

What People Want from Work - Meeting the Psychological Needs of People in Organisations

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Have you ever thought about what makes you enjoy doing your work, or on the other hand, what makes you dread the very idea? In my experience of the past eight years directing staff development programmes I have concluded that the answer to this question is very complex and varies considerably from one individual to another. How do we explain that two people doing exactly the same work in similar conditions experience their work in various ways often in opposition to each other? The differences range from feelings of enjoyment of their work to feelings of resentment or sheer indifference towards it. In this article I will share some research and experience-based insights regarding what people need from work, focusing specifically on psychological needs.

Work is about money.....

People seek to fulfil different needs through their work and do it for a variety of personal reasons. However nearly everyone works to achieve a standard of living that is acceptable to them and meets their expectations. Money provides housing, pays the bills, buys food and clothing, pays for healthcare and gives us the power to function at a level acceptable to our personal standards in relation to our socio-economic environment. To underestimate the importance of money and other material benefits to people who work is a serious misconception. Good workers may leave for greener pastures even if they are happy and satisfied on the job. Fair benefits and salaries are the key to successful companies that recruit and retain good committed workers. In fact, recent research from Watson Wyatt Worldwide in *The Human Capital Edge*, recommends that to attract the best employees, employers need to pay more than the average-paying counterparts in the same market. When the financial aspect is in place, one can start talking about other psychological factors that enable people to regard their work positively, to the extent that they see it as a contributing factor to their personal development.

.....but money is not enough.

Years of research on employee motivation indicates that people want more than money from their work for them to feel satisfied and motivated. Amongst other things, employees at all levels of organisations are deeply affected by the quality of their relationships at the workplace, especially with their supervisors, managers, or people they regard in high esteem. They want to feel appreciated, valued, cared for and respected in the same way that they would within a family. Once the material and financial requirements are satisfactorily met, the primary needs that people have at work are emotional. In a research study that identified some of the best companies that one could work for in the U.K., the overriding factor distinguishing the top companies was the quality of life they offered at work. The most important factors that determined this were: respect for the individual, a friendly non-aggressive environment, a relationship of trust and openness between management and the rest of the staff, and opportunities for learning and development. Many

times, the greener pastures employees move to do not consist of better benefits or higher financial gains. They go to organisations that provide them with a human working environment that values its people and treats them with dignity and respect.

The land of milk and honey or the company next door?

Contrary to what some or many believe, it is neither impossible nor excessively expensive to create work cultures based on respect for the value and integrity of individuals. Once the people leading the organisations embrace these values and become committed to spreading and cascading them throughout the company, the rest can follow with relative ease. Today we talk about value-based organisations. These are companies where the leaders have realised that companies, just like individuals need a “soul” to survive. The soul I refer to in this case is a set of deeply held values that are manifested in every decision, policy, structure and operation of that organisation. Today we talk about emotional and spiritual intelligence in organisations. Essentially, these new intelligences (that are really not so new) are focusing on the value of the human aspect of business. Leaders today are realising more and more that to get the best from people they need to give them the best. They are realising that people want to be treated like adult human beings. They need to find some form of meaning in their work, they need recognition for a job well done, they need to experience a sense of belonging to the organisation; above all they need to feel valued and respected. The following are some practical approaches to achieving these aims.

Sense of Control over one’s work

Employees need to feel a sense of autonomy and control over their work. This includes important components such as the ability to impact decisions that influence their work; setting clear, measurable and achievable goals; having clear responsibility for defined tasks; job enrichment; and receiving recognition for achievement. This can be achieved even in times of change and company restructuring. People in director, CEO, or senior management levels need to implement a culture of consultation in their companies, where they give and receive constant information about where the company is going in terms of direction, policies, structures, etc. Although it is not always possible to share all the information, the more communication and transparency there is the more they can reduce the spread of rumour, hearsay, and uncertainty. These are all factors that create anxiety, stress, and possible anger and resentment in the workplace. Companies need to have clear lines of communication and feedback across all levels.

Furthermore, employees need to believe that their feedback matters, and that it is taken seriously. Otherwise they will see it as a fruitless exercise. When feedback coming from employees is acted upon, it needs to be communicated back to the employees with the appropriate appreciation and recognition for that feedback. Leaders need to encourage this practice even when the feedback received is not given in the most constructive manner, or the content is less than pleasing. I have often heard of managers who tell their people “do not come to me with problems or complaints if you don’t have solutions or suggestions”. In my opinion this approach does not encourage people to give

feedback. It also tends to shift the responsibility to people who do not have the power to change them. In such a situation, a better response would be, “come with your feedback and problems and together we can generate and discuss possible solutions and alternatives”.

As for doing the work itself, employees need to feel that they are trusted to do their job without excessive monitoring unless their behaviour requires a different approach. One of the biggest mistakes companies do is to punish everyone for the sins of a few. In general, people want recognition for their good work with pay tied to their performance. They expect people who do not perform to be addressed and dealt with fairly. Failure to deal with or discipline non-performers is one of the most demotivating actions an organisation can take. Employees also need regular informal and formal feedback about how they are doing on the job. Equally important is the opportunity for them to give feedback upwards regarding how they experience their direct superiors and what changes or improvements they suggest. In this way they can feel that they have a say in the way they are managed and treated.

Finally, one of the most commonly cited factor that contributes to job satisfaction and fulfilment is appreciation and recognition for the work done. This is especially effective when it is made public and coming from people in senior positions in the organisation.

Sense of belonging

A basic need for human beings is to experience a fair degree of belonging to the groups they are part of. This is referred to as the need for affiliation. When used constructively, a healthy sense of belonging in employees encourages loyalty, commitment, initiative and enthusiasm towards work. More importantly, it promotes a sense of ownership in people that enables them to take responsibility for their actions and see their role as crucial, or at least as contributing significantly to the ultimate success of their organisation.

A critical factor in creating a sense of belonging in employees is making sure they get timely information and communication. It is also important that employees understand the management’s formulas for decision-making rather than having decisions imposed on them out of nowhere and that are difficult for employees to comprehend. A sense of belonging is also encouraged by having frequent opportunities for team and meeting participation that helps employees develop a strong sense of involvement. This includes providing visual documentation and posting of work progress and company accomplishments.

On a more emotional level, employees need to feel that they are cared for by the organisation. This can take practical forms such as the provision of health insurances, employee assistance programmes, solidarity funds, counselling services, flexible working hours, harassment and discrimination policies and procedures, etc. and informal practices that promote a general sense of care for the well-being of employees such as encouraging a healthy work-life balance and promoting care and respect in people’s daily interactions.

Opportunity for growth and development

If you think training and education is expensive try ignorance and stagnation instead. Today, it is widely recognised that people are always learning whether they like to or not. Learning does not stop with the end of school

years; rather it is a lifelong process. An important aspect of learning is informal learning, the learning that takes place as a result of daily life experiences. For example, if an employee's opinion is never taken seriously or valued, the employee may learn that they need not offer their feedback. If an employee is treated unfairly or abused they may learn subversive methods of "getting even". In other words, since people learn anyway, it is important that an organisation is concerned about what it is teaching them.

Organisations benefit from a highly developed staff complement that is technically, interpersonally and intrapersonally skilled. This creates employees who are resourceful and flexible both in their work and in their interactions with people. This has short and long term benefits on both the internal and external customer chain ultimately producing higher standards of service or productivity.

Motivational research puts opportunity for growth among the front runners in terms of motivating factors. This is especially the case when these opportunities are linked to achievement and advancement. People prefer to do work they enjoy doing; short of that they prefer to do work that is interesting; and short of that, work that is varied. Training and development programmes give employees a wider repertoire of skills that can help them make their work more interesting and challenging. It also gives them a stronger sense of security in terms of future employability. Because recognition is such an important aspect of employee motivation, employees who complete training should be given public recognition for their participation in training. This can take various forms, the most common being the awarding of certificates, publishing comments, experiences names and photos in company magazines.

Leadership

In conclusion if I were to pinpoint the single most common grievance I hear from people about their workplace, it is the lack of adequately skilled leaders and managers. The skills gap referred to most is often human rather than technical in nature. People need to feel that they can trust their leaders to treat them fairly, honestly, and professionally. They need to be listened to, taken seriously, appreciated and regarded with dignity and respect. People want clear expectations that provide a picture of the outcomes desired with mutual goal setting and constant feedback and an appropriate structure within which to work. They also need adequate recognition for their work.

It is not an easy task to create working environments that meet employees' psychological needs. Perhaps it is more of a challenge in times of economic uncertainty and stiff competition. People are unique individuals who vary greatly among each other in terms of what satisfies them. At the same, there is enough research today to suggest reliable guidelines that greatly increase the chances of success. People need to be recognised and validated; treated with respect and dignity; trusted, valued and cared for and provided with opportunities for development and advancement. These factors are universal and organisations that are committed to them are investing wisely in their own success.