Motivators at work

Lesson 6.1.3 | Organisational psychology

Core ideas

Extrinsic motivators come from outside the work itself, such as pay, bonuses, profit-sharing and performance-related pay.

Intrinsic motivators come from the work experience, such as interest, respect, recognition, empowerment and belonging.

Reward systems can increase effort when employees see them as fair, achievable and linked to valued outcomes.

Performance-related pay can focus behaviour on measurable targets, but it may reduce cooperation or intrinsic interest if workers feel controlled.

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory argues that motivation is stronger when competence, autonomy and relatedness are supported.

Landry et al. can be used to examine motivational rewards through self-determination theory, especially whether rewards feel autonomy-supportive or controlling.

Key terms

Extrinsic motivator: A motivator that comes from outside the work itself, such as money or a bonus.

Intrinsic motivator: A motivator based on interest, satisfaction or meaning in the work itself.

Performance-related pay: Pay linked to measured performance or target achievement.

Profit-sharing: A reward system where employees receive part of the organisation's profit.

Recognition: Acknowledgement or praise for effort, skill or achievement.

Empowerment: Giving workers more control, responsibility or decision-making power.

Autonomy: Feeling able to choose and direct one's own actions.

Relatedness: Feeling connected, respected and included with other people.

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Further detail and evidence

Key study: Landry et al. (2019), Study 1, tested reward meaning: autonomy-supportive appreciation versus controlling performance pressure.

123 French-speaking Canadian university volunteers, mean age 23 and 60% women, were randomly assigned to supportive (65) or controlling (58) instructions.

Both offered a $10 coffee-shop gift card: wording changed meaning while amount stayed constant.

Participants attempted 25 four-letter anagrams in two minutes and completed validated scales of needs and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation.

Supportive wording produced greater need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation and performance, and less need frustration and extrinsic motivation.

Mean intrinsic-motivation scores were 5.31 versus 4.56, and composite performance scores (based on correct and incorrect responses, not percentage accuracy) of 0.76 versus 0.54, supportive versus controlling.

Extrinsic systems: basic pay provides income; a bonus is an additional reward; profit-sharing links rewards to organisational profit; performance-related pay links them to assessed output. Intrinsic motivation is satisfaction in the activity itself. Praise, respect, recognition, empowerment and belonging can support it, though an external reward is not automatically intrinsic.

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Continued

Self-determination theory: autonomy is a sense of choice/volition, competence is feeling effective, and relatedness is connection with others. The meaning and delivery of a reward can support or frustrate these needs. Cash need not always undermine intrinsic motivation.

Landry's designated Study 1 kept the reward value constant and manipulated need-supportive versus controlling presentation. It tested how the interpersonal context of a monetary reward related to needs, motivation and anagram performance, rather than simply comparing reward with no reward.

Applying the ideas

"Here is information recognising your contribution" may be experienced differently from "You must perform this way to deserve payment." The same reward amount can communicate appreciation or control. In Landry, distinguish a composite performance measure from a percentage-correct score.

Evaluation and connections

This supports self-determination theory: autonomy, competence and relatedness help explain rewards; money is not invariably harmful or beneficial.

Random allocation and standard tasks aid comparison; students, brief tasks and self-report limit workplace generalisation. Study 1 is required; Study 2 methodology is excluded in 2027.

Random allocation and constant reward value isolate presentation more clearly. A short student anagram task and coffee-card reward limit generalisation to salaries and long-term employment. Self-report need satisfaction is subjective, while task output adds behavioural evidence. Compare autonomy support with the practical need for clear standards and fair pay.