



# Workplace Autonomy and Affective Commitment: Psychological Mechanisms Linking Job Satisfaction and Organizational Loyalty

Mihaela RUS<sup>1</sup>, and Carmen Mihaela BĂICEANU<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania*

*The Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy*

<sup>2</sup>*Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, Ovidius University, Constanța*

## Abstract

The present research explores the relationship between workplace autonomy and employees' affective commitment within Romanian organizations, highlighting the role of job satisfaction as a mediating factor. In the Romanian socio-cultural context, where collectivist tendencies often prioritize compliance and collaboration over individual decision-making, autonomy at work has been less frequently studied. This study aimed to investigate whether granting employees greater freedom in task execution and decision-making strengthens their emotional attachment to the organization.

A quantitative correlational design was employed, with a sample of 215 employees from public and private institutions across several Romanian cities, representing diverse professional sectors. Data were collected through validated instruments measuring workplace autonomy, affective commitment, and job satisfaction, with strong reliability indices (Cronbach's  $\alpha > .80$ ). Results indicated a significant positive correlation between autonomy and affective commitment ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ), as well as between autonomy and job satisfaction ( $r = .401, p < .01$ ). Regression analyses demonstrated that autonomy at work is a significant predictor of affective commitment, explaining 27.4% of its variance, while job satisfaction further enhanced this relationship, raising the explained variance to 34.1%.

The findings suggest that in Romanian organizations, workplace autonomy contributes to stronger emotional bonds between employees and their employers, reinforcing organizational loyalty and reducing turnover intentions. These results underline the importance of managerial strategies that promote independence, decision-making flexibility, and trust in employees' capacities. By fostering autonomy, Romanian organizations can enhance both psychological well-being and long-term organizational commitment.

**Keywords:** Workplace Autonomy, Affective Commitment, Job Satisfaction, Romanian Organizations, Organizational Psychology

## **1.Introduction**

Employee commitment has long been recognized as a determinant of organizational success, influencing productivity, retention, and overall organizational effectiveness (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Within the broader construct of organizational commitment, affective commitment—defined as employees' identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to their organization (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982)—is consistently associated with the most favorable outcomes. Employees with high affective commitment demonstrate greater loyalty, reduced turnover intentions, and enhanced discretionary effort, making it a vital psychological resource for organizations (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001).

One of the key antecedents of affective commitment is workplace autonomy. Autonomy refers to the degree of independence and discretion employees have in decision-making, task execution, and work scheduling (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). High levels of autonomy have been linked to intrinsic motivation, higher job satisfaction, and stronger organizational attachment (Galletta, Portoghese, & Battistelli, 2011; Nakayama, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that when employees are trusted to take initiative and control over their work, they experience greater psychological empowerment, which strengthens their emotional ties to the organization (Naqvi, Ishtiaq, Kanwal, & Ali, 2013; Sisodia & Das, 2013).

Despite these findings, the specific relationship between autonomy and affective commitment has not been widely investigated in the Romanian context. Romania's organizational culture, influenced by both collectivist traditions and post-socialist structural transformations, often places greater emphasis on hierarchical authority and compliance than on individual discretion (Popescu & Deaconu, 2015). This cultural orientation may shape the way autonomy is perceived and enacted within organizations, potentially altering its impact on job satisfaction and commitment compared to Western, individualistic contexts.

Moreover, existing research has primarily examined autonomy and commitment in large Western economies or emerging Asian markets, leaving a gap in understanding how these constructs interact in Eastern European societies (Chordiya, Sabharwal, & Goodman, 2017). Given the current labor market challenges in Romania, including skilled workforce migration to Western Europe and increasing competition for talent (Anghel, Botezat, Coșciug, Manafi, & Roman, 2016), it is crucial to explore psychological mechanisms that foster employee loyalty and reduce turnover.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment among Romanian employees. By addressing this gap, it seeks to provide both theoretical insights into organizational psychology in post-transition societies and practical recommendations for managers seeking to strengthen employee retention and organizational stability.

## **2.Literature Review**

### **2.1 Workplace Autonomy**

Workplace autonomy is a central construct in organizational psychology, conceptualized as the degree of discretion and independence an employee has in carrying out work tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). It encompasses freedom in choosing work methods, controlling scheduling, and influencing evaluation criteria (Breugh, 1999). Autonomy is widely recognized as a key psychological resource because it enhances employees' sense of responsibility and ownership, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Empirical research consistently shows that autonomy is positively associated with higher job satisfaction, creativity, and

psychological empowerment (Naqvi, Ishtiaq, Kanwal, & Ali, 2013; Zychová, Fejfarová, & Jindrová, 2023).

Although autonomy tends to be less prevalent in collectivist or hierarchical organizational cultures (Çolak, Altinkurt, & Yilmaz, 2017), studies demonstrate that it remains a significant predictor of positive work attitudes even in such contexts (Sisodia & Das, 2013). This suggests that granting employees discretion and control over their work can generate motivational benefits across diverse cultural environments.

Meta-analytic evidence has substantially strengthened the empirical foundation of the relationships among autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment. Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007), synthesizing findings from over 200 studies, identified autonomy as one of the strongest predictors of job satisfaction ( $\rho = .46$ ) and affective commitment ( $\rho = .29$ ), consistent with the Job Characteristics Model. Complementary research indicates that autonomy also contributes to occupational well-being and may serve as a protective factor against burnout, thereby indirectly reinforcing affective commitment (Lee, Idris, & Delfabbro, 2017). From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, autonomy exerts its influence through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Van den Broeck et al. (2021) demonstrate that autonomy-supportive work environments promote more self-determined forms of motivation, higher job satisfaction, and more favorable attitudinal outcomes, positioning autonomy as a central resource for the development of affective organizational commitment.

In Romania and other European post-transition contexts, autonomy may hold particular relevance due to the persistence of bureaucratic and hierarchical institutional structures (Popescu & Deaconu, 2015). Romanian research highlights meaningful associations among workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment, while emphasizing contextual moderators such as leadership style and human resource practices. In centralized settings where autonomy is relatively scarce, even moderate degrees of discretion may produce substantial motivational benefits. Evidence from Southeastern European and Balkan organizational contexts further indicates that affective commitment is strongly influenced by relational and collectivist dimensions—such as interpersonal trust, psychosocial climate, and a sense of belonging—particularly within public or semi-public institutions (Alshetri, 2013; Chordiya, Sabharwal, & Goodman, 2017). These findings are consistent with broader European research emphasizing that autonomy and job satisfaction function as essential psychosocial resources even under structural constraints.

A foundational theoretical explanation for the role of autonomy in workplace attitudes is provided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). In their updated overview, Ryan and Deci (2020) clarify the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and emphasize that motivation varies in the degree to which it is autonomous or controlled. According to SDT, individuals experience optimal functioning and well-being when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. Autonomy, in particular, facilitates internalization processes through which employees come to identify with their work roles and organizational values, thereby fostering enhanced job satisfaction and stronger affective commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This theoretical framework provides a coherent explanation for the proposed motivational pathway linking workplace autonomy to job satisfaction and, ultimately, to affective organizational commitment.

## **2.2 Affective Commitment**

Emotional (or affective) commitment refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in their organization (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982;

Meyer & Allen, 1991). Employees with strong affective commitment are motivated not only by extrinsic rewards but by loyalty, trust, and value alignment with their organization (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). High levels of affective commitment are associated with lower turnover intentions, higher organizational citizenship behaviors, and improved performance (Robinson, 2023).

Cultural factors can influence the development of affective commitment. For example, collectivist contexts, including Eastern European countries such as Romania, may strengthen affective ties because loyalty and group belonging are highly valued (Alshetri, 2013; Chordiya, Sabharwal, & Goodman, 2017). However, in environments where employees perceive limited autonomy or top-down decision-making, affective commitment may be undermined, as workers feel less psychologically empowered.

### **2.3 Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction, defined as a positive emotional response to one's work experiences (Locke, 1969), plays a dual role as both a predictor and mediator of organizational commitment. Employees are more satisfied when they perceive fairness, recognition, and autonomy in their workplace (Luthans, 1998). Numerous studies confirm that job satisfaction correlates positively with affective commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Alsiewi & Agil, 2014). Moreover, job satisfaction can serve as a mechanism through which autonomy strengthens affective commitment: autonomy enhances satisfaction, which in turn deepens affective attachment to the organization (Brown & Barker, 2019; Lima & Allida, 2021).

In Romania, where job insecurity and migration pressures have been salient over the past two decades (Anghel et al., 2016), satisfaction may be particularly important in fostering stability and commitment. Organizations that neglect satisfaction-enhancing factors, including autonomy, risk losing valuable talent to more attractive labor markets abroad.

### **2.4 Integrated Perspective**

Taken together, the literature suggests a robust theoretical framework: autonomy is expected to foster satisfaction, which subsequently reinforces affective commitment. This aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that autonomy is a fundamental psychological need whose fulfillment strengthens motivation and well-being. By situating this relationship in the Romanian context, the present study contributes to filling a research gap in Eastern European organizational psychology while offering practical implications for retention strategies in competitive labor markets.

## **3. Methodology of Research**

### **3.1 Aim Of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment among employees in Romanian organizations. Specifically, the research seeks to determine whether greater autonomy in task execution and decision-making predicts higher levels of job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment, and whether job satisfaction serves as a mediating mechanism in this relationship. By addressing this aim, the study contributes both theoretically—by extending organizational psychology models to the Romanian context—and practically, by providing insights for managers seeking to strengthen employee well-being, loyalty, and retention in a competitive labor market.

To address this gap, the present study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is workplace autonomy associated with employees' affective commitment in Romanian organizations?

RQ2: How does workplace autonomy influence employees' job satisfaction?

RQ3: Does job satisfaction mediate the relationship between autonomy and affective commitment?

Based on prior research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Workplace autonomy is positively associated with employees' affective commitment.

H2: Workplace autonomy is positively associated with employees' job satisfaction.

H3: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between workplace autonomy and affective commitment.

These research questions and hypotheses provide the conceptual framework for the methodological design outlined in the following section.

### 3.2 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design aimed at exploring the relationships between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment in Romanian organizations. A correlational approach was selected because the purpose of the research was not to manipulate variables experimentally, but rather to identify associations and predictive relationships among constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### 3.3 Participants

The sample consisted of 215 employees (64% female, 36% male) drawn from public and private organizations across Romania, including sectors such as education, healthcare, IT, and public administration. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 61 years ( $M = 37.4$ ,  $SD = 8.9$ ). Work experience varied between 1 and 32 years ( $M = 10.8$ ,  $SD = 7.6$ ).

The sampling frame consisted of employees working in public and private organizations in Romania across several sectors. Participants were recruited through professional networks, institutional mailing lists, and online dissemination channels (e.g., organizational communication platforms and social media groups targeting professionals).

Inclusion criteria required participants to:

- (a) be at least 18 years old;
- (b) be currently employed (full-time or part-time);
- (c) have a minimum of six months of tenure within their current organization.

Exclusion criteria included temporary interns, unemployed individuals, and incomplete survey responses.

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in professional backgrounds. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed in accordance with ethical research standards.

### 3.4 Instruments

• **Workplace Autonomy Scale** (Breugh, 1999). This 9-item scale assesses employees' perceptions of autonomy in work methods, scheduling, and evaluation. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). In the present study, internal consistency was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

- **Affective Commitment Scale** (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). This 9-item measure assesses employees' emotional attachment to and identification with their organization. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. In this study, the scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).
- **Job Satisfaction Scale** (Locke, 1969). The 5-item scale measures overall job satisfaction. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Internal consistency in the present sample was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

All instruments were translated and back-translated following standard cross-cultural adaptation procedures to ensure linguistic equivalence. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of Romanian employees to confirm clarity and comprehensibility.

### 3.5 Procedure

Data collection was conducted online using a secure survey platform between March and May 2025. Participants received the link via email and professional networks, with clear instructions and an estimated completion time of 10 minutes. Ethical approval was obtained from the host university's ethics committee. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary, data would remain confidential, and they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. First, descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were computed for all scales. Pearson correlations were conducted to examine relationships among variables. To test hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were employed, with autonomy as the predictor and affective commitment as the outcome variable. Job satisfaction was entered as a mediator using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with bootstrapping (5,000 samples). Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

### Conceptual model

The hypothesized relationships are presented in **Figure 1**. Workplace autonomy is expected to positively predict affective commitment (H1) and job satisfaction (H2). In addition, job satisfaction is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between autonomy and affective commitment (H3).

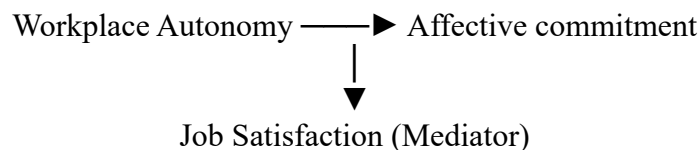


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the relationship between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment.

### 3.7 Results

#### Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Descriptive statistics and reliability indices for the main study variables are displayed in Table 1. Overall, employees reported moderately high levels of workplace autonomy ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), suggesting that participants generally perceived a fair degree of independence in making decisions about how to perform their tasks, manage their time, and evaluate their work outcomes. Affective commitment also scored relatively high ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ), indicating that, on average, employees felt a strong affective bond with their organizations, characterized

by loyalty, identification with organizational values, and willingness to remain in their current workplace. Job satisfaction, while somewhat lower than the other variables, was still reported at a moderate-to-high level ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), reflecting overall positive evaluations of work experiences.

The range of responses indicated substantial variability across participants. For workplace autonomy, scores ranged from 1.80 to 4.90, suggesting that while some employees reported limited autonomy, others experienced very high levels of decision-making freedom. Affective commitment scores ranged between 1.90 and 4.90, confirming heterogeneity in the extent to which employees were emotionally attached to their organizations. Job satisfaction varied between 1.60 and 4.80, demonstrating that although many participants expressed satisfaction, a subset reported relatively low contentment with their work conditions.

All three scales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .84 to .89. According to Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) guidelines, alpha coefficients above .70 indicate acceptable reliability, while values above .80 are considered good. Thus, the instruments employed in this study provided stable and consistent measures of the targeted constructs. The highest reliability was observed for the Workplace Autonomy Scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ), followed by Job Satisfaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and Affective commitment ( $\alpha = .84$ ). These results suggest that the scales were psychometrically sound for the Romanian sample and suitable for subsequent correlational and regression analyses.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Main Variables (N = 215)

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Min	Max
Workplace autonomy	3.54	0.72	.89	1.80	4.90
Job satisfaction	3.42	0.74	.86	1.60	4.80
Affective commitment	3.67	0.68	.84	1.90	4.90

## Correlations

Pearson correlation coefficients among the three main variables are presented in Table 2. As hypothesized, workplace autonomy was positively and significantly correlated with affective commitment ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating a moderate-to-strong association (Cohen, 1988). This finding suggests that employees who perceive higher levels of independence in their daily work tasks also tend to experience stronger emotional bonds with their organizations.

Workplace autonomy was also positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ), representing a moderate relationship. This result is consistent with previous research indicating that when employees are allowed to make decisions regarding their work methods and schedules, they report greater satisfaction with their jobs (Gözükara & Çolakoğlu, 2016; Zychová, Fejfarová, & Jindrová, 2023). In the Romanian context, where organizational structures are often hierarchical and decision-making is centralized, this association underscores the potential benefits of empowering employees with greater autonomy.

Finally, job satisfaction was positively correlated with affective commitment ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .01$ ), reflecting a moderate relationship. This suggests that employees who are more satisfied with their jobs also exhibit higher levels of affective attachment to their organizations. Such a link aligns with earlier studies conducted in different cultural contexts (Brown & Barker, 2019; Lima & Allida, 2021), and highlights the universal importance of job satisfaction as a precursor of affective commitment.

Together, these correlations provide preliminary support for the study hypotheses: workplace autonomy appears to be an important predictor of both job satisfaction and affective

commitment. The strength of these relationships suggests that even in Romania, where organizational autonomy is often underemphasized, granting employees more independence could serve as a key psychological lever for enhancing organizational loyalty.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations Between Main Variables (N = 215)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Workplace autonomy	—		
2. Job satisfaction	.40**	—	
3. Affective commitment	.52**	.46**	—

p < .01, \*\* (two-tailed).

The correlation coefficients were below the .80 threshold, suggesting that multicollinearity was unlikely to pose a problem in subsequent regression analyses.

### Regression Analyses

Prior to conducting regression analyses, key assumptions were tested. Residuals were examined for normality using histograms and Q–Q plots. Homoscedasticity and linearity were assessed through scatterplots of standardized residuals. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated acceptable tolerance values (> .20) and VIF values below 5, confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern.

To test H1 and H2, two separate regression models were estimated, with workplace autonomy entered as the predictor.

In the first model, workplace autonomy significantly predicted affective commitment,  $\beta = .46$ ,  $t(213) = 8.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.35, .56], explaining 27.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = .27$ ). This indicates that employees who reported higher levels of autonomy were more likely to develop strong affective bonds with their organizations. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, this represents a large effect, suggesting that autonomy is a robust predictor of emotional attachment in Romanian workplaces.

In the second model, autonomy significantly predicted job satisfaction,  $\beta = .40$ ,  $t(213) = 6.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 16.0% of the variance ( $R^2 = .16$ ). This confirms H2 and supports the assumption that autonomy contributes positively to employees' evaluations of their work experiences. Although the explained variance is more modest compared to affective commitment, the effect is still meaningful in practical terms, especially given the contextual challenges of Romanian organizational structures, where hierarchical control often limits decision-making freedom.

In an additional step, age, gender, and work experience were entered as control variables in both regression models. The inclusion of demographic covariates did not substantially alter the magnitude or significance of the main effects. Workplace autonomy remained a statistically significant predictor of both affective commitment and job satisfaction, indicating that the observed relationships were robust beyond demographic influences.

To further test H3, both autonomy and job satisfaction were included as predictors of affective commitment in a multiple regression model. The model was statistically significant,  $F(2, 212) = 54.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , and accounted for 34.1% of the variance in affective commitment ( $R^2 = .34$ ). In this model, both autonomy ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and job satisfaction ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) remained significant predictors, suggesting that job satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between autonomy and commitment. The increase in explained variance (from 27.4% to 34.1%) indicates that job satisfaction adds explanatory power beyond the direct effect of autonomy alone.

From a practical perspective, these findings imply that Romanian managers can strengthen employees' emotional ties to their organizations not only by granting them greater autonomy but also by ensuring that this autonomy translates into higher satisfaction with their jobs. In other words, autonomy functions both as a direct predictor and as an indirect pathway to commitment through job satisfaction.

### **Mediation Analysis**

To examine H3, Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2018) was employed to test whether job satisfaction mediates the relationship between workplace autonomy and affective commitment. Workplace autonomy was specified as the independent variable, job satisfaction as the mediator, and affective commitment as the dependent variable. A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was used to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effect.

Results indicated that workplace autonomy significantly predicted job satisfaction ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and both autonomy ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and job satisfaction ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ) significantly predicted affective commitment. The indirect effect of autonomy on affective commitment through job satisfaction was .13, with a 95% CI [.07, .21]. Because the confidence interval did not include zero, the mediation effect was statistically significant, indicating partial mediation.

Given that all variables were assessed using self-report measures within a single survey, the potential influence of common method bias (CMB) was carefully examined. As an initial diagnostic, Harman's single-factor test was conducted by entering all measurement items into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis. The first factor accounted for 32% of the total variance, well below the commonly referenced 50% threshold, suggesting that common method variance is unlikely to represent a substantial threat.

However, as Harman's test alone cannot fully rule out method bias, its limitations are acknowledged. Although a marker variable was not included in the original design, future research could incorporate a theoretically unrelated construct to statistically control for method variance. Additionally, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) approach comparing the proposed multi-factor measurement model with a single-factor model would provide a more stringent assessment of potential common method effects.

To further mitigate this risk, several procedural remedies were implemented at the design stage, including guaranteeing anonymity, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, and employing validated instruments with clearly differentiated item wording and response formats. Together with the moderate intercorrelations observed and evidence of discriminant validity among constructs, these considerations suggest that common method bias is unlikely to have substantially inflated the reported associations.

These findings support H3, indicating that job satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between autonomy and affective commitment. Workplace autonomy exerts both a direct influence on employees' affective attachment and an indirect influence by enhancing job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, it is important to interpret the mediation results with caution. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the design, causal inferences cannot be definitively established, and the temporal ordering of variables remains theoretically assumed rather than empirically verified. Longitudinal or experimental research designs would be required to more rigorously test the directional pathways implied by the mediation model.

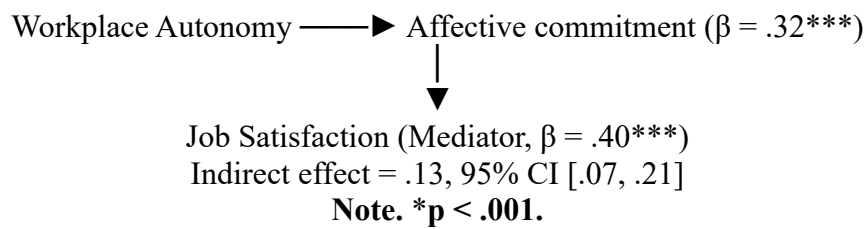


Figure 2: Mediation model with standardized coefficients

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment among Romanian employees. The results confirmed the proposed hypotheses: workplace autonomy was positively associated with both job satisfaction and affective commitment, while job satisfaction partially mediated the autonomy–commitment link. These findings extend existing organizational psychology literature by validating international evidence (Galletta, Portoghesi, & Battistelli, 2011; Sisodia & Das, 2013) in the Romanian context, where autonomy has often been underemphasized in managerial practices.

The strong positive association between autonomy and affective commitment indicates that granting employees greater freedom in decision-making and task execution fosters stronger affective bonds with their organizations. This aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies autonomy as a fundamental psychological need, and with meta-analytic studies highlighting autonomy as a robust predictor of affective commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). The mediation analysis further revealed that autonomy influences commitment both directly and indirectly through job satisfaction, underscoring its dual role as both an antecedent and a mechanism of organizational loyalty.

For Romanian organizations, these findings hold important implications. Management practices rooted in hierarchical structures and strict oversight may undermine employees' affective ties, whereas autonomy-supportive strategies can enhance satisfaction, strengthen loyalty, and reduce turnover. Encouraging employees to exercise discretion in work methods, involving them in decision-making processes, and adopting flexible scheduling are practical strategies that can help translate autonomy into commitment. Such approaches are particularly relevant given Romania's labor market challenges, including workforce migration and high turnover rates (Anghel, Botezat, Coşciug, Manafi, & Roman, 2016).

Emerging evidence suggests that the strength of the relationships among job autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment depends on several contextual moderators that delineate their boundary conditions. Organizational culture represents a central moderating factor: in hierarchical, control-oriented cultures, autonomy tends to exert stronger effects because it constitutes a scarce and valued resource, whereas in more participatory or clan-type cultures its incremental benefits may be less pronounced. Leadership style also shapes these dynamics. Transformational and empowering leadership amplify the positive impact of autonomy by fostering psychological safety, self-efficacy, and value alignment, while authoritarian or transactional leadership may constrain employees' capacity to translate autonomy into meaningful satisfaction or commitment. Additional potential moderators include perceived organizational support, job complexity, and sectoral differences, all of which can strengthen or attenuate the autonomy–commitment link. Considering these boundary conditions provides a more nuanced understanding of when and for whom autonomy is most

beneficial, underscoring the need for theoretically grounded, context-sensitive interpretations of the findings.

In conclusion, workplace autonomy emerges as a powerful predictor of affective commitment among Romanian employees, both directly and indirectly via job satisfaction. By fostering autonomy, organizations can build healthier, more sustainable workplaces where employees feel valued, empowered, and emotionally connected to their institutions.

#### **4.1 Interpretation of Findings**

First, the significant positive relationship between workplace autonomy and affective commitment (H1) highlights the role of independence and discretion in fostering affective attachment. This is consistent with prior research in Western and Asian contexts showing that autonomy enhances organizational loyalty and identification (Galletta, Portoghese, & Battistelli, 2011; Sisodia & Das, 2013). Our results demonstrate that even in Romania, where hierarchical and collectivist organizational cultures may constrain autonomy, granting employees more decision-making power strengthens their emotional ties to the organization.

Second, autonomy was positively related to job satisfaction (H2), confirming earlier findings that independence in work tasks enhances employees' evaluations of their jobs (Naqvi, Ishtiaq, Kanwal, & Ali, 2013; Zychová, Fejfarová, & Jindrová, 2023). While the variance explained was more modest compared to affective commitment, this relationship remains important, as satisfaction serves as both a desirable outcome in itself and a mechanism for commitment.

Third, mediation analysis supported H3, showing that job satisfaction partially mediated the autonomy–commitment link. This suggests that autonomy operates through two complementary pathways: directly by empowering employees to align with organizational values, and indirectly by fostering satisfaction with their work. This finding aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes autonomy as a fundamental psychological need. It also echoes meta-analytic evidence that satisfaction plays a key role in shaping commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Brown & Barker, 2019).

#### **4.2 Implications for Romanian Organizations**

The findings carry several practical implications. Romanian organizations often operate within hierarchical, compliance-oriented structures, where decision-making authority is concentrated at managerial levels (Popescu & Deaconu, 2015). Our results suggest that such structures may inadvertently limit employee commitment. By contrast, granting greater autonomy—such as allowing employees to choose work methods, manage schedules, and participate in performance evaluation—could enhance satisfaction and strengthen affective attachment, reducing turnover and increasing organizational stability.

This is particularly relevant given Romania's ongoing labor market challenges, including high rates of skilled workforce migration to Western Europe (Anghel, Botezat, Coșciug, Manafi, & Roman, 2016). Employers who fail to meet employees' psychological needs risk losing talent, while those who create autonomy-supportive environments are more likely to retain a committed workforce. Autonomy, therefore, represents a low-cost but high-impact strategy for employee retention in a competitive labor market.

#### **4.3 Theoretical Contributions**

The study contributes to organizational psychology literature by:

1. Confirming the cross-cultural robustness of autonomy as a predictor of affective commitment.

2. Demonstrating that job satisfaction is not only an outcome of autonomy but also a mediator linking autonomy to affective commitment.
3. Extending these findings to an Eastern European context, thus addressing a gap in the literature that has predominantly focused on Western and Asian settings.

## **5.Limitations**

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the use of a cross-sectional design prevents strong conclusions about causality. While significant associations were observed between workplace autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment, it cannot be determined with certainty whether autonomy leads to greater commitment, or whether employees who are already committed perceive their work as more autonomous. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish temporal ordering and causal pathways.

Second, the sample was limited to employees from a select number of professional sectors, such as education, healthcare, IT, and public administration. Although this provides diversity, it may not capture the full variability of autonomy and commitment across all Romanian industries. For example, autonomy levels may differ substantially between creative sectors, where independence is encouraged, and highly bureaucratic sectors, where decision-making is centralized. Expanding the sample to include a wider range of industries and organizational sizes would enhance the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the sample cannot be considered fully representative of the Romanian workforce as a whole. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling methods, which may have resulted in the overrepresentation of certain sectors, such as education, healthcare, and public administration, where access through professional networks was more readily available. Consequently, employees from sectors characterized by different organizational structures or levels of autonomy (e.g., manufacturing, small private enterprises, or informal employment) may be underrepresented. This potential sectoral bias limits the generalizability of the findings and suggests that caution is warranted when extrapolating the results to all Romanian organizations.

Third, the study relied exclusively on self-reported measures, which are susceptible to common method variance and social desirability bias. Participants may have overstated their levels of satisfaction or commitment due to perceived expectations or organizational loyalty norms. To address this limitation, future studies should incorporate multi-source data, such as supervisor evaluations, peer assessments, or objective organizational indicators (e.g., turnover rates).

Finally, the study did not examine potential moderating or contextual variables, such as organizational culture, leadership style, or national cultural values, which may shape the relationship between autonomy and commitment. For instance, transformational leadership could amplify the positive effects of autonomy, while rigid hierarchical cultures may suppress them. Exploring such moderators would provide a more nuanced understanding of how autonomy operates within different organizational contexts. (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Despite these limitations, the present study provides valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms linking autonomy, job satisfaction, and affective commitment in Romanian organizations. By addressing these limitations, future research can further refine theoretical models and inform evidence-based managerial practices.

## **6.Future directions**

Building on the present findings, several avenues for future research can be identified. First, as this study employed a cross-sectional design, future research should adopt longitudinal or experimental approaches to better capture causal dynamics between workplace autonomy, job

satisfaction, and affective commitment. Such designs would clarify whether autonomy consistently predicts long-term commitment or whether reciprocal relationships exist.

Second, comparative studies across different organizational sectors in Romania could provide deeper insights into how autonomy functions in varied contexts. For instance, autonomy may be perceived differently in highly regulated sectors such as public administration compared to more flexible industries like IT or creative services. Future research should also consider cross-national comparisons, particularly between Romania and Western European countries, to identify cultural similarities and differences in how autonomy shapes commitment.

Third, exploring the role of moderating variables could refine existing models. Variables such as organizational culture, leadership style, or perceived organizational support may either strengthen or weaken the impact of autonomy on satisfaction and commitment. For example, autonomy-supportive leadership may amplify positive outcomes, while authoritarian leadership could suppress them.

Fourth, future studies should consider incorporating multi-source and multi-method data. Collecting information from supervisors, peers, or organizational performance metrics (e.g., absenteeism, turnover) would reduce reliance on self-reports and provide a more comprehensive assessment of how autonomy and commitment manifest in workplace behavior.

Finally, qualitative approaches—such as interviews or focus groups—could capture employees' subjective experiences of autonomy and commitment, providing rich contextual insights that complement quantitative findings. Such approaches may reveal unique cultural nuances in the Romanian workplace, including how historical legacies of centralization continue to influence perceptions of autonomy.

In sum, advancing research in these directions will contribute to a more complete understanding of autonomy as a psychological and organizational resource, while also informing evidence-based strategies to strengthen employee well-being and organizational sustainability in Romania and beyond.

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