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**CORPORATE PURPOSE AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE? A QUALITATIVE
LITERATURE ANALYSIS OF PURPOSE IMPACTS**

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Abstract: *Today's organisations are judged by profit and their impact. Corporate purpose, goals extending beyond profit maximisation, serves as a strategic asset.*

A qualitative literature review shows that purpose indirectly raises profitability by attracting committed employees who accept lower wages and by improving return-on-assets when purpose is clear. In innovation, purpose aligns strategy and expands leaders' opportunity-recognition, fostering architectural change and long-term transformation. Regarding sustainability, purpose anchors stakeholder-oriented actions, reshapes value creation, and bolsters organisational resilience. For employees, purpose raises motivation, engagement, and autonomous commitment, though its effect on self-determination is inconclusive. Overall, a genuine, well-communicated purpose integrated into organisational identity constitutes a competitive advantage, with the strongest effects observed in employee behaviour and sustainability. Further quantitative research is needed to clarify the purpose's impact on innovation and financial outcomes.

Keywords: *Corporate Purpose; Purpose Impacts; Competitive Advantage; Literature Review*

INTRODUCTION

The world as it is, is in a state of constant change. The ongoing changes affect every area of life. This distresses the labour market as well as every other market that organisations are operating in. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, organisations operated under the doctrine of shareholder value maximisation, therefore aiming to satisfy their shareholders by maximising profits (Salter 2019, p. 22).

Even back then, Peter Drucker fought against this and emphasised the importance of mission and corporate purpose (Pollman 2021, p. 1444). But only in the 1990s, Bartlett and Ghoshal acknowledged that it is not the financial corporate objectives that are the main motivators of employees, but it is what an organisation does in addition, thereby acknowledging the corporate purpose (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1994).

During the last 30 years, a lot has evolved regarding the perception of the role of the organisation within society. In 2019, the Business Roundtable acknowledged society as a stakeholder of every organisation that needs to be taken care of (Clarke 2020, p. 26). The World Economic Forum also recognised the responsibility of organisations for sustainable value creation as part of the purpose in 2020 (Ferrarini 2020, p. 7).

The concept of corporate purpose is brought into the spotlight, especially by institutions such as the Business Roundtable and the World Economic Forum. However, the debate extends beyond these institutional statements. Corporate purpose is increasingly discussed as a moral guideline, but also a potential source of strategic differentiation and competitive advantage.

Against this background, this paper examines the impact of corporate purpose using a qualitative literature analysis. The aim is to critically assess whether corporate purpose can actually function as a competitive advantage and to identify the conditions under which it contributes to an organisation's success.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literature-based approach to examine the impact of corporate purpose. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive account, the analysis focuses on a targeted selection of academic contributions that reflect current debates in four thematic dimensions.

The dimensions were selected based on important factors for organisations and their stakeholder and overall relevant topics. Therefore, this analysis of corporate purpose impacts will cover the effects on financial performance, innovation, sustainability and employee behaviour.

The approach follows the principles of qualitative content analysis. The method serves to summarise conceptual insights and empirical findings, enabling a structured comparison of perspectives and the identification of overarching patterns. The publications were examined in terms of their theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical implications. By structuring the literature according to the four key dimensions, the study provides a coherent framework for assessing whether corporate purpose can serve as a source of competitive advantage.

To be able to examine the impacts of corporate purpose, it has to be defined first. Therefore, the second chapter will firstly cover the definition of corporate purpose before focusing on the impacts of corporate purpose.

Definition of Corporate Purpose

Originally, the corporate purpose of an organisation was assumed to be profit maximisation (Slintak and Dvorsky 2018, p. 16). Only in the 1990s did the organisational objective shift towards serving society (Kaufman et al. 1998, p. 32). Today, there are many different definitions of corporate purpose and all of them include it as a goal or direction for an organisation (Hurth et al. 2018, p. 7).

Due to this condition, the definition of Henderson and van den Steen will be applied in this paper. They defined corporate purpose as “a concrete goal or objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization” (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, p. 327).

Furthermore, it is important not to mix corporate purpose with mission, vision, or even corporate social responsibility. With corporate purpose, mission, and vision, each statement serves its own role, while only together they form a brand's identity and provide parameters for decision making within an organisation (Fitzsimmons et al. 2022, p. 208).

An organisation's vision describes the desired state within five to ten years and depicts the future (Collins and Porras 1991, p. 42). The mission of an organisation describes the what and why behind an organisation (Bruce and Jeromin 2020, p. 26). Corporate social responsibility generally takes the form of limited, stand-alone programmes, in contrast to corporate purpose, which is conceived as a fundamental element of corporate strategy. (Fitzsimmons et al. 2022, p. 208).

Impacts of Corporate Purpose

Having established a definition of corporate purpose, its potential impacts can now be assessed. Despite more than three decades since Bartlett and Ghoshal brought the concept into prominence (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1994), research on its impacts remains comparatively limited.

This paper attempts to summarise the current state of knowledge regarding the impact of corporate purpose in four categories that are particularly relevant to organisations, stakeholders and society: financial performance, innovation, sustainability and employee behaviour.

Within each category, two important contributions to existing research were critically examined. The results of this analysis are presented in the following chapter.

RESULTS

Purpose Impacts on Financial Performance

Henderson and van den Steen were the first to acknowledge a possible impact of corporate purpose on financial performance. Although their research focused on the organisation's role as carrier of identity and reputation, they had positive findings regarding the impact on financial performance. Their initial goal was to find out why organisations have a corporate purpose in the first place. To research this, a quantitative study was conducted (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, p. 329).

The authors concluded that organisations with an implemented corporate purpose operate more profitably than organisations without a corporate purpose (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, p. 327). However, it should be noted that no financial metrics were used for these analyses. Instead, this finding was based on the fact that an implemented corporate purpose strengthens em-

employees' identity with the organisation and creates a shared identity and reputation (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, p. 327). As a result, such organisations tend to employ people who support the purpose of the business and are therefore willing to accept lower salaries for the same work while putting more effort into their jobs (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, pp. 327–328). According to the analysis by Henderson and van den Steen, this enables these organisations to operate more profitably.

Gartenberg et al. intentionally researched the connection between corporate purpose and financial performance. As a base for their quantitative study, they used the *Great Place To Work* raw data, focusing on publicly traded companies, including all applications from 2006 through 2011, from the US (Gartenberg et al. 2019, p. 5).

At first, the authors tried to match corporate purpose and financial performance, represented as Return on Assets (RoA). However, there was no evidence found that corporate purpose directly impacts the RoA (Gartenberg et al. 2019, p. 7).

The broad scope of the raw data allowed the authors to not only evaluate data for corporate purpose, but also to identify other factors. This made it possible to examine whether corporate purpose, in conjunction with other factors, influences financial performance. The factor analysis revealed four factors: Management, which primarily addresses the perception of management and the relationship between management and employees; purpose camaraderie, combining questions about the degree of camaraderie among employees with questions about purpose perception; non-discrimination, the pure exclusion of discrimination in the workplace; and purpose clarity, combining questions about purpose perception with questions about the clarity of leadership concerning strategy and goals (Gartenberg et al. 2019, p. 8).

The authors then analysed whether the factors in combination with corporate purpose have an impact on the financial performance. Of all four factors, only purpose camaraderie and purpose clarity showed an impact, with the impact of purpose camaraderie being very low (Gartenberg et al. 2019, p. 8). Nonetheless, it could be proven that corporate purpose, with the factor purpose clarity, has a positive impact on the financial performance (Gartenberg et al. 2019, p. 8). The authors explain that this circumstance arises primarily because purpose clarity ensures a high degree of clarity concerning the importance of one's own work, thus making the organisation's expectations clear, which in turn can ensure that the organisation primarily employs people whose personal goals align with the organisation's goals (Gartenberg et al. 2019, pp. 8–9).

Purpose Impacts on Innovation

In 2021, Henderson questioned how far corporate purpose can support organisations in establishing architectural innovation (Henderson 2021, p. 5480). Architectural innovation is defined as “innovation that changes the architecture of a product while keeping many of its components relatively unchanged” (Henderson 2021, p. 5480). The author argues that pursuing such innovation will be the key to solving many current problems (Henderson 2021, p. 5479).

Henderson defines an organisation as purpose-driven if it is publicly committed to a goal beyond profit maximisation and sacrifices profits in the short term to pursue it (Henderson 2021, p. 5479). According to the research, a shared purpose increases strategic alignment (Henderson 2021, p. 5481). Furthermore, managers who are actively embracing the corporate purpose are more likely to identify new opportunities as the purpose broadens their view of the world (Henderson 2021, p. 5481). Additionally, the author acknowledges that not only managers benefit but also every employee, since the embrace of corporate purpose increases the perceived meaning of one's work and creates a strong sense of shared identity (Henderson 2021, p. 5482). This might lead to an increase in trust, which correlates with the ability to tackle architectural change (Henderson 2021, p. 5482).

Henderson summarises that corporate purpose increases the probability that an organisation sees the need for architectural innovation. This is supported by a shared strategy due to the corporate purpose, hardworking employees and more trust within the organisation. (Henderson 2021, p. 5485)

Henderson and Serafeim hypothesised that fighting the ongoing climate change requires the help of corporate purpose, especially in supporting organisations in making innovations to accel-

erate the process of decarbonisation (Henderson and Serafeim 2020, p. 178). The authors argue that authentic corporate purpose increases an organisation's capacity to tackle systemic challenges. Purpose-led organisations are more willing to invest in long-term transformation, even at the expense of short-term profitability, because they benefit from increased productivity and strategic alignment. (Henderson and Serafeim 2020, p. 178)

Furthermore, intrinsic motivation among employees thrives when a genuine corporate purpose is implemented and supported by appropriate employee treatment, enhancing both the perceived meaning of work and sense of identity (Henderson and Serafeim 2020, p. 178). Purpose-driven organisations tend to attract prosocial employees who share their values, enabling them to manage ambiguity and risk more effectively (Henderson and Serafeim 2020, p. 179).

The authors highlight that such organisations are well-positioned to lead cooperative efforts and spearhead innovation. They conclude that this could be a potential starting point to use Corporate Purpose in developing innovation to fight climate change. However, they caution that new performance metrics are needed to align investor expectations with the broader goals of purpose beyond profit maximisation. While costly in the short term, purpose is seen as a long-term strategic asset. (Henderson and Serafeim 2020, pp. 179–180)

Purpose Impacts on Sustainability

Duell et. al. researched corporate purpose as a possible way to reach corporate sustainability. The authors deem corporate purpose as one way to embed actions that matter to the stakeholders and long-term financial performance in parallel (Duell et al. 2022, p. 26). They argue that corporate purpose can function as a powerful tool to address systemic flaws in traditional capitalism. According to Duell et. al. corporate purpose aims to resolve the four key corporate failures: inequality and distrust, technological challenges, the intangible nature of companies, and environmental degradation (Duell et al. 2022, p. 27).

By embedding a corporate purpose, organisations can take the opportunity to rethink standard practices and adjust them and at the same time avoid unintended social and environmental consequences of technological progress (Duell et al. 2022, p. 28). Therefore, the corporate purpose offers an opportunity to rethink the way value is created and measured, while at the same time building trust (Duell et al. 2022, p. 28).

The authors conclude that corporate purpose is not merely a rhetorical device but an essential strategic tool for achieving sustainable, resilient and socially responsible outcomes in today's complex business environment (Duell et al. 2022, p. 36).

Florez-Jimenez et. al. researched the connection between corporate purpose, corporate sustainability, and organisational resilience. In general, they argue that both corporate sustainability and organisational resilience can be acquired more easily by defining a corporate purpose since it serves as a foundation for the strategy and helps an organisation to survive in a rapidly changing environment (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 68). In sum, the authors argue that corporate sustainability, organisational resilience and corporate purpose seem to be related and together explain how an organisation achieves long-term prosperity (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 69).

To link corporate purpose to corporate sustainability, they argue that purpose-driven organisations tend to adapt goals according to the triple-bottom-line (environmental, social, economic), which encourages efficient innovations and long-term prosperity (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 69). Linking corporate purpose to organisational resilience, they argue that corporate purpose helps to build a risk-aware culture, therefore enabling organisations to anticipate and manage high impacts and retain their identity during such disruptions (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 70).

An authentic corporate purpose supports shared alignment and organisational resilience, enabling organisations to persist, maintain their purpose, and develop a mission (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 83). It strengthens stakeholders' identification with the corporate identity, which is reflected in positive behaviours towards the organisation (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 85). By aligning employee behaviour with this purpose, organisations create a high level of synergy that strengthens cohesion and collective performance (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025, p. 85).

Purpose Impacts on Employee Behaviour

Van Tuin et. al. focused their research on the impact of corporate purpose on employee motivation and work engagement. They emphasise that the role of corporate purpose is often overlooked, yet it remains only as strong as stakeholders' belief in it (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 2).

The authors lay out self-determination theory (SDT) as a possible explanation for how corporate purpose might accelerate motivation and work engagement. In this theory, every human being acts as a social agent who draws on life experiences within social contexts to construct meaning and develops a coherent sense of self-identity (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 2). Therefore, corporate purpose might accelerate motivation and work engagement when it fits into the beliefs that people hold (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 3).

SDT explains that when an extrinsic motive like corporate purpose is internalised into the self-identity, it becomes autonomous motivation (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 3). This could foster work engagement as employees are willing to take on tasks that align with their values and the intrinsic motivation might enhance (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 3). Therefore, the authors hypothesise that corporate purpose associates positively with autonomous motivation and work engagement (van Tuin et al. 2020, pp. 3–4).

Various studies in a Dutch organisation were performed to test the hypotheses. The results showed a positive relationship between corporate purpose and autonomous motivation and between corporate purpose and work engagement (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 6). The findings indicate that employees who feel inspired by their organisation's corporate purpose report a stronger work engagement, a sense of contributing to its realisation and a desire to make the world a better place (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 8). It was shown that they show a higher level of work engagement, therefore supporting the assumption that a clearly defined corporate purpose functions as an antecedent to employee engagement (van Tuin et al. 2020, p. 8).

Parmar et. al. explored how employee self-determination and well-being are affected by corporate objectives (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 13). The hypothesis is put forward that a corporate goal that focuses on creating value for multiple stakeholders, such as a clearly defined corporate purpose, improves the satisfaction of employees' psychological needs (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 14).

As before, SDT is used as a possible explanation for the mode of action of corporate purpose. Based on SDT, the authors argue that individuals want to satisfy three central psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these needs are supported in an organisational context, they promote intrinsic motivation, facilitate the internalisation of extrinsic goals and increase the likelihood of positive organisational outcomes (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 14). A stakeholder-oriented approach promotes autonomy by giving employees at various levels the opportunity to decide for themselves how to shape their actions and which stakeholder outcomes to prioritise (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 17). It also strengthens competence by actively involving stakeholders, with successful interactions reinforcing employees' sense of making a meaningful contribution (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 17). Finally, relatedness is promoted by creating and maintaining connections between the organisation and its stakeholders, with shared purpose possibly catalysing greater employee self-determination (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 18).

Several studies were conducted exploring the relationship between corporate purpose and employee well-being and self-determination. There was no evidence found that a corporate objective focusing on a shared purpose is associated with a higher level of self-determination (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 28). This might suggest that the impact of a purpose-driven approach on employee self-determination differs depending on the context. However, it was noted that higher levels of self-determination were observed when participants could directly compare between purpose-driven and instrumental stakeholder framings (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 24). Furthermore, increased psychological need satisfaction, linked to a clear, people-oriented corporate purpose, was associated with greater job satisfaction, reduced turnover intention, and stronger discretionary effort (Parmar et al. 2019, p. 29), highlighting purpose as a potential motivational lever in organisational settings.

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, two research papers were examined for each of the overarching topics: financial performance, innovation, sustainability, and employee behaviour, highlighting their respective insights into the impact of corporate purpose.

With regard to financial performance, both papers were able to demonstrate that corporate purpose has a fundamentally positive impact on financial performance. Gartenberg et al. included RoA, a real measurable indicator, in their study. However, this finding was only established after an extended factor analysis. Corporate purpose alone does not have a positive effect on RoA, but only in conjunction with clear communication on the part of management. Henderson and van den Steen recognised that organisations with corporate purpose are more profitable because they often employ people who are willing to accept lower salaries due to the values they represent. It can therefore be concluded that a positive impact of corporate purpose on financial performance has been established. Nevertheless, the recurring factor in the authors' argument was the identity and values represented, which were strengthened by the corporate purpose.

It has been established that the current environment brings with it a high demand for innovation. Research into the impact of corporate purpose on innovation shows that a clearly defined corporate purpose can support organisations by strengthening their authenticity and promoting strategic alignment. However, both analysed studies emphasise that their findings are only a starting point and that the insights gained so far are limited. Further research is therefore needed in this area before a clear answer can be given.

Concerning sustainability, it is generally acknowledged that both individuals and organisations have a duty to take responsibility. The analysis of both studies shows that corporate purpose has a positive impact and can be seen as a key driver of corporate sustainability. It also has an indirect effect, as sustainability boosts organisational resilience, which in turn strengthens corporate purpose and keeps it stable, especially during times of disruption or crisis. This interaction highlights how important a clearly defined corporate purpose is for long-term stability and credibility. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are currently no concrete examples from organisations and no case studies have been conducted, meaning that the theoretical assumptions have not yet been substantiated by empirical evidence.

Two studies were also analysed concerning employee behaviour and the impact of corporate purpose on it. Both used SDT as an explanatory framework, suggesting that they might arrive at similar results. In fact, corporate purpose was found to have a positive influence on employee work motivation and engagement. In the second paper, however, the connection with self-determination could only be confirmed when participants were given an alternative condition for comparison. Thus, despite an identical theoretical basis, the two studies did not lead to identical results. Nevertheless, the authors emphasise that corporate purpose acts as a motivational boost, especially when it aligns with employees' personal values. In this case, they develop a personal interest and autonomous motivation to actively participate in its implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the impact of corporate purpose on financial performance, innovation, sustainability and employee behaviour. The results show that corporate purpose has a positive impact on financial performance; however, these findings are based less on concrete comparisons with financial indicators and more on the willingness of employees to support the corporate purpose and even accept lower salaries in return. An open research question therefore, remains as to how corporate purpose actually translates into financial metrics.

Concerning innovation, both studies found that corporate purpose can significantly support organisations. Nevertheless, there is a lack of reliable data to date, so further in-depth research is needed.

The impact of corporate purpose on sustainability proved to be very positive. It was also found that the combination of corporate purpose and corporate sustainability strengthens organisational resilience, especially in times of disruption. An accompanying case study would be a valuable approach for future research in this area. The conclusion summarises the information presented in the research paper, the main conclusions and contributions of the author, and gives directions for future work on the research problem.

There is also a positive impact on employee behaviour: corporate purpose has a beneficial effect on work motivation and work engagement. However, no clear statement could be made regarding employee self-determination, which highlights the need for further research.

In summary, it can be said that corporate purpose has positive effects in all four areas examined, although additional empirical studies are needed to substantiate these findings.

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КОРПОРАТИВНАТА ЦЕЛ КАТО КОНКУРЕНТНО ПРЕДИМСТВО? КАЧЕСТВЕН АНАЛИЗ НА ЛИТЕРАТУРАТА ЗА ВЛИЯНИЕТО НА КОРПОРАТИВНАТА ЦЕЛ

Резюме: Днешните организации се оценяват по печалбата и въздействието си. Корпоративна цел (КЦ), която надхвърля максимизирането на печалбата, служи като стратегически актив. Качествен преглед на литературата показва, че КЦ косвено повишава рентабилността, привличайки ангажирани служители, които приемат по-ниски заплати, и подобрява възвръщаемостта на

активите, когато КЦ е ясна. В областта на иновациите КЦ съгласува стратегията и разширява възможностите на лидерите да разпознават възможности, насърчавайки архитектурни промени и дългосрочна трансформация. По отношение на устойчивостта КЦ утвърждава действията, ориентирани към заинтересованите страни, преобразува създаването на стойност и укрепва организационната устойчивост. За служителите КЦ повишава мотивацията, ангажираността и автономната отдаденост, въпреки че ефектът ѝ върху самоопределението е неясен. Една истинска, добре комуникирана КЦ, интегрирана в организационната идентичност, представлява конкурентно предимство, като най-силно изразените ефекти се наблюдават в поведението на служителите и устойчивостта. Необходими са допълнителни количествени проучвания, за да се изясни въздействието на корпоративната цел върху иновациите и финансовите резултати.

Ключови думи: корпоративна цел; въздействие на корпоративната цел; конкурентно предимство; анализ на литература

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