

## **Mission Statement: A Systematic Review of the Literature**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** A mission statement is a widely used strategic tool that emphasises an organisation's uniqueness and identity. This article summarises and offers a critical overview of the literature on mission statements, since its inception in the early 1980s until today.

**Methodology:** Following a systematic literature review, 53 academic papers published in top leading journals in the field that focused on the role of the mission statement in organisations are presented and discussed.

**Findings:** Works dealing with mission statements can be classified into four main areas: (1) mission statement development, (2) mission statement components, (3) mission impact on employees, and (4) mission impact on performance. The synthesis of this literature shows that mission statements are widely used in practice but poorly researched in theory. Most articles in the area adopt a managerial phenomenon-based strand, lacking a deep theoretical foundation.

**Contribution:** This paper contributes to the existing literature in two main ways. First, it provides a comprehensive and critical review of scholarly research on mission statements. Second, it puts forward directions for future research on this area.

**Keywords:** Mission statement, literature review, bibliometric analysis, firm performance

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## 1. Introduction

The mission statement is a written declaration that communicates the purpose of an organisation. According to the annual report of Bain & Co. (Rigby and Bilodeau, 2015), the mission statement is one of the most widely used managerial tools worldwide. It became popular in the early 1980s, and since then it has received attention from managers and academics. In the present research, we examine this 35-year-long body of research on mission statements. What is a mission statement? Is there any advantage for organisations to explicitly define their company's mission statement? Is the mission statement really a useful managerial tool? Do managers actually refer to the mission statement and use it as a guidance for their strategic decisions? What components should a mission statement include, and which ones should it not? All these questions and others have been addressed by studies on mission statements, which are reviewed in the present paper.

Using a systematic review process, we identified 53 academic papers that specifically deal with the mission statement. The main research findings can be grouped into four themes: (i) mission statement development, (ii) mission statement components, (iii) mission impact on employees, and (iv) mission impact on organisational performance. We describe in detail each of these groups and identify research gaps and avenues for future research. Surprisingly, although the mission statement is one of the most commonly used managerial tools, and despite more than 30 years of research, studies in the area of mission statements have a predominant practical orientation and very limited theoretical development.

## 2. Methodology

Following the systematic literature review process suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003), we began by defining the research objectives. In our case the objective was to do a thorough review of all aspects concerning mission statements. To that end, we searched for all articles containing the specific term mission statement in three databases: EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and ISI Web of Knowledge. We believe these databases contain all relevant publications in the area of business and management. We first searched for

any document in the aforementioned databases that contained the term mission statement in the abstract, the title, or the keywords. This search returned 2,233 documents.

We then restricted the search to documents written in English in the areas of management, business, economics, social issues, and the social sciences. After these restrictions, we were left with 424 documents. Then, we narrowed the search to high-quality peer-reviewed journals. To decide on the quality of the journals, we used as a guide the Journal Citation Report (JCR) index as reported in the ISI Web of Knowledge. The JCR is computed annually by the Web of Knowledge based on several indicators of journal citations. Ordered by JCR index, journals can be ranked and divided into quartiles. Journals in the first quartile (Q1) are the 25% of total journals in that category with a higher JCR index and are therefore considered more prestigious and with a better reputation and quality in the journal category. In general, high-quality journals according to the JCR index coincide with those with a rating of 3, 4, or 4\* in the ABS ranking and/or the first or second quartile in the Scimago ranking. To focus on high-quality journals, we decided to restrict the search to high-quality journals in either the Q1 or Q2 JCR index. Following that rule, we moved from 424 documents to 99 documents. We then reviewed each article one by one to check if they really addressed mission statement, and we discarded those that either did not match our research objective or were not research articles, such as editorials or book reviews. In that way, we were left with 53 research articles from high-quality journals in the areas of management, business, economic, social issues, and the social sciences that were written in English and that deal specifically with mission statement.

We did not put any restriction on the search in terms of time period. This was done on purpose to identify all articles since the topic originated. The first article we found was from 1984, and, as the search was done in December 2015, the last article was from 2014.

The 53 articles were published in 19 journals from a variety of management disciplines, including entrepreneurship, like *Journal of Business Venturing* or *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*; social issues and non-profit, such as *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*; and general management journals, like *Management Decision* or *Journal of Management Studies*.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Overview

The papers reviewed can be grouped into four main themes, each fitting into a certain time frame of mission-statement research. There is a group of papers concerning mission statement development, that is, the creation and implementation of a mission statement. Those papers were mostly written in

the 1980s and early 1990s, when the concept of mission statement first appeared. Only a few companies had created a mission statement, and most articles at this time tried to answer the question: how is a mission statement formulated? What stakeholders should be involved in the mission formulation? Which process should be followed to successfully formulate a mission statement? What should be the process to spread the mission throughout the organisation?

A second group of papers takes an observational approach and uses mainly content analysis to identify the words more frequently cited in organisational mission statements and draw conclusions based on that. Which stakeholders are cited in the mission statements? Is the mission statement more internally focused, mentioning employees, for example, or more externally focused, mentioning customer satisfaction?

The third and fourth groups both explore the impact of the mission statement on organisational outcomes. There is an important differentiation though, as some studies focus on the impact of the mission statement on employees and employees' behaviour and ethics (group 3), whereas other studies concentrate on the impact that having a mission statement has on organisational performance (group 4). Thus, the third group answers questions like is the mission statement really a guidance for strategy formulation. Is the mission useful, after all? Those papers mainly focus on internal organisational elements like the effect of the mission to strengthen organisational culture, improve relations among the different stakeholders, or enhance ethical behaviour. Finally, the fourth group tries to answer a similar question, that of the usefulness of the mission, from an external perspective. Do companies that have a clear mission statement perform better? Do companies with mission statements have better results than those that do not have a stated mission? The next paragraphs provide a detailed review for each group.

### **Group 1: Mission statement development**

In the early 1980s academics, managers, and consultants recognised the need of explicitly formulating a mission statement in organisations. Lundberg (1984) acknowledged that although *'everyone agrees that they are necessary, statements of mission do not even exist in many organizations and are inadequate in others.'* Responding to that call, in the 1980s and early 1990s a group of researchers published several papers discussing how to formulate a good mission statement. The common approach was for top management to delegate the initial drafting of the mission statement to their subordinates and then review subsequent drafts until the CEO was satisfied. This method was time-consuming and did not provide the necessary involvement to obtain the benefits a good mission statement promised—enhanced motivation, improved organisational climate, and organisational alignment—.

Lundberg (1984) proposed a technique called zero-in, in which all managers responsible for major functions and activities of the organisation were involved in a series of meetings and planned activities with the objective of formulating a shared organisational mission statement. Similarly, Medley (1992) described the process by which a new mission statement was developed in World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in the UK. The organisation had some difficulties after a rapid expansion, and a clear mission statement was found to help them clarify roles and functions at the management level and lead to organisation effectiveness. Davies and Glaister (1997) studied mission statements in business schools in the period 1987-1993 and claimed that most mission statements were designed top-down and with little involvement from the different organisational stakeholders. Overall, papers in this group highlight the relevance of having a clearly stated mission statement created with the involvement of different stakeholders. This way, it reflects the real organisational mission, not only the view of the CEO, which in some cases might not be comprehensive.

### **Group 2: Mission statement components**

A second group of studies have examined the different elements—named components—that are included in a mission statement. The seminal work of Pearce and (1987) proposes the first classification, distinguishing eight categories: (1) the specification of target customers and markets; (2) the identification of principal products and services; (3) the specification of the geographic domain; (4) the identification of the core technologies; (5) the expression of commitment to survival, growth, and profitability; (6) the specification of key elements in the company philosophy; (7) the identification of the company self-concept; and (8) the identification of the firm's desired public image. A couple of years later, David (1989) performed a content analysis of 75 manufacturing and service firms to provide some guidelines in developing useful mission statements. In addition to the eight components proposed by Pearce and David (1987), he proposes an additional one (9) related to concern for the employees. The overarching conclusion is that higher performing firms do have comparatively more comprehensive mission statements.

Some years later, O'Gorman and Doran (1999) used Irish SMEs to replicate Pearce and David's (1987) landmark study of mission statements in large organisations. The analysis of 64 mission statements revealed that firms emphasise 'concern for survival (77%)', their 'product or service (72%)', and their 'concern for the customer (64%)' in their mission statements. Mission statements analysed tend to omit discussions of 'core technology', the 'target market', and 'public image'.

After the aforementioned pioneering works, new studies have emerged. For instance, Bart (1997) examined the specific content characteristics of

mission statements in industrial firms. He involved a sample of CEOs and presidents from 44 industrial corporations, identifying 25 components but only 11 being used to a high degree: (1) organisational purpose or *raison d'être*; (2) statement of values/beliefs/philosophy; (3) distinctive competence/strength of the organisation; (4) desired competitive position; (5) relevant/critical stakeholders identified; (6) statement of general corporate aims/goals; (7) one clear and compelling goal; (8) specific customers/ markets served; (9) concern for employees; (10) concern for shareholders; and (11) a statement of vision.

More recently, a focus has been placed on comparing the content of mission statements in different industries or countries. For example, Kemp and Dwyer (2003) studied the role of mission statements in the tourism and hospitality sector; and Markman et al. (2005) did so in university technology transfer offices (UTTO). In addition, Biloslavo and Lynn (2007) provided an analysis of the differences in the mission statement content in Slovene and US companies according to stakeholder emphasis and by the mission's component; Brabet and Klemm (1994) studied differences between Britain and France; and Moss et al. (2011) explored the dual identity of the mission statement in social companies and compared them with high-performance enterprises. It is also remarkable the study of Morris (1996), about how to write an effective mission statement.

All these studies used a content analysis methodology that works in the following way. First, they identified the mission statements of several companies and classified them according to a previous classification, such as that of Pearce and David (1987). They used several independent researchers to code if each of the mission components was present, and in some cases—such as in Moss et al. (2011)—computer-aided content analysis was performed to avoid human bias. In a second stage, researchers confirmed the consistency and accuracy of the ratings. Finally, different comparisons by descriptive statistics and correlations were used. Regression analysis was performed to relate components with outcomes such as business performance indicators.

### **Group 3: Mission impact on employees**

Studies within this group question whether a mission statement is really a useful management tool and, most importantly, useful for what?

Klemm et al. (1991) make an important distinction when specifying that mission statements can be used for either internal—using the mission statement to motivate employees and to align staff objectives or external purposes—to enhance company image and promote external relations. Results signalled that mission statements are seen by managers to have a more important role internally than externally. This finding is in line with the fact that many companies do not publicise their mission outside of the

company, neither on their webpage (Bart, 2001) nor in their annual reports (Leuthesser & Kohli, 1997).

Once the main role of the mission statement was identified, that of shaping corporate identity (Leuthesser & Kohli, 1997) and improving employee motivation, some researchers investigated how effective the mission statement was in achieving this goal. Their conclusion was that the mission statement can only accomplish its goal if it is well formulated (Ireland & Hitt, 1992) and properly used (Mullane, 2002). At this point it is worth highlighting that companies' performance should be measured not only in economic terms but also on how good companies accomplish their mission (Bagnoli & Megali, 2009). In this sense, the mission can be considered as a "cultural glue" that permits an organisation to work as a collective unity. The mission should act as a philosophy that enables employees to understand the daily activities and actions in the same way and also to speak a common language. Campbell and Yeung (1991) distinguished two 'schools of thought' to describe the mission: in terms of business strategy and/or in terms of philosophy and ethics.

This latter perspective is the one adopted by Ostapski and Isaacs (1992) who argued that the mission statement, together with the code of ethics, plays an important role in defining an institutional context that supports the self-assessment process in business ethics. Similarly, Blodgett et al. (2011) discovered that US-based family businesses state more frequently their ethical values in the mission statement than their non-family corporate and international counterparts. Their findings suggest that the family business mission statement serves to provide ethical direction for the business.

Another topic related to mission and ethics is the business codes. Business ethical codes differ somewhat from professional codes and mission statements, yet the concepts are commonly interchanged by managers and sometimes misunderstood in the literature (Pearce & David, 1987). However, business codes are largely study. For example, Stevens (1994) studied the content and effectiveness of codes and how business codes are communicated and interiorised by workers, as well as how they influence workers' behaviour. More recently, Kaptein (2004) analysed the business codes of the largest corporations in the world.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the creation and development of ethics programmes within an academic context. Weber (2006) suggests the business school's attention to mission statements, curriculum development, ethics policy, and programme oversight and outcome assessment. An ethical culture and daily workplace environment begin with a solid commitment in the corporate mission.

#### **Group 4: Mission impact on organisational performance**

Research examining the relationship between mission statements and performance is scarce and inconclusive (Green and Medlin 2003; Atrill et al. 2005). Three main reasons support this diversity. First, studies have been conducted in various environments and employing different performance metrics. From the studies surveyed, business performance has been operationalised through a variety of metrics, ranging from the satisfaction and behaviour of key stakeholders to the financial performance of the company. Second, there are important discrepancies with what many organisations call a mission statement, observing a common overlap between a mission statement and a vision statement (Khalifa, 2011). Third, some authors argue that rather than the existence of a direct association between mission statement and performance, there are several intermediary outputs that mediate between these two constructs (Williams et al., 2014). Mixed results are therefore reported in the literature.

Within this category, there is a first group of studies suggesting that well-developed mission statements positively impact on the behavioural performance of a firm. Following this rationale, Hall et al. (1970) and Schneider et al. (1971) proved that once the mission statement is well stabilised, individuals accept it as their values and goals until the point that their behaviour changes. Demb et al. (1989) and Lin (2012) also elaborate on this issue. Both articles conclude that without a common mission statement, groups are subject to unconscious behavioural tendencies. In the airline context, Lin (2012) stressed the importance of the safety mission statement, which was found to be effective for building commitment and enthusiasm among employees. Yet, results showed that the safety mission statement had a negative direct effect on the pilot's safety behaviour. As Williams et al. (2005) and Rolls et al. (2008) signalled the effectiveness of a mission statement relies on the extent to which it is communicated to the employees.

There is a second group of studies that concentrates on the customer's component of mission statements and tries to establish a connection between this component and firm performance. In Germain and Cooper (1990) the authors investigated how written customer-service mission statements generate an advantage in the face of competitors. Their findings indicated that when mission statements include a customer-service orientation, the firm has internalised the key role of the customer, and thus, their activities are intentionally customer-oriented.

Another group of studies conceptualises the performance of the firm as financial performance. For instance, Bart and Baetz (1998) investigated whether there is a specific content of a mission statement that correlates with firm performance using from a sample of 136 executives from 500 large Canadian organisations. The authors found that firms with a formal written mission statement had a significantly higher ROS but a low



percentage of change in profits and sales. Metrics about the financial performance of the firm were found to be significantly higher for those firms that clearly articulate organisational values, identify financial goals, and recognise the organisation's purpose(s) in their mission statement. Also, they found that the higher the involvement of internal stakeholder in the mission development process, the higher the ROS. Similarly, in those firms in which employees displayed satisfaction concerning the mission development process, the financial performance was greater. Another key finding was that when the mission statement was highly aligned with its firm's performance evaluation system, the result was a much more focused resource allocation process in which the firm's efforts were concentrated and its resources efficiently distributed and consumed.

A couple of years later, Bart et al. (2001) proposed a new model suggesting that several mediating elements interfere in the relationship between mission statement rationale and firm performance. In this case, firm performance was operationalised through the ROA, the ROS, and managers' satisfaction with the overall financial performance of the firm. A survey was designed and sent to 83 of the largest corporations in North America. Using structural equation modelling, the authors validated that mission statements impact on employee behaviour, a construct that has a direct relationship with financial performance. The recent work of Williams et al. (2014) also discussed this moderation effect. Particularly, the authors focus on how each of the component actions relating to top management commitment impacts on this relationship.

Firm performance has also been understood as the ability to address stakeholders' issues. In Barktus and Glassman (2008), the authors investigated mission content alignment with firms' actions. Using mission statements from the top 100 firms listed in the Fortune 500, they observed that not all firms practice what they preach in their mission. Based on these results, one might question whether mission statements really matter. This paradigm is the starting point of the work of Hirota et al. (2010), who, in the Japanese setting found empirical evidence that mission statements have a significant impact on corporate policies and outcomes. However, this only applies to companies in which norms and values are widely shared and intensely held throughout the organisation. Their results also confirmed that strong-mission firms performed better than weak-mission firms.

Although the vast majority of studies concentrate on top firms operating in international markets, there are several works doing so in other sectors. In the educational context Palmer and Short (2008) analysed the relationship between the content of mission statements from 408 US business colleges and measures of performance. Drawing on Kaplan and Norton's (1992) balance scorecard approach, they found a significant association between the vector of eight mission components of Pearce and David (1987) and performance. Also remarkable is the study of Sufi and Lyons (2003), which

evaluated mission statements of 30 top hospitality enterprises and tested them for correlation with financial performance indicators. The findings revealed a statistically significant correlation between the mission statements and the annual turnover.

The overarching conclusion is that although the literature is still limited, all these studies seem to converge in signalling a correlation between a complete mission statement and superior firm performance. Mission statements are conceived as a powerful tool for companies. Nevertheless, for this positive effect with firm performance to take place, it is necessary to develop pre-development mission rationale and post-development mission alignment with employee behaviours. The engagement of all the stakeholders is crucial in order to make mission statements worthwhile.

Mission statements have also been studied in the family business literature. Prior research advocates that the process of formulating a mission statement is influenced by the need to ensure the health of the business (Chandler 1962) and by the health of the family (Ward 1987; Harris et al. 1994). Succession is used as a part of the business strategy by family businesses, becoming one of the most important and problematic issues for family business survival (Handler 1994). Aiming at shedding new light on this issue, Leon-Guerrero et al. (1998) surveyed 1,000 family businesses in Washington State. The authors observed that as the number of family generations increased, utilisation levels of family mission statements increased significantly.

Another viewpoint in our literature review is that some non-profit organisations developed new mission statements as their activities and partners change. A recent study by Koch et al. (2015) examined the effects of non-profit organisations' resource streams and network ties on changes to the services provided and clientele served as specified in the mission statements. They also observed that non-profit organisations are likely to change the activities and beneficiaries defined in their mission statements to mirror those of organisations with whom they work with.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

Research on mission statements has mainly followed a practitioner's perspective. Predominantly, published works have reviewed mission statements from top companies and analysed which are the main components and how the different stakeholders were involved in the definitional process of the mission. Although these studies provide interesting insights to practitioners on how to improve their missions and reinforce customer's and employees' commitment to the firm, one of the main gaps observed is the lack of a theoretical corpus in which to be grounded.

Accordingly, a clear avenue for future research is to reinforce the theoretical framework related to mission statement research. Theoretical perspectives that can contribute to and be expanded by research on mission statements are diverse and can be applied either at the organizational level or at the individual level. At the organizational level, literature on institutional stakeholders' perspectives and corporate governance could contribute to the mission statement literature. Following Suchman (1995) and Freeman and Reed (1983) one might question "what is the effect of the organisational mission statement on organisational legitimacy?" Theories related to organisational identity and social capital (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002) could also be a lens to look at the role of the mission statement. At the micro-level, focusing on how mission statements affect employee beliefs and behaviours, Goal-framing theory (Lindenberg & Steg, 2013) or self-efficacy theory (Maddux 1995) could also be successfully applied to mission statement research.

In addition to strengthening the theoretical background, a lot can be improved in the methods. Works reviewed typically use case studies that are not properly justified. In the quantitative papers, the statistical analyses tend to be restricted to basic descriptive statistics and mean comparison t-tests. In addition, the articles analyse cross-sectional data, making the observation of cause-effect relationships difficult. Answering questions such as the effect of mission statements on performance indicators will improve with the use of longitudinal analysis.

A clear and shared mission statement is supposed to enhance employee motivation and promote ethical behaviour, but those findings have not been empirically tested. Future studies should investigate the extent to which external forces —e.g., economic conditions and competition— together with internal ones —e.g., organisational culture, human resource practices, organisational structure, and technology— mediate the relationship between the mission statement, performance and employees' motivation.

Moreover, if the mission statement is considered a critical communication tool (Bartkus et al., 2000), it is relevant to study how effective this communication is. This stream of research can also contribute to the literature on mission statements and has already been pointed out by the research on mission in practice, which differentiates between espoused mission versus real mission (Cardona and Rey 2008). Similarly, if the mission is used as a communication tool, another relevant question is about the renovation or update of the mission statement. As Drucker (1973) pointed out, businesses must have clear "what the business should be" even more than "what the business is".

There is also an important strand of the literature analysing whether there is a significant relationship between mission statements and performance, and if so, which is the resulting effect. Studies that have

adopted this approach mainly rely on descriptive statistics, lacking empirically robust models to test the hypotheses. Difficulty in obtaining homogenous data for all companies in the analysis might limit the way performance is currently measured.

As for those studies analysing the value chain ‘mission statement > behaviour > performance’, it is worth questioning whether the effects of this relationship are the same across sectors. Firms operate in a variety of contexts that entail substantial differences in how the mission impacts on the business and among the various stakeholders. The studies reviewed mirror this diversity, signalling that it is difficult to converge in a one-way directional and positive effect. Based on this evidence, we argue that it is highly complex to define a mission statement that is able to reflect all the different aspects of the company. Indeed, the need for future research emerges in different directions.

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