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The Role of Work Motivation in Psychological Health

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Abstract

It is incumbent on organisations to find ways to support their employees and help them achieve their full potential; they must provide employees with conditions that promote psychological health. Based on a series of studies conducted by Dr. Claude Fernet, recipient of the 2012 CPA President's New Researcher Award, this article sheds light on the role of work motivation in employees' psychological health in an attempt to provide a better understanding of the forces at play. More specifically, these studies describe how the multiple dimensions and functions of work motivation can explain employees' adaptation to the work environment and their psychological health. Directions for future research are then proposed.

Keywords: work environment, job demands, job resources, employee motivation, psychological health, self-determination theory

The Role of Work Motivation in Psychological Health

The psychological health and functioning of employees is a serious concern for organisations. To compete in today's world, more than ever before, organisations must not only hire the best available staff but also find ways to enable them to be productive and effective employees. The most productive and effective employees are highly motivated and presumably in good health. Such employees work energetically, produce high-quality outcomes, and perform optimally. Unfortunately, health problems in the workplace are on the rise (Vézina, Bourbonnais, Marchand, & Arcand, 2008), resulting in higher costs, not only for organisations (e.g., productivity losses, high turnover, and absenteeism rates), but also for individuals (e.g., psychological stress, lower quality of life). How can organisations cope with these problems and create the supportive conditions that will foster employees' motivation? How can they promote, rather than impede, employees' psycho-

logical health? This article presents an overview of a number of studies conducted in close collaboration with my colleagues and students in an attempt to gain insight into these important issues.

Theoretical Background

My research builds mainly on the literature on motivation, drawing primarily on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). This theory makes an important distinction concerning the nature of motivation: people may invest themselves in an activity not only to varied degrees (a quantifiable aspect), they also do so for various reasons (a qualitative aspect). Specifically, two broad forms of motivation—autonomous and controlled—may differentially impact employee functioning and well-being (see Gagné & Deci, 2005, for a review). *Autonomous motivation* refers to acting with volition, as when employees engage in their job for the inherent pleasure and satisfaction they experience (intrinsic motivation) and/or because they personally endorse the importance or value of their work (identified regulation). *Controlled motivation* refers to behaviours that are enacted under internal or external pressure, as when employees perform their job to gain a sense of self-worth or to avoid feelings of anxiety and guilt (introjected regulation) and/or because they are pressured by demands, threats, or rewards by an external agent (external regulation). Many studies have supported the presence of these forms of motivation and their differential impact on psychological functioning in diverse life spheres, including the workplace (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For instance, autonomous motivation has been positively associated with psychological well-being (Blais, Brière, Lachance, Riddle, & Vallerand, 1993), job satisfaction (Millette & Gagné, 2008), and occupational commitment (Fernet, 2011). In contrast, controlled motivation has been positively associated with negative consequences for workers, such as burnout (Fernet, Sénécal, Guay, Marsh, & Dowson, 2008) and turnover intention (Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002).

The Multiple Dimensions and Functions of Work Motivation

My research to date has mostly focused on the multidimensional nature of motivation, how different types of motivation influence the way in which individuals adapt to the workplace and how they affect employees' psychological health. First, in order to address the multiple dimensions of work motivation, we developed two scales designed to better understand motivation in school staff. One scale addresses teaching tasks (Fernet et al., 2008), and the other addresses work roles in school principals (Fernet, 2011). In

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theoretical terms, the results of these studies underscore the importance of accounting for construct specificity in the analysis of work motivation. That is, individuals engage in their work for various reasons, and these reasons may differ across different work activities (tasks or roles). For example, a teacher might find lesson planning and teaching stimulating, but performing administrative and other tasks less so. The results also show that certain activities are more strongly associated with specific indicators of psychological functioning at work. To illustrate, burnout in school principals is more closely associated with motivation toward the instructional leadership role than with motivation toward the administrative or informational role. This nuanced conceptualisation of motivation allows a deeper understanding of employees' motivation and how its specific dimensions relate to psychological functioning. In practical terms, these instruments allow us to more precisely identify which work activities are more likely to contribute to motivational gains (or deficits). This would in turn allow better designed interventions, for both individuals and organisations.

Second, our studies have contributed to the understanding of the various functions (e.g., moderating and mediating role) by which motivation affects employees' adaptation to the work environment and their psychological health. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), work motivation is largely influenced by the social context in which people work. Our studies show that, notwithstanding this significant effect, some employees are more vulnerable than others to social contingencies (Fernet, Gagné, & Austin, 2010). In a 24-month prospective study examining the moderating effect of work motivation, we found that low-quality relationships with coworkers contribute significantly to burnout, but only for employees with low autonomous motivation. These findings suggest that employees who are driven by internalized work values (autonomously motivated) have better defences against burnout, because they would be less dependent on certain social contingencies. Work motivation has also been shown to play a moderating role in situations where the work organisation imposes constraints on employees. One of our studies, conducted in two samples of employees (Trépanier, Fernet, & Austin, 2012), indicates that autonomous motivation (relative to controlled motivation) reduces the negative effect of specific job demands (role overload, ambiguity, and conflict) on psychological distress. Another study (Fernet, Guay, & Senécal, 2004) explores how autonomous motivation helps employees adapt to their job and maintain psychological health. Drawing on Karasek's (1979) model, we examined whether motivation moderates the relationship between job demands and control in predicting burnout. The results show that decision-making autonomy acts to minimise the negative effect of job demands on burnout, but only for employees who are highly autonomously motivated. This suggests that employees who are motivated primarily by satisfaction, pleasure, and the inherent interest of the tasks can benefit more from certain job resources in order to cope with high job demands. In summary, these studies converge on the idea that motivation, depending on its nature, can be either a protective or vulnerability factor in explaining the effects of environmental work factors on employees' psychological health.

In addition to the moderating role of motivation, our studies have shed new light on the mediating role of motivation as a psychological mechanism that could explain how environmental

work factors influence psychological health. The models developed to address these mechanisms, such as the job demands—resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), generally propose that motivational factors can explain only the relationships with job resources (e.g., decision-making autonomy, social support) and positive manifestations of psychological health (e.g., vitality and engagement). However, the results of our studies reveal that employees' motivation is affected not only by resources, but also by job demands. Furthermore, motivation simultaneously predicts positive and negative psychological consequences. For example, a study conducted in teachers (Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012) shows that higher perceptions of classroom overload and students' disruptive behaviours (i.e., job demands) over a school year reduces autonomous motivation, which in turn predicts higher burnout. Moreover, in a 9-month longitudinal study of school principals (Fernet, Austin, & Vallerand, 2012), we explored the temporal nature of the relationships between work motivation, job resources (job control, recognition, quality of relationships with staff), and positive and negative indicators of professional functioning (burnout and occupational commitment). The results show that job resources at the beginning of the school year positively predict autonomous motivation and negatively predict controlled motivation at the end of the year. In addition, motivation at the beginning of the year—primarily autonomous motivation—predicts both burnout and commitment at the end of the year. Taken together, these findings support the influential role of motivation in psychological functioning at work. They also suggest that motivation can be influenced by both negative and positive aspects of the work environment.

Future Directions

Although these studies enable us to better understand when, how, and why motivation can predict employees' psychological health, further studies are needed to better delineate the multiple roles of motivation in a temporal perspective. Whereas the research in this area and the above-presented studies largely support a sequential effect of environmental work factors on motivational processes, which are then translated into positive or negative manifestations of psychological health, this posited sequence could in fact be more complex. As such, longitudinal studies that include multiple time measures could be undertaken to not only better identify the different functions (mediating or moderating) of variables but also the time required for the effects to be observed (short- or long-term) and the sequences of effects (normal, reversed, or reciprocal). Furthermore, studies could attempt to more deeply investigate how various aspects of the work environment act on employees' motivation. Although the research on SDT (e.g., Gagné & Deci, 2005) proposes that management styles exert a powerful influence on employees' motivation, the precise mechanisms by which managers achieve this remain unclear. In addition to acting directly on their employees' motivation, it is plausible that a manager—who may have the authority to define and shape the conditions in which employee works (Smircich & Morgan, 1982)—can influence employees' perceptions of the work environment. For example, a manager can cultivate autonomous motivation in employees by minimising obstacles (e.g., clear mandates, meaningful rationales) and by providing access to

additional—and more diverse—job resources. Research along these lines would be useful for organisations wishing to create the conditions at work that can foster motivation and promote, not impede, psychological health.

Résumé

Il revient aux organisations de trouver des moyens de soutenir leurs employés et de les aider à réaliser leur plein potentiel; elles doivent leur fournir les conditions qui favoriseront leur santé psychologique. Fondé sur une série d'études réalisées par Claude Fernet (Ph. D.), lauréat en 2012 du Prix du nouveau chercheur de la SCP, cet article explique le rôle de motivation au travail dans la santé psychologique des employés en vue d'améliorer la compréhension des facteurs en jeu. Plus précisément, ces études décrivent en quoi les multiples dimensions et fonctions de la motivation au travail peuvent expliquer l'adaptation des employés à leur environnement de travail ainsi que leur santé psychologique. Des pistes pour les recherches à venir sont aussi proposées.

Mots-clés : environnement de travail, exigences d'un emploi, ressources pour un emploi, motivation des employés, santé psychologique, théorie de l'autodétermination.

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