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Unpopular Opinion: Employees Don't Need Ping Pong Tables to be Motivated

Katelyn Poulson

“Radar” at 6:00 each morning has become a rather painful sound. After a full night’s rest, I still struggle to get up after the first alarm. My eyes remain glued shut as I fumble my hand over the nightstand to find the snooze button—my saving grace.

Waking up in the morning is difficult. The Sleep Review reported that 57% of Americans hit the snooze button and stay in bed for at least five extra minutes a day.ⁱ That adds up to 35 minutes each week, 150 minutes each month, and 1,800 minutes each year that we spend just lying in bed after the alarm sounds. Why do we waste so much time?

The point is that we are fairly unmotivated people. If we struggle to motivate ourselves, how do we even begin to understand how to motivate others?

Many businesses have resorted to a new solution. Companies place large amounts of money into building fun and interactive break rooms, providing unlimited snacks and drinks, and even offering unlimited vacation days. I believe that companies should ditch the new, “innovative” way of motivating employees with extravagant benefits and instead channel their efforts into developing the intrinsic motivation of each employee so that they are able to find joy and satisfaction in hard work.

Motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, increases performance levels in the workplace.ⁱⁱ When identifying which steps they should take to keep their employees motivated, employers often turn to tangible things that are easy to measure. For example, if managers feel that John is a valuable asset to their team, they may give him a pay raise or monetary bonus to increase his job satisfaction. Salaries and working conditions are factors that can be adapted to the individual employee quite easily. This is why we have seen a burst of ping pong tables, free snacks, and outrageous benefits among different companies. While these factors may *appear* to be motivators, in reality they are not. According to Frederick Herzberg, motivators are factors that highlight the “intrinsic nature” of the job, actually encouraging employees to put in more effort.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are differences between *motivators* and *hygiene factors*.

Hygiene factors, by definition, do not motivate employees, but their absence may lead to dissatisfaction. Working conditions are a basic example of a hygiene factor, but other surprising examples include safety, supervision, and even salary.^{iv} Few people would be outraged or feel unmotivated by the absence of a game room at their corporate office.

Let's break it down further: Company A is located in Chicago—a city that experiences harsh, cold winters. Employees complain there is no heater in the office space and that it causes discomfort in the workplace. However, Company B is also located in Chicago and keeps their office space heated at a pleasant temperature. Employees make few comments regarding the office temperature. When lacking the comfort of a warm office, employees appear to be unmotivated. On the other hand, when experiencing this basic comfort, employees will likely fail to take advantage of the heated office space.

In contrast, motivators do lead to more hard-working employees. Motivators usually are *intrinsic* rewards that propel employees to work harder. Some examples of intrinsic motivators are increased responsibility in the workplace and recognition for a job well done.

What is an intrinsic reward?

Intrinsic rewards originate from the work itself, like autonomy and challenge. However, extrinsic rewards are external from the task or work being done. Examples include pay and benefits. In a Turkish study, researchers evaluated the motivation of employees in the manufacturing industry. The study found that “intrinsic rewards have a significant influence on employee results; however, extrinsic rewards do not have a significant influence on employee results.” Intrinsically motivated people actually perform better at work.^v

Johnmarshall Reeve suggests that “people use rewards expecting to gain the benefit of increasing another person’s motivation and behavior, but in so doing, they often incur the unintentional and hidden cost of undermining that person’s intrinsic motivation toward the activity.”^{vi} Implementing extrinsic rewards may not only be less effective than introducing intrinsic rewards, but may also deteriorate the intrinsic motivation already instilled in the individual and deteriorate the quality of work.

Contrary to popular belief, extrinsic rewards are not effective “in addition to” intrinsic rewards. When in place, the extrinsic reward actually replaces the intrinsic reward and decreases motivation.^{vii}

Daniel Pink shares a similar opinion in his book *Drive* arguing that “a concern for outside rewards might actually hinder the eventual success.”^{viii} In a study conducted at Harvard Business School, 23 professional artists were selected to provide a piece of their art to a panel of judges. Ten commissioned works and ten non-commissioned works were presented to the judges who rated the works of art based on creativity. The study found that the commissioned pieces were “significantly less creative than the non-commissioned works.” The artists claimed that “when you are doing a piece for someone else it becomes more “work” than joy.”^{ix} Similarly, when

working for others, we find less satisfaction in our own work. We lose creativity and the drive to succeed.

Why is there the expectation that companies must take extreme measures in order to have a team of motivated employees?

If we can shift from providing extrinsic rewards to providing intrinsic rewards for high-performing individuals, the quality of human capital will increase. Clearly, employees need to be paid and benefits need to be provided. However, we should steer away from monetary rewards and promotions. Employees will not wonder why they don't have luxurious items and rewards as long as they are invested in the work they are doing and are treated fairly.

Humans have much more potential than they are accredited. By striving toward promotion after promotion and competing for the highest bonus, we may feel that the reward fills our void. But we should fill ourselves with more substance and value. We feel valued when offered emotional support. We feel appreciated when spoken to in kind and affirmative words. We feel motivated when we work, not just for the monetary value, but with a bigger purpose in mind.

ⁱ "57% Of Americans Hit the Snooze Button." *Sleep Review: The Journal for Sleep Specialists*, August 27, 2014.

ⁱⁱ "Organizational Behavior." *University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing*, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Herzberg, Frederick, Bernard Mausner, and Barbara Bloch Snyderman. *The Motivation to Work*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Özutku, H. 2012. "The Influence of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards on Employee Results: An Empirical Analysis in Turkish Manufacturing Industry." *Business and Economics Research Journal*, 3(3), 29-48.

^{vi} Pink, Daniel H. "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us." New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2009.

^{vii} Frey, B. S. "On the Relationship between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Work Motivation." *International Journal of Industrial Organization* 15(4) (1997): 427.

^{viii} Pink, Daniel H. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2009.

^{ix} Ibid.