



Understanding Employee Motivation During Covid-19 Whitepaper

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METHODOLOGY

Findings were obtained through a thorough literature review using keywords such as: Self-Determination Theory, Motivation, Teams, Work Design.

Similarly, key news articles and blogposts describing Covid-19 impacts on businesses and people were studied and summarized throughout this paper.

Self-determination theory was chosen as a lens by which to review the potential impact of Covid-19 on employee motivation because the theory has been well-validated within the motivation literature and is considered a key mechanism through which human motivation can be understood.

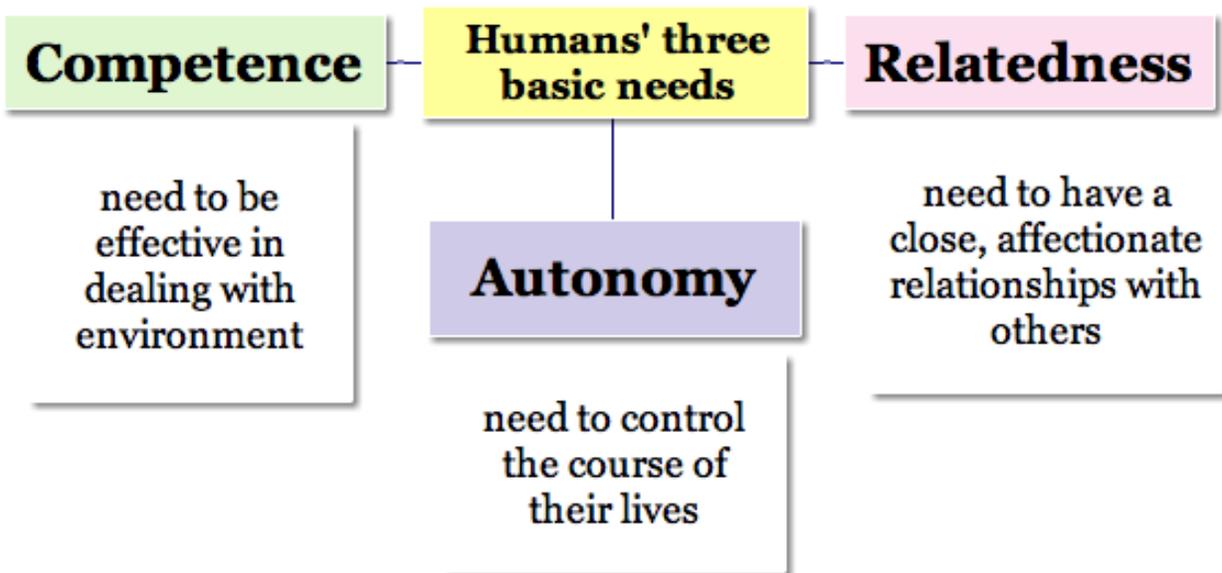
Self Determination Theory and Understanding Employee Motivation

The way in which employees are motivated can provide insight into how their mindset and subsequent workplace behaviors may be affected by Covid-19. By looking at employee motivation through the lens of self-determination theory (or a basic psychological needs theory), we can gain insight about the specific and essential conditions that must be present and are necessary for people to have energy to apply their talents, be inspired to learn, extend themselves, and to be self-motivated, all which are key behaviors for an organization to run smoothly.

Research in self-determination theory has shown that motivation can be either internal or external. External motivation is external to the self, meaning that motivation comes from an outside source which may include a reward or punishment, such as keeping one's job or not. People that are internally motivated value the activity that they are engaged in and they are interested and committed to it for reasons from within, such as deep interest in a project, or a sense of commitment to an organization's values. Comparisons between people who are internally motivated vs. externally motivated have shown that internal motivation results in people who have higher levels of performance, creativity, vitality, self-esteem, and general well-being. For this reason, it's imperative that organizations focus on creating conditions for internal motivation to flourish.

Internal motivation includes the fulfillment of three essential human needs: the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness. *Autonomy* is defined as the need for one's own experience and relevant behaviors to be consistent with their sense of self or a feeling that they are doing work that is aligned with who they are and what they care about. *Competence* is described as a feeling of efficaciousness, or the sense that an employee can meet challenges and affect outcomes at work. *Relatedness* is the experience of interacting with and being connected with people. If these needs are not met, it could, at the least, reduce employee motivation to perform, and also potentially diminish or crush their spirit.

Self-Determination Theory



How Covid-19 Affects Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness at Work

As employees question their job security, family health, and future, internal motivation may significantly change. A person's sense of autonomy may be reduced as they find themselves torn between work and new obligations such as caring for a sick relative, taking care of children who are now at home, or making arrangements to ensure that their families are taken care of during the pandemic (i.e., grocery stock up, financial planning). They may find that work tasks seem less important and experience themselves struggling to perform tasks that previously were fulfilling to their sense of self. Further, they may find themselves struggling with emotional contradiction, knowing that their work is important to focus on to ensure long term financial survival, yet also realizing that family and relationships are of increased importance to them.

A person's sense of competence may also be significantly affected during the crisis. As employees watch thousands of capable workers lose their jobs, an increased sense of pressure to perform as well as questions arising about their worth or capabilities may result in reduced feelings of self-efficacy (the belief that they have the ability to complete a task or be successful). Further, many jobs have changed as employees absorb tasks that used to be completed by their colleagues. These rapid changes were unlikely to be followed by adequate training or consideration of an increased workload, and employees may now find themselves overwhelmed with tasks, and afraid to admit it for fear of losing their own job. Feelings of competence may also be dramatically reduced in certain sectors, such as sales. The notion that a person can affect organizational outcomes is not reasonable in the current unstable market, and employees may be disheartened as they realize that previous behaviors that used to work, such as cold-calling potential customers, may actually result in worse outcomes, such as the appearance that they are salespeople who are not sensitive to the impact of the pandemic.

Lastly, a person's experience of relatedness is clearly at jeopardy due to the current circumstances. Rules, regulations and policies in place which reduce employee contact, as well as the limited ability to interact outside of work, will likely result in people feeling less connected to others. While there are ways to try to mitigate this with technology, the innate need for human contact and connection will likely be impacted negatively, with the potential for feelings of isolation. An unexpected side effect of this may be seen in employee communication and trust. Positive relationships are central to the ability to communicate effectively as well as to trust one another (especially on teams), so leaders will need to pay close attention to the quality of these functions as time goes by.

How Leaders Can Increase Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness at Work

While there are many challenges in front of leaders and employers with respect to managing changing workplace motivation, there are also opportunities to build systems and culture which can positively affect employees.

Autonomy

1. Remind employees of organizational mission, vision and values, and engage in a conversation about how they see their work and their unique contributions in relation to them. Inspiring this shared vision either through an email, video, or ideally, a conversation, may build agreement that “we believe in this”.
2. Help employees to envision a brighter future that they can help to create right now. Be transparent and honest about where the organization is currently at, but also communicate ways that the company is using this time and its employees to enable possibilities.

Competence

1. Make the innovation of work design a primary goal of the organization. Spend time considering how the structure and new demands of an employee’s job may impact their performance during this unique time. Be open to and share ways that employees may manage new responsibilities, such as working in teams to accomplish tasks, or allowing for flexible schedules (which have the added benefit of increasing autonomy), and be mindful that changes in work design and workload will require more time than usual to adjust.
2. Include employees in weekly/monthly goalsetting. Research has demonstrated that employees who are engaged in the process of setting their own goals will understand the goal better and will also tend to set higher goals, leading to increased performance and increased self-confidence.

Relatedness

1. Build structured “social time” for employees. Similar to “water cooler” talk, the ability for employees to routinely check in about non-work-related matters can help to sustain relationships and also stay relevant and informed about each other’s lives. This prioritization of informal communication may have the added benefit of an increased support system for those who are struggling with Covid-19 related matters or social isolation.
2. Make time to debrief with employees about their personal situation. One way that this can be accomplished is with a check-in at the start of a meeting for all attending the meeting (including the leader!). On a scale of 1-5 have everybody rate how they are feeling, as well as a couple of sentences describing ‘why’. Lead by example by offering an appropriate amount of personal information in order to create a safe environment for sharing.

CONCLUSION

Although there are many challenges that leaders and organizations face in managing employee motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic, there are opportunities to systematically improve employee performance by addressing this with purpose. By looking at employee motivation through the lens of self-determination theory, employers can take action to fulfill employee needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work, thereby enhancing feelings of motivation and subsequent performance.

Future Whitepapers

- Please email me at leah.pezer@ucalgary.ca for any whitepaper requests or ideas that may benefit your organization

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