

Employee Perceptions of the Work Environment, Motivational Outlooks, and Employee Work Intentions: An HR Practitioner's Dream or Nightmare?

Advances in Developing Human
Resources

2018, Vol. 20(2) 197–213

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DOI: 10.1177/1523422318757209

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Abstract

The Problem.

Reinforcement theory has inspired many types of human resource development (HRD) initiatives. Despite their widespread use, reinforcement-focused programs, designed to control the outcome of behavior through external rewards, have proven expensive and cumbersome to manage and have an alarmingly low rate of return on investment. There is a critical need to better understand motivation in work environments as well as to explore more efficacious forms of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic simultaneously.

The Solution.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is concerned with forward influence, independent choice, and the degree to which behavior is internalized as self-determined. Sources of employee motivation are influenced by employee perceptions of the work environment as well as behavioral outcomes. The most optimal forms of motivation are believed to originate from internal regulation of basic psychological needs rather than external forms of motivation such as those central to reinforcement-focused theory and practice.

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Author Note: This article was subjected to a two-tier, blind review process that did not involve any of the contributing authors who are currently members of the editorial board.

The Stakeholders.

We question which forms of motivation are most optimal for influencing employee behavior in the workplace, including long-held traditions of reinforcement-grounded programming, and present new models for understanding the role of motivation in HRD. Results of this study focus the conversation on SDT and explore specific implications for practice.

Keywords

self-determination theory, human resource development, reinforcement, work intention, Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale

Despite decades of research debunking the carrot-and-stick approach to motivation, human resource practitioners remain preoccupied with reinforcement theory (Landry et al., 2016; Stone, Deci, & Ryan, 2009). Reinforcement theory—a motivation model grounded in the process of shaping behavior by strictly controlling consequences (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Gibson, 2004; Premack, 1965)—has given rise to organizational strategies such as pay-for-play cash bonuses, tangible extrinsic rewards in the form of prizes and luxury vacations, and several forms of organizational perks and public recognition ceremonies as a strategy for influencing behavior in the workplace. Programs such as cash-based bonus incentives, for example, designed to control the outcome of behavior through monetary rewards over and above normal pay structures, are expensive and cumbersome to manage; still, despite the high expense and alarmingly low rate of performance return (Collins & Clark, 2003; Landry et al., 2016), leaders continue to root their trust (and future) in the belief that some of the strongest forms of motivation are external to the employee and are reinforcement based.

Self-determination theory (SDT)—a multidimensional, organismic meta-theory—highlights the importance of developed inner resources that influence the self-regulation of human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 2000; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). The major premise of SDT is that individuals are optimally motivated when they believe they are volitional agents of their future (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Human resource development (HRD) interventions and programs as well as desired work outcomes hinge on an understanding of how employees experience their immediate work environment, including the influence of motivational regulation as extrinsically or intrinsically focused. Despite the prevalent use of reward and incentive design structures, a significant amount of research has now emerged which explores how—and under what conditions—forms of motivation operate in ways that influence employee intentions within a working context (Gagné et al., 2015; Landry et al., 2016). The purpose of our work was to explore expressions of external and intrinsic motivation on employee work intentions. First, we detail a conceptual framework of SDT-focused motivation and the hypotheses used to guide our study. Second, we briefly review the concept of intentions. Third, we lay out the method for our study, including the details of the data testing our hypotheses alongside the results of our work and a discussion of the findings, coupled with specific recommendations for practitioners.

Motivation: The Case for SDT as a Conceptual Framework

SDT is concerned with forward influence, independent choice, and the degree to which behavior is internalized as self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, the sources of employee motivation are influenced by perceptions of the work environment as well as by behavioral outcomes. The most optimal forms of motivation are believed to originate from basic psychological needs rather than the physiological drives of pleasure and pain (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Shuck, Zigarmi, & Owen, 2015; Stone et al., 2009).

The SDT literature advocates the measurement of several forms of motivation, or motivational outlooks, such as external motivation, introjected motivation, identified motivation, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).¹ External motivation is noninternalized and is defined as engaging in an activity to obtain some form of reward (e.g., cash incentive) or avoid an external consequence (e.g., getting fired) rather than interest in the activity itself. Introjected motivation is defined as engaging in an activity out of external pressuring forces that guide the parameters of behavior where a subject replicates in himself or herself behaviors or attributes they experience in the external world. This form of motivation occurs through a process of introjection, where behavior evolves out of internal psychic pressures such as disgrace or guilt (or more positive behaviors such as happiness or joy) and are externally controlling (e.g., “I do this work so I can prove to myself and others that I am smart, which is validating to my ego identity; otherwise I would feel shameful or embarrassed”). Identified motivation is defined as engaging in an activity because it is interesting and enjoyable and connected to one’s sense of meaning and values (e.g., “I do this work because I believe in the cause it represents”). Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity out of pure satisfaction for the activity itself (e.g., “I do this work because I enjoy the process of it”). Gagné et al. (2015) argued that identified motivation differs from intrinsic motivation “in that the activity is not done out of inherent satisfaction, but for the instrumental value it represents” (p. 179).

These types of motivational outlooks are characterized by their degree of internalization. In other words, “the individual comes to see oneself as the source of initiation and regulation of behavior and feels a sense of volition and endorsement of the actions” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 226). In the SDT literature, identified and integrated motivational outlooks are autonomously regulated functions, whereas external and introjected motivational outlooks are designated as controlled regulation. Research has loosely defined autonomous regulation as more “internal” (and therefore more volitional) and controlled regulation as more “external” and less volitional (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Finally, scholars have suggested that autonomous forms of regulation are more optimal than controlled regulation and research has shown that autonomous forms of regulation have a positive correlation with well-being, satisfaction, happiness, performance, and flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

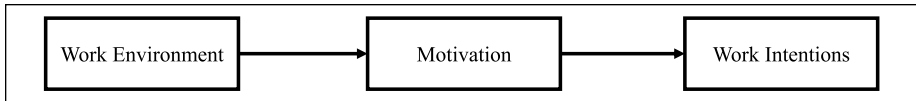


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

The Concept of Intention

Cognitive perceptions of one's work experience result in appraisals that guide employee decision making. An appraisal is defined as an individual's assessment regarding how their past and current work experiences affect their sense of work well-being (Lazarus, 1982, 1984; Nimon, Zigarmi, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2011). Appraisals occur within a psychological process where new information continuously influences and is folded into the inherent meaning of a situation or context. Work environment features shown to meaningfully impact work perceptions are factors such as opportunities for growth, greater job autonomy, increased task variety, and meaningful work (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015a). Favorable appraisals regarding work-based perceptions are connected to both lived and future-expected experiences, and these appraisals are used to inform decision making about in-the-moment behavior. In-the-moment intention can be framed as cognition that precedes the performance of behavior.

Because intentions represent an individual employee's future commitments toward a specific target, such as those actions connected to performance, we adopted the Nimon and Zigarmi's (2015b) model of intentions as a latent proxy to empirically demonstrate the motivation–performance linkage. Grounded in a review of literature, Zigarmi and Nimon (2011) presented justification for five independent employee work intentions connected to work performance. Their research correlated five unique intentions to various dependent variables: intent to stay, intent to use organizational citizenship behaviors, intent to perform, intent to use discretionary effort, and intent to endorse (cf. Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015b).

It follows that various forms of motivation would be related to different types of employee outcome behavior. The ability to simultaneously understand the functions of less-internalized forms of motivation such as extrinsic and introjected outlooks alongside more internalized forms of motivation such as intrinsic and identified outlooks could be valuable to practitioners in HRD. In this study, we hypothesize that the presence of positive work-based environmental factors (e.g., job autonomy, meaningful work) would demonstrate higher effect sizes in their relationship to internalized forms of motivation, which would subsequently influence more positive forms of employee intention behavior. In short, we believed that work cognition would influence work intention through different forms of motivation. See Figure 1 for our guiding conceptual model.

Grounded in the extant literature as well as our guiding conceptual model, we tested three unique hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Work environment cognitions will be positively and more strongly related to forms of autonomous regulation (i.e., identified and intrinsic) compared with forms of controlled regulation (i.e., extrinsic and introjected).

Hypothesis 2: Work intentions will be positively and more strongly related to forms of autonomous regulation (i.e., identified and intrinsic) compared with forms of controlled regulation (i.e., extrinsic and introjected).

Hypothesis 3: Motivation will mediate the relationship between work environment cognitions and work intentions.

Said differently, for Hypothesis 1, we anticipate that more advantageous work environment conditions will be strongly related to higher levels of autonomous regulation and that less advantageous work environment conditions will correspond with lower levels of autonomous regulation. Furthermore, we similarly believe work environment cognitions and controlled regulation will demonstrate a positive relationship in direction, but that the relationship will be weaker in magnitude. To illustrate Hypothesis 2, for example, we anticipate that high levels of autonomous regulation will correspond strongly with favorable scores on work intentions and that low levels of autonomous regulation will also correspond strongly with less favorable scores on work intentions. Relative to the relationship just described, we also expect that the connection between controlled regulation and work intentions will be somewhat weaker in size. For Hypothesis 3, we predict that the connection between work environment cognitions and work intentions will look different depending on the kind of motivation reported by employees.

Method

An organization operating from two locations, Southern California and Texas, participated in this study in 2011. The participating company was a manufacturing plant that produces power generators, lawn and gardening power tools, all-terrain vehicle (ATVs), and motorcycles. The survey effort was part of a broader engagement improvement process. The company's president socialized the upcoming data collection effort with an introductory video. An electronic survey was launched through Qualtrics, and of the 510 employees who received the survey invitation, 365 participated, a response rate of 72%. Of the total sample of respondents, 65% were male, and 61% were born in 1961 or later. Thirty-eight percent held managerial positions, and 79% had been with the organization for 4 years or less. The measures used for the study are described next.

Work Cognition Inventory (WCI)

We used the WCI Short-Form (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015a), which measures employees' cognitive assessment of their work environment. We chose the WCI due to the comprehensiveness of its content domain; the WCI features 36 questions for 12 three-item subscales, and can be modeled as second-order latent factors (i.e., job factors, organizational factors, and relationship factors; see Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015a) and one third-order work cognition latent factor. All questions in the 12 subscales described below feature a 6-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 = *to no extent* to 6 = *to the fullest extent*.

Job factors are autonomy (e.g., “I have the authority I need to make decisions about my job”), meaningful work (e.g., “I am working on projects that matter to this organization”), workload balance (e.g., “I have enough time to complete my work on most days”), and task variety (e.g., “My job involves making multifaceted decisions”). Organizational factors are composed of distributive justice (e.g., “I think there is an equal exchange between my effort and my compensation”), procedural justice (e.g., “Decisions, policies, and procedures are fairly and consistently applied to all”), growth (e.g., “I can chart my future career path in this organization”), and job expectations (e.g., “I am expected to meet agreed-upon standards”). Relationship factors are connectedness with leader (e.g., “My boss takes an interest in me professionally”), connectedness with colleagues (e.g., “My colleagues generally act in my best interest”), collaboration (e.g., “Most people who work with me are positive and collaborative”), and feedback (e.g., “The feedback I receive allows me to make improvements in my job”).

Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (MWMS)

We chose to use the MWMS in this study because it measures various types of motivation; the MWMS consists of 19 questions representing six subscales for motivation in the workplace (Amotivation, External-Social, External-Material, Introjected, Identified, and Intrinsic), provides a 7-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely/entirely* to capture respondents’ reasons for exerting effort on the job, and its use has been validated across seven languages (Gagné et al., 2015). Participants responded to the prompt: “Why do you or would you put efforts into your current job?” and example items included “To get others’ approval” (external motivation) and “Because the work I do is interesting” (intrinsic motivation).

The external motivation subscale can be broken down into two subscales: External-Material Regulation and External-Social Regulation; we took this into account in our modeling as described in our “Results” section. Due to poor reliability and measurement model fit, we removed two of the four introjected regulation items. Specifically, to measure introjected regulation, we used the following two items in this study: “Because otherwise I will feel ashamed of myself” and “Because otherwise I will feel bad about myself.” Across various samples, previous research has shown somewhat lower reliability of the introjected regulation subscale relative to other subscales in the MWMS (Gagné et al., 2015).

Work Intentions Inventory (WII)

We used the short form of the WII (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015b). It features 15 questions, grouped into a pentad of threes that represent one of the five kinds of work intentions. All questions provide respondents with a 6-point Likert-type response scale, which ranges from 1 = *to no extent* to 6 = *to the fullest extent*. The five work intention scales and corresponding example items are listed here: intent to perform at a higher than average level (e.g., “I intend to work efficiently to help this organization

succeed”), intent to endorse (e.g., “I intend to talk positively about the leadership in this organization”), intent to use discretionary effort (e.g., “I intend to volunteer for things that may not be part of my job”), intent to stay with the organization (e.g., “I intend to stay with the organization even if I were offered a similar job with slightly higher pay elsewhere”), and intent to use organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., “I intend to respect this organization’s assets”).

Analytical Approach

We ran reliabilities, correlations, and descriptives as preliminary analyses (see Table 1) prior to conducting structural equation modeling to test our proposed theoretical model and corresponding hypotheses.

Measurement Model

Following Nimon and Zigarmi (2015a), we modeled WCI as one third-order latent variable, with job cognition, people cognition, and organizational cognition as second-order latent variables, and with the 12 WCI factors as first-order latent variables created from their respective observed items. Also, we modeled external motivation as a second-order latent variable with external-material motivation and external-social motivation dimensions serving as first-order latent variables, in accordance with Gagné et al. (2015). The other forms of motivation and all work intention variables were modeled as first-order latent variables. Finally, in accordance with theoretical expectations that extrinsic motivation and introjected regulation should correlate, and our expectation that identified and intrinsic outlooks should correlate, we specified that in our models.

Structural Model

To test the degree to which our data fit our theoretical model, we used structural equation modeling in MPlus 7.2. We empirically evaluated nested models for full versus partial mediation effects using the Yuan–Bentler scaled difference chi-square test. Indirect effects were calculated using the RMediation package (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007). In all analyses, we controlled for age and gender.

Results

Using SEM, we first tested our hypothesized model, which proposed that motivation variables would fully mediate the relationship between employees’ perception of the work environment and employees’ work intentions. We set up the model such that four paths were estimated between work environment (third-order latent variable) and our motivation variables, and 20 paths were estimated between our motivation variables and work intention variables (i.e., paths led from each of the four motivation variables to every kind of work intention). We then compared our hypothesized model with a

Table 1. Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Subscales.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Work Environment	3.79	0.73	.95									
2. External Regulation	4.02	1.29	.111*	.84								
3. Introjected Regulation	4.40	1.86	.097	.387**	.96							
4. Identified Regulation	6.12	0.92	.336**	.134*	.339**	.90						
5. Intrinsic Motivation	5.36	1.27	.415**	.069	.221**	.499**	.93					
6. Intent to Use Discretionary Effort	3.72	1.11	.344**	.203**	.213**	.346**	.402**	.92				
7. Intent to Perform	5.31	0.79	.375**	.059	.138**	.586**	.301**	.386**	.91			
8. Intent to Endorse	4.96	1.11	.493**	.142**	.157**	.458**	.388**	.460**	.558**	.95		
9. Intent to Stay	4.45	1.35	.570**	.056	.061	.368**	.424**	.312**	.415**	.624**	.92	
10. Intent to Use OCB	5.37	0.77	.358**	.075	.192**	.540**	.302**	.345**	.642**	.588**	.370**	.87

Note. Alpha reliabilities for each scale are provided on the diagonal. Introjected regulation subscale is estimated from two items (same as those in SEM). OCB = organizational citizenship behaviors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Structural Model Comparisons.

Model	Model description	χ^2	df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$ (compared with model 1)
1	Full mediation (hypothesized model)	3575.23*	2074	0.908	0.099	0.046	—
2	Partial mediation/ Direct path from hard power to trust	3488.11*	2069	0.913	0.078	0.045	84.23, <i>df</i> = 5

Note. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

**p* < .05.

partial mediation model in SEM, by beginning with our initial estimated model but then adding direct paths from work environment to each work intention variable (i.e., five direct paths added simultaneously).

As displayed in Table 2, overall fit statistics indicated that the partial mediation model fit the data better than the full mediation model. Our final model is illustrated in Figure 2, and indirect effects for that model are presented in Table 3.

In accordance with Hypothesis 1, our final structural model indicated that work environment cognitions were indeed more positively and strongly related to more identified and intrinsic forms of motivation, compared with less self-determined types of motivation.

Regarding Hypothesis 2, identified and intrinsic motivation were positively related to favorable work intentions (six paths significant), with identified motivation strongly and positively related to intent to perform and intent to use organizational citizenship behaviors. External and introjected regulation were not notable correlates of work intentions, as only one path was significant, that is, the path from external regulation to intent to use discretionary effort.

For Hypothesis 3, all direct paths from work environment cognitions to the five work intentions were significant and positive, and most were moderate in size. This suggests that how employees perceive their work environment directly plays into their productive intentions to try hard, perform highly, speak well of their organization, stay with their organization, and help others at work.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The primary contribution of this study is a definitive stand on what constitutes optimal motivation in work; namely, identified and intrinsic forms. Specifically, our findings provide initial evidence that reinforcement forms of motivation (external and introjected) fall decidedly short of relating to effective kinds of work intention. The most optimal forms of employee motivation—according to our results—are those that employees internalize as their own choice. Thus, leaders should root their trust and future actions in fostering identified and intrinsic forms of motivation, which have a

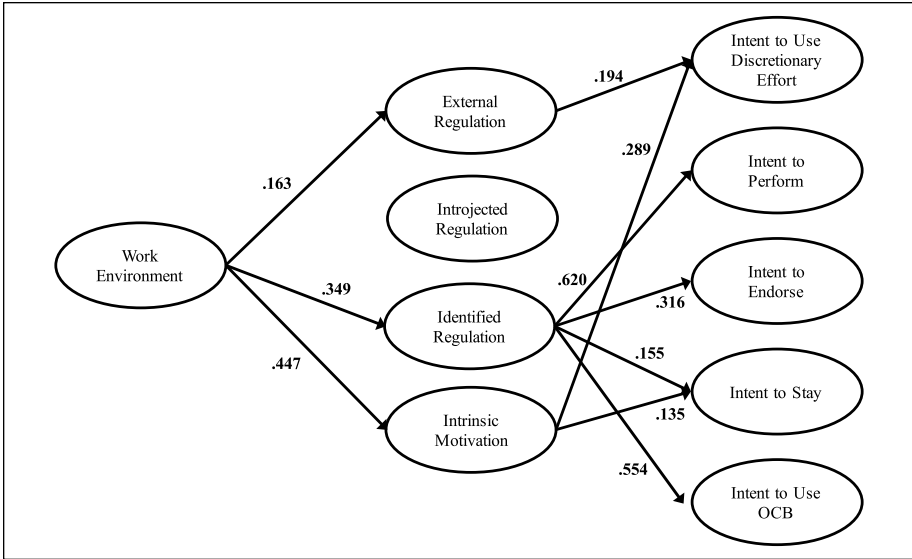


Figure 2. Final structural model ($n = 365$).

Note. Only significant path shown. Significant direct path from work environment to work intentions are listed below (not illustrated): Work Environment → Intent to Use Discr. Effort = .220. Work Environment → Intent to Perform = .267. Work Environment → Intent to Endorse = .394. Work Environment → Intent to Stay = .522. Work Environment → Intent to Use OCB = .256. OCB = organizational citizenship behaviors.

Table 3. Significant Indirect Effects for the Final Model.

Path	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI [LLCI, ULCI]
WE → IDE			
Through Ext Reg	.035	.024	[.000, .091]
Through Intrin Mot	.143	.049	[.055, .247]
WE → IP			
Through Ident Reg	.259	.063	[.145, .393]
WE → IE			
Through Ident Reg	.179	.063	[.070, .315]
WE → IS			
Through Ident Reg	.084	.039	[.016, .167]
Through Intrin Mot	.094	.049	[.003, .197]
WE → IOCB			
Through Ident Reg	.176	.044	[.097, .268]

Note. CI = confidence interval; LLCI = lower level confidence interval; ULCI = upper level confidence interval; WE = work environment; IDE = intent to use discretionary effort; Ext Reg = external regulation; Intrin Mot = intrinsic motivation; IP = intent to perform; Ident Reg = identified regulation; IE = intent to endorse; IS = intent to stay; IOCB = intent to use organizational citizenship behaviors.

decided internal—not external—locus of causality. Findings point to specific implications for practitioners on three unique levels: (a) the practice of creating optimal work environments to foster employee internal motivation, (b) understanding the role of motivation in work, and (c) implementing lessons from the partial model through practice.

The Practice of Creating Work Environments for Optimal Motivation

First, in direct connection to our findings, HRD practitioners should design work in ways that foster workplace climates favorable to meeting the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The work of creating positive, favorable work environments can be challenging, yet this hard work may lead to significant dividends for leaders and employees alike. This study's results suggested, specifically, that employees who cognitively assess their work environment more favorably may operate from a more optimal and sustainable motivation in their work, compared with less optimal forms of motivation (i.e., extrinsic and introjected). A work environment that supports basic psychological needs is associated with the manifestation of healthier work motivation and employees' intentions to work toward enhanced outcomes for the organization, as our model has indicated. The more favorably an employee perceives their working environment, the more likely they are to be motivated by internalized forms of motivation (see Table 1) and exhibit higher forms of behavioral intent on critical measures of performance such as discretionary effort and endorsement. If having employees who are motivated at optimal, self-determined levels is perceived to be valuable, HRD practitioners would be well served to consider the context and nature of the work environment as an immediate and critical first step. Research-grounded strategies might include a focus toward developing positive workplace cultures such as those outlined by Brown and Leigh (1996) characterized by supportive managers, a robust and transparent communication strategy, appropriate levels of recognition, and clear levels of role clarity and, which are opposite of the types of dysfunctional environments described by Rose, Shuck, Twyford, and Bergman (2015) and Goh, Pfeffer, and Zenios (2015a, 2015b), which all detail toxic, externally regulated, and disengaging places of work.

For additional specific connections to practice, HRD practitioners should look toward the collection of evidenced-based research contained in this special issue (i.e., Fowler; Manganelli et al.; Rigby & Ryan; Zigarmi & Fowler) as well as those of Brown and Leigh (1996), Hardré and Reeve (2009), and Gilbert, Laschinger, and Leiter (2010) to understand what favorable work environments both look and feel like within the context of our findings. For example, Gilbert et al. (2010) suggested empowering employees through meaningful forms of communication and emphasizing individual contributions to organizational goals as important steps in producing favorable workplace climates that impact autonomous forms of motivation. At a more detailed level, HRD practitioners are encouraged to look toward the WCI (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015a) as well as the recently developed Cognitive Work Appraisal Scale

(CWAS-11; Shuck, Adelson, & Reio, 2016) for indicators about what favorable, positive work environments can look like and how they can be operationalized. These collective works reliably suggest that environments in which employees see and know the meaning and intrinsic value of their work, feel supported by their supervisors and coworkers, and feel confident and positive that they have the resources to complete their work are more likely to view their workplaces as favorable. As shown throughout our work, favorable perceptions are connected to experiences of positive emotional effect, such as autonomous, self-directed motivation.

In addition, there are direct implications for the fine-tuning of specific HRD practices within recruiting, training, performance management (Hardré & Reeve, 2009), job design, (Gagné & Deci, 2005) as well as compensation (Landry et al., 2016) and reward structures (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Work by Lee and Bruvold (2003) suggested that HRD practitioners focus toward high-commitment human resources practices that include access to training and development programs that encourage career development and management training, as well as job-specific and leadership training (both advanced and high potential), which may influence higher forms of self-directed motivation levels (MacDuffie, 1995; Snell & Dean, 1992). Beyond a total focus on those HRD practices that shape favorability perceptions at work (such as those evidenced-based strategies mentioned above), employees must also trust that their organization is supportive of them being part of such an environment, which includes, for instance, supporting and welcoming employees to share their voice, do meaningful work, and be self-directed in their motivation. Research-supported remedies for practice that build toward empowering employee voice include ensuring that work is procedurally fair (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Zigarmi & Nimon, 2011), that employee engagement and passion are a clear focus of leadership and are communicated regularly (Shuck, Twyford, Reio, & Shuck, 2014), and that a strong performance-management strategy is in place (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013; Gruman & Saks, 2011).

Understanding the Role of Motivation in Work

We note that work environments are complex, involving dyadic relationships between people, the realities of a given job, and aspects of the organization itself—all of which impact the employee work experience. However, in our study, employees who have an identified motivational outlook were much more likely to intend to perform highly and to intend to help others at work, and were moderately more likely to intend to endorse their organization. Similarly, employees acting from an intrinsic motivational outlook were more likely to intend to expend discretionary effort and to intend stay with their organization. When the employees in our study operated from autonomous regulation, their workplaces benefited from the positive intentions of those employees. Here, we note the reciprocal power of autonomous regulation; when organizations work to create favorable, more positive experiences of work (such as through those evidenced-based practices described above), employees tend to operate from an autonomously regulated outlook, and consequently the organization is more likely to benefit from their good intentions.

We strongly encourage HRD practitioners to help employees connect meaningfully with the work they do each day and tap into optimal levels of motivation, such that employees learn to enjoy the process of working as well as have greater opportunity to discover how their personal value system may be in alignment their job. Employees enjoy work when they believe their efforts contribute to something of value and that their voices matter in shaping the future (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

We advise HRD practitioners to consider how various aspects of a given employee's cognitive evaluation of their workplace could affect that employee's global impression of their work environment and shift their motivational locus of causality. Some of this work is not only easy but also lower-cost. For example, finding informal ways to ensure employees are treated with dignity and doing work that is dignified (Anderson & Pearson, 1999), listening to employees when they are expressing an opinion or sharing an idea, and using a people-first strategy in making decisions. Often with experiences of work comes a certain degree of intrinsic meaning and value, and so HRD practitioners have a powerful opportunity to protect that meaning and to ensure that the value of each person's unique contributions is never extinguished.

Implementing Lessons From the Partial Model Through Practice

In light of our findings, motivational outlooks can be both a dream and nightmare. For the HRD practitioner who is empowered to create the conditions of favorable work perceptions, working with autonomously motivated employees is likely a dream. Not only do employees enjoy their work, see the value of their work, and choose to do it in a way that reflects joy, the outcomes of good work surely follow. However, for the HRD practitioner who is trying to work within a system of external, reinforcement-based rewards and dealing with forms of introjected motivation, our findings are likely the stuff that nightmares are made of.

In telling the story of our findings, Figure 2 may prove particularly useful. The lesson embedded within Figure 2 suggests that if leaders hope to build an organization with employees who help each other out, endorse the company, have little intention to leave, work hard, and go above and beyond, internalized forms of motivation are necessary. Only an external motivational outlook (an external locus of causality) has a significant relationship with discretionary effort, and beyond that, forms of less suboptimal forms of motivation fall decidedly (and predictably) short. When it comes to motivation, external rewards such as incentive pay and bonus compensation may be nice add-ons to a job well done, but do little to actually motivate employees over time (Landry et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2009). Although we note that an external motivational outlook does have one significant path, it remains a weak path in the model. Thus, the cost of programs involving external rewards may be prohibitive when the full return on investment of the model is considered (Landry et al., 2016). Practitioners would do much better working to improve the favorability conditions of the workplace and helping employees work from a place of autonomous regulation by employing some of the strategies we have already covered (Shuck & Reio, 2014; Shuck et al., 2014).

Introjected motivation tells a sad and lonely story of required behavior, but not of personal acceptance. That is, employees coming from a place of introjection are working in a way to maintain a certain stature, position, or appearance, and to avoid internal pressures. This often involves ego, low self-esteem, and self-worth in ways that drive no intention at all. Gagné and Deci (2005) referred to this form of motivation as non-self-determined and our results parallel this phrasing. In looking at the model, introjected forms of motivation act as a sort of island, where the employee, a person who is attempting to maintain a sense of self-worth and ego identity, may feel remote from other employees and work in a way that isolates their own behavior—a dangerous and catastrophic cycle. In instances such as these, HRD practitioners can help by training leaders to communicate the value of an employee's work and to find ways to build meaning into the work of the employee as well as communicate messages of intrinsic value and meaning (Shuck & Rose, 2013). Employees might also be encouraged to seek professional counseling to reposition their motivation.

In sum, employees who work in places where they experience their work and working context as favorable are more likely to engage in forms of motivation connected to higher incidence of positive intention and behaviors. Although the story of our model reads easily, the implementation is hard, and we do not overlook that. Many work environments may not be optimal for fostering the development of intrinsic motivations, and perhaps few employees work from a place of autonomous regulation at all times. These notwithstanding, we believe there is a future in striving to build toward optimally focused forms of motivation in workspaces that are experienced as positive—This seems a worthy pursuit.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Gagné et al. (2015) also identified amotivation, defined as the absence of motivation toward an activity. Because our focus was on the expressions of external and intrinsic motivation regulation, we did not include a discussion of this motivational state. See Gagné et al. (2015) for additional details.

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