-up the public sector demands a larger proportion of well educated, skilled employees, when compared with the private sector. These workers have backgrounds which already make them more likely to volunteer, regardless of who they work for. Once the researchers levelled the playing-field and compared workers like-for-like from both groups, they found no significant difference in volunteering rates between the two.

Dr Vlassopoulos comments: "When examined in greater detail our findings suggest there is nothing specific about being a public sector employee which motivates prosocial behaviour. It is more to do with public sector workers having the kind of educational background and skills, which are associated with a higher likelihood of volunteering."

The study also revealed an exception to this finding. Public sector workers in education are much more likely to volunteer than those in private sector jobs generally. This was the case even when comparing workers like-for-like.

The researchers suggest these findings are important to assess the impact of privatising or outsourcing areas of public services and of introducing high-powered incentives in the public sector.

Dr Tonin comments: "Having workers that are instinctively inclined to deliver high quality services is important for the public sector to perform its functions. There are concerns the introduction of financial incentives

to the sector, such as performance-related pay, may attract workers that are more sensitive to monetary reward, but less intrinsically motivated. Also, privatisation could possibly affect motivation.

"However, our study suggests that, with the exception of the educational sector, the [public sector](#) is not particularly effective in attracting altruistically motivated workers, so these concerns may not be particularly relevant."

More information: The complete paper is available online:
<ftp.iza.org/dp8238.pdf>

Provided by University of Southampton

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