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**THE MOTIVATIONAL
WORKPLACE**

The Motivational Workplace

A synthesis of interior design principles and psychological research

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Article at a glance

While the literature on work motivation is vast, little attention has been given to the potential of the physical environment to increase staff engagement, morale and, ultimately, productivity. Based on insights provided by Amanda Stanaway (a leading designer at Woods Bagot) the author offers a psychological perspective on three ways in which the workplace can be used to motivate staff: fostering a sense of obligation via perceived organisational support, offering the user control over their environment, and using internal branding to encourage desired behaviours.

Moving beyond the functional office

A wide variety of metrics have been used in an attempt to measure the contribution of workers. An accurate indicator of employee output offers managers and researchers a means of evaluating staff and testing workplace interventions. Productivity and job satisfaction are popular measures, yet the productivity of knowledge workers is notoriously difficult to assess, and the relationship between satisfaction and output is surprisingly weak (see Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). What managers really want to know is whether staff are performing to their potential, so the task becomes one of defining performance in such a way as to make it measurable.

Perhaps the most cited formula in organisational psychology, Vroom (1964) claimed that performance is a function of ability and motivation. Some dismiss the relative importance of motivation, arguing that ability is the primary contributor to performance (e.g., Dunnette, 1973, cited in Mitchell, 1982). However, possessing the skills required to complete a task amounts to little unless one is motivated to execute them effectively. While there are a multitude of theories devoted to the topic of motivation, all can be seen to focus on the psychological processes that direct, energise, and sustain behaviour (Steers, Mowday, & Shapiro, 2004). Hence, motivation is crucial if an employee's skills are to be channelled towards desired behaviours, and if maximum effort is to be put into the execution of these skills over a sustained period of time. As an indicator of the increasing attention being given to work motivation, both the Harvard Business Review (2003, Vol. 81, Iss. 1) and the Academy of Management Review (2004, Vol. 29, No. 3) have recently released special issues focusing on employee motivation as a critical factor in corporate performance.

While the potential for the workplace to facilitate or hinder an employee's ability is readily apparent, its impact on staff motivation is less obvious. Since there is scant published research related to this latter topic, a leading workplace interior designer at Woods Bagot, Amanda Stanaway, was asked to reveal her techniques for creating motivating working environments. The key points from this discussion can be distilled under the headings of the benevolent employer, workplace flexibility and internal branding.

The benevolent employer: Increasing motivation via obligation

In an intuitively appealing statement, Amanda claimed that simply providing a pleasant working environment increases the motivation of occupants. For example, paying attention to the aesthetics of the workplace, providing access to daylight and good air quality, and even catering to the needs of employees via the provision of company canteens, can all serve to increase the motivation of staff. With the modern pressure to attract and retain a dwindling supply of knowledge workers, an agreeable working environment may be considered a valuable business tool. But will staff who have been attracted to the organisation, and those who were present prior to the refit, be motivated to work any harder than usual?

Providing an environment that exceeds the standards required for functional efficacy may be received by employees as an instance of perceived organisational support (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Such acts of apparent generosity lead employees to view the organisation as a benevolent entity that values the contributions of staff and is concerned for their well-being. Figure 1 depicts two workplace features designed to give employees the impression that the organisation wants them to enjoy their time at work. However, for any increase in work motivation to occur, staff must feel obliged to reciprocate this perceived organisational support.

Figure 1 Company cafeteria and breakout room at Yahoo, each of which contains games for recreation (the breakout room has a Playstation under the television). Such features are presumably designed to attract a certain demographic (computer literate young males?) to the organisation.



Equity theory (Adams, 1963) states that a sense of obligation results from the employees' comparison of their own input (e.g., skills, hours worked) with the organisation's input (e.g., wages, working conditions). If an employee perceives that the organisation has provided something valuable (e.g., a pleasant working environment), then this ledger of contributions will appear unbalanced, leading to the perception of inequity and a sense of psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The worker is then motivated to reduce this dissonance by increasing their input, thus restoring equity. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance enables equity theory to explain reciprocity without resorting to theoretically-problematic notions such as justice: employees' work motivation is increased in pleasant offices simply because maintaining previous input levels is uncomfortable.

Figure 2 These workers probably feel a sense of gratitude towards their employer for providing such idyllic surroundings, which is likely to create a sense of unease unless the gesture is reciprocated with improved job performance.



Workplace flexibility: The importance of environmental control

When designing offices, Amanda attempts—wherever possible—to incorporate adjustable features into the workplace. She believes that workers should be given as much freedom as possible if they are to perform to their potential. Granting occupants control over their environment (e.g., redirecting desks, adjusting chairs) enables them to attain a level of comfort similar to their own home, which in turn allows them to work without distraction. While some may argue that such flexible arrangements would lead to a disorganised, inefficient workplace, research indicates that denying staff a certain degree of control over their environment can have negative results.

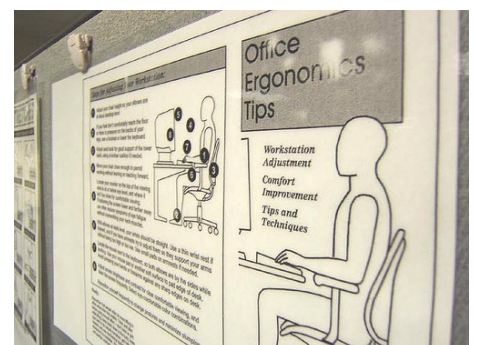
According to Brehm (1966), we react to environmental constraints by behaving in a way intended to re-establish control. For instance, employees may attempt to combat office noise by wearing earplugs. Such reactions are abandoned if unsuccessful, but the failure to gain control can lead to behavioural consequences that are undesirable, persistent and pervasive. In a seminal study within the literature devoted to control, Seligman and Maier (1967) found that dogs given no means of escaping an electric shock failed to make any attempt to avoid future shocks. They termed this phenomenon learned helplessness, and claimed that it results from the dogs' acquired belief that relief from aversive stimuli is independent of their actions. Seligman went on to demonstrate this pattern of behaviour in a number of species, including humans (see Seligman, 1975, for a review). Another stream of research concerns an attributional style known as locus of control. According to Heider (1958), people can be categorised into those who believe that they have the power to influence events (internals) versus those who believe that forces in the environment dictate proceedings (externals). Surprisingly, the literatures on learned helplessness and locus of control seldom cross-reference: nonetheless, one can surmise that repeated feelings of helplessness would lead to the development of an external locus of control.¹

¹ Of course, it is also possible that those with an internal orientation develop learned helplessness more easily than externals.

So what are the potential consequences of depriving workers of control over their environment? Research shows that control over the physical workspace leads to higher ratings of job satisfaction (Lee & Brand, 2005), while the stress related to a lack of workplace control has been linked to health problems in employees, such as coronary heart disease (Ganster, Fox, & Dwyer, 2001). In terms of its effects on motivation, Revesman and Perlmutter (1981) claim that “the opportunity to choose enhances the perception of control, which in turn benefits performance through an increase in motivation” (p. 312, italics added). With this in mind, Broedling (1975) found that internals are more motivated workers than externals, and that this motivational advantage translates to superior performance. This finding is explained with reference to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), which posits that motivation is determined by the extent to which a worker believes that certain behaviours (e.g., increased effort) will result in desired outcomes (e.g., monetary rewards). Hence, a lack of environmental control may lead to a state of learned helplessness and an external locus of control, which can then generalise to the job itself—resulting in reduced work motivation.

However, Evans, Shapiro, and Lewis (1993) warn that control can have negative consequences if the availability of environmental controls is not matched by the ability to execute them. For this reason, the provision of a flexible workplace will only lead to the perception of control, and associated increases in motivation, if introduced alongside a suitable ergonomics training program (Huang, Robertson, & Chang, 2004; Robertson & Huang, 2006).

Figure 3 Where possible, designers should choose office features with options for adjustment, such as the chair on the right. However, businesses must follow up the introduction of these features with appropriate methods of instruction, such as workshops and documentation.



Internal branding: Directing behaviour and building cohesion

While not entirely convinced of its value, Amanda pointed to the common use of branding within the workplace. The assumption here, presumably, is that frequent exposure to the company's brand reinforces the employees' sense of belonging, thereby increasing organisational commitment. While branding may be limited to presentation of the corporate logo, it often also includes information that serves to direct desired behaviours. To understand the impact such information has on motivation, a brief review of arguably the most dominant theory of work motivation is required.

Perhaps the most popular account of work motivation is goal setting theory, which, while introduced by Locke in 1968, continued to evolve alongside an extensive research programme until its formal inception over two decades later (Locke & Latham, 1990). The basic premise of this theory is that performance is enhanced when people are presented with goals. More precisely, research has shown that specific, difficult goals, combined with the potential for feedback, produce the greatest improvements in task performance.

Of course, for a goal to be specific there must be no ambiguity as to the requirements of the task. With this in mind, Rothman (1987) argues that the work environment can convey standards for desired behaviours in the form of normative information. Research into the effects of normative information on task performance indicates that workers provided with salient standards for task execution come closer to reaching those standards than those who are not (e.g., Mitchell, Rothman, & Liden, 1985), and it is assumed that such information is beneficial because it helps the performer to set specific goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). Such information may include examples of previous work, instructions for completing tasks, or even simple cues for guiding more general behaviours. As an example of the latter, Rothman reports that IBM prints the word THINK on surfaces within their workplaces. This cue is unobtrusive yet salient, and reinforces a behavioural standard that can be generalised across all tasks and roles within the organisation.

However, making staff aware of an organisation's goals does not explain why employees should choose to strive for them. The fact that feedback enhances the effectiveness of goal setting indicates that normative information is most effective when others are in a position to evaluate the outcome. This evaluation may increase effort when vocational rewards (e.g., increased pay, career advancement) are contingent on performance, limiting the motivational benefits of evaluation to that provided by superiors. However, evaluation by colleagues may also lead to increased motivation if a bond exists between the employees capable of observing each others behaviour. Presentation of the corporate logo within an office may not contain any normative information per se, but it can serve to build a sense of community between co-workers. Once colleagues begin to consider themselves as part of a collective enterprise, research shows that individual effort is increased and team performance is optimised (Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). However, this outcome only materialises if individuals' goals are compatible with team goals (Seijts & Latham, 2000), reinforcing the fact that employees must both perceive and commit to the goals contained in normative information (Martin & Manning, 1995).



Figure 3 A sign placed at an unknown warehouse, containing normative information intended to direct employees' behaviour.

Putting the feeling back into work motivation

It should be noted at this point that the literature on the general topic of motivation is vast and that many additional hypotheses concerning the role of environmental factors on work performance may be derived. While an exhaustive review of the multitude of theories and empirical studies is not possible here, there are two issues frequently debated by motivation theorists that are relevant for our discussion of the workplace: the contribution of drive theories and the role of unconscious processes.

The theories outlined so far – goal-setting, expectancy and equity – all fall into a class of cognitive theories that represent an historical departure from earlier attempts to conceptualise motivation in terms of instincts, drives, needs or arousal. The result of this paradigmatic shift was a rational, emotionally-neutral view of conscious cognition. For instance, goal-setting theory concerns the effects of conscious intention; expectancy theory depicts the worker deliberately weighting their effort in accordance with predicted outcomes; while equity theory involves a rational comparison of the relative contributions of employee and organisation.

However, contemporary work on human cognition is slowly reintroducing the subject of emotion, and with it the fuel needed to drive behaviour. Adams (1963) implicitly accepted this necessity with his inclusion of cognitive dissonance as a mechanism for seeking equity; the discomfort produced by cognitive inconsistency is a form of arousal, and the subsequent motivation to increase effort is a drive, despite attempts by the cognitive movement to avoid such concepts. Furthermore, Latham and Pinder (2005) point to the fact that goals are not always conscious; a criticism that can also be directed to the processes concerning expectancy and equity.

Although this may sound like an abstract theoretical issue irrelevant to designers, it actually serves to strengthen the link between environmental factors and worker motivation. If we assume that behaviour is often directed by levels of felt arousal (i.e., emotion), and that much of the processing governing this arousal occurs outside of awareness, then we begin to understand why seemingly transparent attempts at increasing employee motivation are often successful. The outcome of the three design principles discussed by Amanda is that the employee feels motivated to work and, in many cases, will not be able to tell you why this is. While work motivation is determined by many factors beyond the organisation's control, providing staff with a pleasant, flexible, informative and communal workplace should be considered the foundation for optimal business performance.

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Acknowledgement of images

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