

# Only Motivated Staff Need Stay

*Meaningful questions elicit meaningful answers about what really lifts the game. Stewart Forsyth and Andrea Polzer-Debruyne discuss the elements that mediate the relationship between the motivating job characteristics and results.*

Do you sometimes wonder if you are getting through to your people? Do they understand what your enterprise is all about and what they are contributing? Are they, in their low key way, really enthused about the job?

You are not alone in thinking, even worrying about these things, because it's not just results but retention you need to worry about. Getting performance levels up is important, but so is keeping those high performing people in your organisation rather than losing them to competitors.

### Flawed Advice

How do you keep them, let alone keep them working? There's no shortage of advice on how to reward and motivate your staff. But how useful is it? How about this suggestion from a publication only last year, based on the evidence of how important leadership is to staff motivation and commitment – "90% of a manager's job today is the day to day coaching of employees". Really?

- What about them doing value adding things for clients – what

the consulting firms call "chargeable time"?

- What happens to their cred – with staff and clients – if they're talking about what their staff should do, instead of demonstrating how to do it?

In our opinion, much of the advice about motivation is flawed – based on weak attitude research and myths about what gets people going. To illustrate these points, the table shows some US results, based on research done by American Express on best and worst possible rewards.

Looks reasonable, doesn't it? We have all heard that positive recognition of employees' work is the best thing we can do to get them motivated. Some of us even had consultants or trainers come in and survey our staff to confirm just that. Yet, in spite of all our thank you's and the lattes we had with our staff, why do the really good ones leave?

### Thanks But No Thanks

Now we do not take issue with the relative ranking of the rewards in the American Express survey or other studies showing similar results. But we'd like you to try a little



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thought experiment:

Your boss, after advice from Motivation Consultants Ltd makes you an offer. She will reliably and sincerely thank you when your performance exceeds a defined standard. But due to the economic circumstances you know so well, she will be forced to reduce your "3B's" (base, bonus, and benefits) by 10%. And based on their survey, overall you'll be more motivated because of the power of the recognition your boss will provide:

- You win, because you get useful feedback as well being happier and more motivated;
- Your boss wins because she's cut payroll 10% while increasing productivity.

"Hold on there!" We hear you say! "Don't pay that consultant's bill!" And we agree – in all likelihood you won't get the results you expected and paid for. When you checked out the table of motivators, or most of the others you find in the literature, you assumed that money would be held constant in the equation. As did the people being surveyed. But is that really reasonable?

### Money Talks

We have all learned that money isn't everything of course. And that is why when people respond to sur-

veys they don't want to appear to be greedy types. People say the right thing. No matter that they would change jobs for the chance of stock options or three dollars an hour more; they aren't going to say that.

Obviously it's harder to measure what makes a difference to what people do, rather than what they say, so we do rely a lot on attitude research. But if we are going to rely on what people say:

- We have to be careful that our questions are about what they do and not what they feel is right;
- We have to ensure that our questions cover the territory of all possible motivators.

And that includes money and financial rewards.

Unfortunately the results of this sort of research are often not neat. A motivation study published last year is illustrated with charts of the paths linking motivators and results (performance, stress, and tendency to leave). They look like wiring diagrams – arrows and numbers all over – indicators of the complexity of the topic "motivation at work".

### What's Hot, What's Not

This research found that while the structure of motivation as such seems constant across countries and

## First The Best, Second The Worst

### Best Performance Rewards

- Verbal thank you for a job well done
- Job satisfaction
- Career related gift or training
- Letter of commendation
- Good evaluation

### Worst

- Getting fired
- Extra work
- Ignored/no recognition
- Food/gift certificate
- Tee-shirt, other clothing

June 1999 Amex survey of 1,000 US workers' view of best and worst possible rewards

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## ERA a Pass, Overall

After six months of the Employment Relations Act, the Employers and Manufacturers Association has examined the Act's performance and handed out an interim report. EMA's Employment Relations Manager, Peter Tritt, says the ERA has earned a pass mark overall:

- Employment Relations Service: Excellent. Who would have thought a Government department could perform so well.
- Employment Relations Authority: Very good. It's currently quick and effective, but may become subject to demand outstripping supply.
- Unions: Very good. With 130 unions registered since the Act began, many enterprise based, the new rules regarding union registration can be called a success. The 15 member threshold is mitigating the impact of unions' statutory monopoly on collective bargaining.
- New mediation service: Good. Teething problems and some mediators are inexperienced, but overall quick and efficient.
- Reinstatement after dismissal. Pass. A realistic Authority decision held that reinstatement for an unjustified dismissal does not mean this must be ordered. The solution must be feasible and is not an option when a breakdown in relationships has occurred.
- [In]dependent contractors: Fail. The law used to be clear, now it will stay uncertain until judicially interpreted.
- Written agreements for all new employees: Fail. Non-compliance is pervasive, perhaps as high as 70% among small to medium businesses, who seem unaware or don't care about the risk of substantial penalties. It's the same on ensuring new appointees obtain independent advice about their employment agreements.
- Employment relations education leave: Fail. But no employer is complaining. Course development is just beginning, so the burden of this extra leave on employers can't be measured.
- Militant unions: Fail. But it's not the Act's fault. The ongoing saga of the wharfies seeking to reclaim their waterfront monopoly with unlawful actions has nothing to do with the new law.
- Union access rights. Fail. How is it that the law protects minors from unscrupulous employers, but allows open season for union officials to badger young employees about union membership?
- More strikes? Too soon to tell. Work stoppage figures for the December 2000 quarter are not yet available. But the vets strike illustrated how powerful unions can prohibit the nation's largest employer from replacing its striking vets.
- Collectivisation: Too soon to tell. Claims about droves of workers joining the union seem extravagant, but there's little evidence.
- Multi-employer collective agreements: Too soon to tell, but the two private sector contracts that survived the ECA have been successfully re-negotiated. Though seen as a Mecca for the trade union movement, no new private sector MECA's are on the table.
- Higher wage settlements? Too soon to tell. The nation's largest union (Engineers) has been a model of restraint during the Act's honeymoon period with most wage settlements in the 2-3% range. Most settlements involving other unions are in the same band.
- Employment Court: Too soon to tell whether it is going to head off again into anti-employer decisions that, again, warrant wholesale knocking back on appeal.
- Good faith bargaining: Too early to tell, but shows promise. After an initial scare over highly prescriptive rules and Treaty of Waitangi obligations, the interim code of good faith looks set to proceed on a sensible basis. There's no reason to believe why good faith bargaining can't become an enduring part of our industrial scene as it is in North America. ←ET

cultures, there are differences in terms of what motivates the people in these countries. What turns you on in the US, or Bulgaria, might not get the NZ juices flowing – mainly due to different countries operating in different economic and cultural climates. Interestingly:

- Pay and job security did not figure as significant motivators for the workers from the OECD country studied (the Netherlands);
- They were important in countries like Bulgaria.

Quite possibly once you get these things sorted other issues become more important.

So, Maslow was right? Unfortunately there is no reassurance for Maslow and his hierarchy of needs – “higher” and “lower” needs show their relevance simultaneously.

### Significant Others

There is support for another theory – that of Hackman and Oldham – that “meaningfulness” and “responsibility” mediate the relationship between the motivating job characteristics and results. No matter where your workers are from, you need to identify the things that help them see the significance of, and personal contribution they can make to, the work for which they are getting paid.

Overall, it seems that people will be motivated to try harder if they can see the relationship between their:

- Effort;

- Performance outcomes;
- And in turn, pay rises.

### Lifting The Game

As you have probably already experienced, employee motivation is not a clear-cut area that can be achieved by applying someone else's recipes. You need to know what makes YOUR employees tick, and not those participating in research from far away countries.

Obviously we're not recommending that you cut the one-on-one sessions you have scheduled. Nor that you quit the walking about and hanging around to give you the chance to see your people at work, and to help them do better through developing their knowledge and skills.

What we do suggest is that you check to be sure that your regular staff attitude surveys are really covering all the territory they need to. And when you've identified what the motivators for your people are – make your managers (and teams if that's the way you do it) accountable for lifting the critical measures to where they need to be.

### References

- Bob Nelson in *Compensation and Benefits Review*, May 2000
- Robert Roe and others in *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, October 2000
- Jacques Igalens & Patrice Roussel in *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1999 ←ET



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