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MOTIVATION – REVIEW AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

Despite widespread acceptance among theorists and authors that intrinsic motivation can lead to a fuller achievement of a person's potential and to better and more sustainable performance, organizations continue to struggle to implement viable mechanisms for promoting it due to social considerations that are more supportive of extrinsic motivation. This article reviews factors related to motivation and the challenges of promoting intrinsic motivation in the backdrop of an unsupportive ecosystem.

KEYWORDS:

Motivation , social considerations , Review and Challenges.

INTRODUCTION:

Motivation is broadly categorized under two heads – intrinsic and extrinsic. A person is said to be intrinsically motivated when one performs an activity or task for the sheer joy of accomplishing it. In contrast, a person is extrinsically motivated when he or she takes up an activity to derive a benefit that would result as an outcome of completing that task. In the latter case, performing the task may not provide enjoyment, but one takes it up only for the expected rewards. It is therefore possible and likely that a task is performed under some kind of compulsion. In the case of the former, the enjoyment of doing is a reward in itself. In the case of extrinsic motivation, taking away the expected outcome would result in the person losing interest in the task. Intrinsic motivation and the task are inseparable because the task itself is the source of joy and drives the person.

Motivation at the work place has considerable impact on employee performance. Quite a lot is written in the press about fresh graduates not measuring up to industry standards. While the education sector churns out thousands of graduates every year, only a fraction of them are considered employable. While it may be easy to blame the institutes for the current state, the malady may actually be more deep rooted. In this article we review how our ecosystem drives career choices and inhibits intrinsic motivation ultimately impacting people from achieving their true potential.

MOTIVATION AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Human beings are born with intrinsic motivation. It is common observation that children enjoy the activities that they are engaged in. They can carry on with an activity that they enjoy without any directions from others and without tiring. As they step into the more structured education system, they are expected to perform well in all subjects. Parental over-exuberance gradually leads to competitive peer pressures. It is common for parents to lure children with promise of rewards if they do well in exams. Children are thus conditioned to respond to extrinsic rewards from a very early stage.

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MOTIVATION – REVIEW AND CHALLENGES

Later in life they are subject to similar pressures while choosing a stream of education. Education streams have come to be graded based on the career opportunities these are likely to afford. Engineering, medicine, and management have been favorites for a long time. Whether or not a student has an aptitude for these subjects, social considerations tend to steer him or her towards these 'rewarding options.' In such cases it is extrinsic motivation in the form of well-paying jobs that drive parents and students alike. Many students thus start off by making suboptimal choices that will ultimately lead to suboptimal performance compared to their potential had they opted for subjects for which they had a natural flair.

MOTIVATION AND COMPETENCE

It is possible that one may deliver great performance despite having made an initial suboptimal choice by sheer hard work. If one has the intelligence, then it is reasonable to assume that he or she will develop competence in the subject or job with reasonable effort. It is not uncommon to find students who by sheer dint of hard work are able to excel. When rewards are linked to performance which in turn depends on competence, the lure of rewards can be a strong extrinsic motivator for developing competence. The current social ecosystem places a huge emphasis on the role of extrinsic motivation for developing competence.

However, motivation and competence have a two way relationship. Just like motivation can lead to competence building, it is possible that competence may lead to motivation. A good teacher is often able to create interest in the subject by making it easy for the student to follow and understand. Students often choose to pursue a subject because they understand it better than other subjects. Thus interest in the subject is a result of a 'feeling' of competency created by the teacher which then leads to motivation to want to pursue the subject. This is an example of acquired intrinsic motivation where a student desires to pursue the subject for the joy within the task of learning itself. Any work that requires the use of this competency will naturally be performed well even when there is no external reward related to it. Thus performance as a result of competence developed through intrinsic motivation is more likely to be sustained. It may be argued that performance is also a factor of effort not just motivation, but then isn't effort too driven by motivation.

What is interesting irrespective of whether competence is developed as a result of extrinsic or intrinsic motivation is that motivation and competence are related as a cyclic phenomenon where each feeds into the other – high competence leads to high motivation which leads to desire for developing even higher competence and so on.

MOTIVATION AND CHOICE

In our example above, what would happen if in the following year a not so good teacher were to teach this student the same subject? Since the student's competency was 'acquired' as a result of the teacher's competency, the student may well loose interest going forward as it was not innate. This leads us to the importance of innate competency or 'aptitude' in sustaining motivation. In both situations – where motivation is externally engineered – whether due to social considerations, or through aided competency development, there is a risk that motivation may not be sustained.

In the long run, performance will be sustained when people are driven intrinsically, that is, they exercise choice based on their own natural competencies. Education needs to be a means to enhance these competencies, people then derive even more satisfaction pursuing their interests. When people have the choice to build on their inherent strengths they enjoy the work for the sake of it and not because it is a means to achieve something else. Such situations are more likely to sustain performance as the stimulus is inbuilt and cannot be taken away.

MOTIVATION AND SENSE OF PURPOSE

Sense of purpose is what drives people to do something that they can consider as meaningful. It has a deeper relevance to motivation than either 'choice' or 'competence.' Unfortunately most people do not start with one. By the time that they go through school and are capable of some independent thinking, they are already cast in a mold and go through the motions of completing their studies and then competing for the cherished jobs that their parents and society set them up for. By this time most people are firmly entrenched and extrinsically motivated – more often than not by financial rewards. Work then is merely a means to rewards. Remove the rewards, and work ceases to motivate. This is because there is no intrinsic motivation in the form of 'sense of purpose' that is related to the work. It will not be wrong to assert that sense of purpose can only be related to intrinsic motivation since both can be traced to some internal source.

MOTIVATION AT THE WORK PLACE

It is not difficult to see why employee surveys indicate that motivation levels at the work place are generally not very high. Most people get into jobs not by choice but because it was the best they could 'make do with.' The job probably makes use of their 'acquired competence' without regards to their intrinsic natural abilities. That people would have had some sense of purpose and would have scouted for organizations that were aligned to it would be a utopian situation.

So on one hand we have students who are not intrinsically motivated and on the other hand organizations that are not equipped to hire based on intrinsic motivation levels of candidates because it is difficult to assess. At best organizations have some mechanisms to test for aptitude and personality which is used selectively at mid to senior level positions.

INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Given this situation, all that organizations can do is try and make the most of an unhelpful ecosystem by creating an environment that provides some elements of intrinsic motivation to employees. Visioning is one way in which organizations strive to impart a 'sense of purpose' to its employees. It is like selling your idea and hoping that employees will buy into it and internalize it. Unfortunately, vision statements are often quite nebulous and not many may relate the work that they do to how it fits in with the big picture. At best the employees' sense of purpose is likely to be extrinsic in the nature of rewards – something like climbing the corporate ladder in the shortest possible time.

Organizations do slightly better at providing 'choices.' This they do by giving employees more freedom in the way they perform their tasks, and greater autonomy at senior levels in defining the organization's roadmap. A lot depends on the managers' operational style and hence empowering employees can be quite person dependent. Also, the nature of work can limit the extent of choice people can have - especially in routine operational tasks where requirements of standards may actually leave little scope for any autonomy or scope for creativity.

Developing employee 'competence' is probably the only area where organizations can contribute effectively. Training departments mostly focus on building technical, operational, and leadership skills. Since organizations invest heavily in competence development programs, it may well be this reason that they complain about education institutes not producing graduates who are readily employable. This may not be a fair criticism. Institutes at the first level provide broad based education which will help students explore a wide spectrum of opportunities. Every organization has its own agenda on what competencies are critical to its growth and therefore will have to tailor further employee skill development programs appropriately.

INFERENCE

It is reasonable to assert that while intrinsic motivation is a potentially more optimal route to better and sustainable employee performance, our current social ecosystem is more supportive of extrinsic motivation with its accompanying shortcomings. Organizations continue to be at the receiving end of this suboptimal system primarily because they are the ones inadvertently promoting extrinsic motivation.

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