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Madeleine Pitcher

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Improving Intrinsic Motivation in the Workplace

By Madeleine Pitcher

Interested in motivation, Rochester experimental psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan conducted a study using a Soma puzzle cube. College students participating in the study were divided into two groups and placed into a room with the Soma cube and magazines. Each group was instructed to solve the Soma cube, but only one group of students were told they would be paid for correctly solving the cube.

Deci informed the college students they would be given a certain amount of time to solve the cube, and once time was up, he would leave the room for about ten minutes. Once Deci had exited the room, he observed the students' behavior. He discovered that a large number of the paid participants were starting to browse the magazines, while the unpaid participants continued trying to solve the cube as they waited for Deci to return to the room.¹

Intrinsic motivation is the natural satisfaction gained from engaging in behavior for its own sake, like the unpaid participants' behavior in the Soma puzzle cube study. *Extrinsic motivation*, on the other hand, is the drive to engage in behavior to seek a reward, such as the cash reward in the same study. With the Soma cube experiment in mind, managers across the United States are wondering how to tap into intrinsic motivation to increase productivity in their employees.

Let's take a look at why it's important to focus on intrinsic as compared to extrinsic motivation, why we do not see this focus more in the workplace, and how you can improve intrinsic motivation in your office.

Importance of Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation tends to increase employee performance more than extrinsic motivation. In a study done by Korn Ferry, 60% of employees who felt extrinsically motivated were reported to "exceed performance expectations." On the other hand, regarding the data with intrinsically motivated employees, the research found that 76% of employees "exceed[ed] performance expectations."²



Figure 1: Comparison of employees exceeding performance expectations based on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

The reason productivity is more prevalent within intrinsically motivated employees is linked to purpose. When employees understand the mission of their company and feel the intention of their work, they find self-fulfillment in completing tasks.

Intrinsic motivation is also preferred over extrinsic motivation because of its lack of authoritative control. Although extrinsic motivation may theoretically inspire action by giving out rewards, such as money, the sense of control from the reward inhibits the actual motivation to complete the task.³ Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, taps into natural satisfaction and makes employees complete the task because they actually enjoy doing the work.

Focusing on intrinsic motivation in the workplace also comes with the benefit of worker retention. For example, Singapore Airlines spends \$100 million a year to ensure employees are highly trained and feel competent in their autonomy and their ability to keep travelers happy. The airline also rotates employees “through different divisions . . . to keep employees interested” and up for the challenge. As a result of this type of motivation, Singapore Airlines’ cabin crews stay on the job an average of 10 years, while Singapore Airlines’ ground crews stay with the airline for more than 20 years.⁴

Why Intrinsic Motivation is Lacking

Because boredom results from a lack of motivation, if the work itself is not driving employees, then the employees are probably bored. Also, the reason their jobs have become boring is because the tasks become tedious and mundane over time.⁵ However, oftentimes workers remain at their boring jobs because they are extrinsically motivated by the need to be financially stable.

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If employees are stuck doing the same tasks at work, it is time to spice up the work environment by practicing the following:

1. Identify what the organization expects from their employees.
2. Teach employees a new skill.
3. Network across departments to encourage involvement in different parts of the workplace.

If employees are not bored but are still lacking intrinsic motivation, it is probably because there is too much challenge. When there is too much challenge in the work environment and employees cannot find a balance between difficulty and skill, they become stressed and burned out.

Surveys report that stress in the workplace has been rising over time. In fact, an “analysis of a major global employee survey covering almost 50 countries reveals that “employee stress has risen almost 20 per cent in three decades.”⁶ As a result of these rising numbers, the employees’ potential for innovation and adaptability is being obstructed by stress as it takes up space in the working memory.

Additionally, employees may be lacking a connection to the company. If employees do not feel valued and wanted by their organization, employees do not feel welcome to express their ideas. Also, everyone thinks differently, so implementing a more inclusive approach rather than pushing ideas on them could allow employees to bond with the company.⁷

How to Improve Intrinsic Motivation

After learning about what intrinsic motivation is and why it may be lacking within a company, now you may wonder what can be done about it. Interestingly, research done by “Gallup and the Hay Group find[s] that an employee’s immediate leader’s style has the greatest influence on employee engagement, morale, and performance.”⁸ Therefore, leaders within the organization can take responsibility for how the mood of the workplace is conveyed and improve their workplace environment by refraining from being rigid and helping employees understand why they’re working.

Refrain from Being Rigid

Organization is an asset to an efficient work environment, but too much control can be detrimental. Rigid workplaces stem from goals and decision-making trickling down from the top, as in a hierarchy.

In order to allow for more agility and success, create empowered and autonomous teams. When working in a team, meet frequently with a clear focus on output. Instead of providing teams with detailed instructions for projects, set out broad directions with strategic priorities.⁹ Refraining from strict hierarchy can allow for employees to develop company bonds and to feel empowered enough to speak up and collaborate.

Help Employees Understand the Why

Employees should know why they come to work every day. Paying the bills and achieving social appreciation are understandable incentives, but achieving these extrinsic aspirations every day gets exhausting and makes work feel wearisome. Therefore, employees should focus on finding work responsibilities that tap into their purpose and intrinsic motivation.

This can be done by looking for roles that fulfill autonomy, competence, and relationships, as supported by self-determination theory.¹⁰ For example, increase relationships by encouraging coworkers to get lunch together after a meeting. Employees may return from such experiences with a greater sense of why they are working, and they'll get to know their partners better.

Conclusion

Work does not have to be a burden. Once your employees learn the importance of intrinsic motivation and focus on improving it within the workplace, they will be more productive and motivated to complete their tasks. Also, focusing on improving intrinsic motivation is what employees need, because “in a recent study, 65% of employees said they would rather have a new boss than a pay increase.”¹¹ If you do not start implementing the tactics of a balanced work life, empowering employees, and taking responsibility for improving the motivation of the workplace, then how long will your employees continue to work for you?

Notes

¹ Karen McCally, “Self-Determined,” *Rochester Review* 72, no. 6 (July–August 2010): https://www.rochester.edu/pr/Review/V72N6/0401_feature1.html.

² Scott Hensarling, "The Case for Motivation: What's Sapping It, What Will Bring it Back," *The Business Times*, June 8, 2019, <http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/case-motivation-whats-sapping-what-will-bring/docview/2236658437/se-2?accountid=4488>.

³ Kuvaas Bård, Robert Buch, and Dysvik Anders, "Individual Variable Pay for Performance, Controlling Effects, and Intrinsic Motivation," *Motivation and Emotion* 44, no. 4 (August 2020): 525–533, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11031-020-09828-4>.

⁴ Hensarling, "The Case for Motivation."

⁵ Juhi Parmar, "Lost Interest in Work? What Is Causing It? How Do You Overcome It?," *Business World*, June 17, 2019, <http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/lost-interest-work-what-is-causing-how-do-you/docview/2241346072/se-2?accountid=4488>.

⁶ Hensarling, "The Case for Motivation."

⁷ Saurav Poudyal, "Building a Motivated Workforce," *New Business Age*, May 31, 2019, <http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/building-motivated-workforce/docview/2307160685/se-2?accountid=4488>.

⁸ Shawn Murphy, "How to Tap into Purpose to Motivate People," *Nonprofit World*, April–June 2020, 12–14, <http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/how-tap-into-purpose-motivate-people/docview/2428111571/se-2?accountid=4488>.

⁹ Lucia Darino et al., "Performance Management in Agile Organizations," McKinsey Insights, April 29, 2019, <http://erl.lib.byu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/performance-management-agile-organizations/docview/2374207432/se-2?accountid=4488>.

¹⁰ McCally, "Self-Determined."

¹¹ Murphy, "How to Tap into Purpose," 12–14.