

The Haskayne Report



Bridging the Motivation Gap Through Self-Determination

by Samuel Goldberg

It is widely accepted that creativity and innovation are critical for organizational performance and success (Andersen, et al., 2014). However, to achieve these metrics more reliably, managers must address employee motivation given evidence that only 15% of employees worldwide are engaged in their work (Gallup, 2017). This data indicates that there is something missing in organizations, but also sheds light on a great opportunity. With regards to worldwide employee engagement, Gallup Chairman and CEO Jim Clifton remarks, “What if we doubled that? What if we tripled it? Imagine how quickly that would fix global GDP, productivity and hence, human development.” (Gallup, 2017).

He also suggests that high performers are often encouraged in their development by someone at work (Gallup, 2017). This indicates that there are practical steps that managers can take to genuinely motivate employees that struggle with work disengagement. In order to understand how to fix this issue, it is critical to define two of the most important types of human motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation (i.e., the desire for an external reward, such as money) is the traditional approach to incentivizing employees. It continues to be critical for attracting employees and keeping them (Gerhart & Fang, 2015).

However, just because an employee is attracted and stays with a company does not necessarily mean they are satisfied (Gallup, 2017). Perhaps employees need to be incentivized by something else than just external rewards. Intrinsic motivation is “an incentive to engage in a specific activity that derives from pleasure in the activity itself rather than because of any external benefits that might be obtained.” (American Psychological Association, 2020). In other words, intrinsic motivation occurs when an activity is done merely for its own sake. Intrinsically motivated individuals have been shown to find their work more meaningful and to be more creative (Zhang et al, 2021). Zhang et al. (2021) found that intrinsically motivated university students were able to think of more creative ideas (those considered relevant, original, and practicable) in relation to a given online task than non-intrinsically motivated students given the same online task. Finding ways to motivate students and employees in an increasingly online world is critical for success, and fostering intrinsic motivation appears to be a key piece. So, it is clear that healthy workplaces require a balance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Pulling only on the extrinsic motivation lever can burn employees out and lead to dissatisfaction, whereas pulling on intrinsic motivation alone does not necessarily lead to optimal performance either (Gerhart & Fang, 2015). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are both important for employee engagement and satisfaction, and fall in a threshold (Gerhart et al., 2013). The authors discuss the importance of treating employees on a case-by-case basis whereby some require more intrinsic rewards than others and vice versa with extrinsic rewards.

Recommendation

The classic model of self-determination theory helps to bridge the gap between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and is an excellent way for managers to understand the psychology of their employees and subsequently improve work satisfaction and overall performance.

The factors that comprise self-determination theory are the three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cherry, K. 2021). A review completed by Deci & Ryan (2000) found that social environments that support these three needs increase intrinsic motivation, strengthen life aspirations, improve high-quality performance, and mental health. Roehrich et al. (2017) also demonstrated that partner relationships built on mutual autonomy, and one of competence or relatedness indicated satisfaction and increased performance.

Given these findings, managers can foster this same attitude in their employees by allowing them to have more creative control over their work (autonomy), more collaboration with others (relatedness) and instilling confidence in their employees (competence). Cultivating these needs in the workplace, combined with the right amounts of extrinsic motivators, will pave the way for a more engaged and satisfied employee, and therefore a more successful organization.

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