

Looking for the best?

Then measuring motivation is the key to finding those “top performers”.

Roz is a call centre manager of a large telecommunications company who was recently having problems with the productivity of a number of “her best staff”. She called me in for a chat to see if I could help identify some of the problems. When I asked her to outline the main issues, she described them as follows:*

Over the previous 6 months, her call centre had undergone a period of rapid expansion. The total numbers in the centre had increased from 320 to nearly 600. This meant that a large number of new positions were created and a number of “promotional opportunities” became available. Roz had to find 23 Team Leaders in a hurry. Whilst many of these were to be external appointments, Roz was keen to do the right thing by her current staff and promote as many of her top performing CSO’s as possible. To this end, she gathered all of the KPI data that she could on her staff and then ranked them from highest to lowest. Next she encouraged many of her top 20 staff to apply for the vacant Team Leader roles. Of this, 12 took up the offer.

Within 3 months Roz was experiencing significant difficulties with her new Team Leaders. Whilst many of them started with great gusto, and met or exceeded their KPI’s in nearly all areas, their performance had started to taper off. In an attempt to identify the cause, Roz interviewed a number of her “former stars”. In almost every case, she found the answer to be exactly the same. Whilst none of her new Team Leaders had any difficulty functioning within the role to an acceptable standard, the role was just not what they had imagined. In short, the job just did not motivate them.

The misconception that Roz had is quite a common one within business. As employers, we often assume that our brightest and best employees in one field will automatically be the best performers once promoted into a new field. This is based on the misnomer that skills (i.e., abilities) and requisite personality characteristics are all that it takes to predict future performance in another role. Whilst these are important characteristics (e.g., I want my accountant to have high level numerical reasoning abilities), they really only determine whether a candidate or an employee **‘can’** perform a particular job not whether they **‘will’** perform in a particular role. In order to find out whether an individual possesses the motivators aligned with a particular job we need to measure their motivated fit with the role.

WHY IS MOTIVATION IMPORTANT?

According to Chamberlin (2001), understanding why people come to work enables managers to reward individuals in a meaningful way and this in turn results in increased productivity, lower levels of absenteeism and below average turnover. High performers tend to leave their jobs for many reasons including feeling undervalued or under challenged, seeing little opportunity for advancements, lack of praise or recognition and undue work pressure (Stephenson, 2000).

There is a large volume of research which shows that when people are motivated and feel actively involved in their jobs they perform better (Mishra & Gupta, 1994). Likewise, another study has demonstrated that when difference in pay and jobs status were taken into account, job satisfaction and self-esteem increased as job motivation increased (Ilardi, Leone, Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

Theories about human motivation are not a recent invention. Freud in 1913 originally explained motivation in terms of instincts and proposed that biological instincts initiated much of our behaviour. Skinner's Reinforcement Theory (1953), when applied to work motivation, assumes that people will work harder if their behaviours are rewarded, say through meeting a particular need. Behaviour that is not rewarded, say by not meeting a need as expected, tends not to be repeated.

Maslow's Need Hierarchy (1943) suggests that individuals have five levels of need – Physiological, Safety/Security, Social/Belonging, Esteem and Self-Actualisation at the highest level. These needs are progressive, that is, basic lower level needs, eg. hunger, sleep, must be satisfied before higher level needs are felt, eg. love, recognition. People are constantly trying to satisfy their most salient needs and they are unable to focus on higher level needs until this is done.

Alderfer (1972) collapsed Maslow's five need levels into three:

- Existence – Maslow's Physiological and Safety/Security needs, satisfied by environmental factors such as warmth, food, water, shelter.
- Relatedness – Maslow's Social needs, satisfied by positive relationships with other people who are important to the individual.
- Growth – Maslow's Esteem and Self-Actualisation needs, satisfied by continual self development.

According to Locke (1968), goal setting is a deliberate activity that influences task performance. In order to influence performance positively, there are two prerequisites - the individual must be aware of the goal, that is, what is to be accomplished, and they must accept the goal as something for which they are willing to work.

Research has shown that goal setting (Locke, Shaw, Saari & Latham, 1981):

- directs attention and action, and provides task focus,
- mobilises energy and produces effort,
- drives individuals to develop appropriate strategies to achieve their goals,
- leads to greater productivity when goals are challenging, and
- is more effective when feedback is provided.

Finally, Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory (1977) suggests that if an individual believes they possess the skills, knowledge, abilities, experience, etc, to do the job, they will expend more effort and presumably achieve higher levels of performance. The belief in oneself (self efficacy) is what motivates them to perform.

IMPLICATIONS OF MOTIVATION THEORY FOR THE WORKPLACE

As we saw with our case study, when there is not a strong alignment between personal motivators and motivational opportunities available in a specific role, then satisfactory performance and job satisfaction are hard to achieve. As well as selection and promotion, the assessment of personal motivators has a number of broader applications within the Human Resource paradigm.

When trying to performance manage any individual, understanding what is driving their behaviour is very useful when trying to modify their behaviour and encourage specific productive behaviours. Whilst an individuals personal motivators will vary across the course of their lifetime, it is important to know which particular motivators are dominating at any one time. Thus, additional responsibilities etc can be tailored to suit the individuals needs.

In a similar manner, understanding the motivational profile of people in the organisation helps management to design appropriate reward systems. For example, people who thrive on taking on challenging and higher levels of responsibility may be motivated by filling in for their manager when they are absent; people who need guidance and prefer routine in their work will not benefit from this approach but would perhaps be motivated by regular recognition from their manager instead.

Finally, having a clear grasp of an employees motivational profile is an extremely useful tool when trying to plan their career development. For example, if a person is driven by a need for high levels of autonomy, it

makes sense to direct them towards roles where this characteristic is readily available!

Footnotes:

**names have been changed in this article to protect identities.*

*** many thanks to Sylvia Vorhauser for providing the background research for this article.*

**** assessment of motivation is possible using a valid and reliable psychometric tool. For more information contact the author.*