

The impact of employee rewards on employee motivation: Toxic environment as a moderating variable

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Received 12 January 2025

Revised 25 March 2025

Accepted 28 March 2025

ABSTRACT

Employee rewards are crucial for motivating and recognizing organizational contributions. However, organizations frequently overlook the elements (financial and non-financial rewards) that motivate employees. Most organizations lack tools and tactics to motivate employees, and the worst part is that a toxic work environment demotivates employees. This study aimed to investigate and understand how employee rewards affect motivation in a toxic environment as a moderating variable. Exploratory research was conducted for this review. Information was gathered from online publications, dissertations, online databases, and books relevant to the topic. Financial benefits are the most effective motivator for most employees; however, selected individuals are driven by intrinsic rewards. Money alone is not always sufficient to motivate employees. Regardless of these benefits, a hostile work environment motivates employees. To foster a healthy work environment, organizations must train managers and staff in professionalism, fairness, positivism, and workplace culture. Employees or managers acting toxically toward other staff members should be addressed immediately. This study emphasizes the value of reward systems in a nontoxic workplace. Organizations can promote greater job satisfaction, which in turn lowers absenteeism and increases employee motivation levels, ultimately boosting total economic production by eliminating the toxic aspects that may impair motivation.

Keywords: Financial Rewards, Motivation, Non-Financial Rewards, Toxic Work Environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Because organizations have implemented reward systems, their advantages are beneficial. Organizations have expressed satisfaction with enhanced employee productivity; lower attrition rates; higher business commitment, creativity, and innovation; and stronger operational relations and motivation among employees. Organizations are expected to cultivate wholesome and gratifying bonds with their workforce (Marczak & Yawson, 2021). In addition to internal rewards such as reaching an individual objective, independence, and greater work opportunities, rewards incorporate extrinsic rewards such as money and perks (Armstrong, 2010; Grobler et al., 2011). This study was guided by the Hay Group (2008) rewards system that encompasses extrinsic rewards (money assurance, variable salary, perks, and continuous rewards) and intrinsic rewards (environmental and employment ethos, guide and administration, professional advancement and progress, workplace education, and advancement). Increasing employee motivation significantly influences productivity and efficacy (Agrawal & Singhal, 2021). Motivation is an individual's desire to accomplish their objectives (Bastola, 2021; Skripak & Poff, 2020; Varma, 2017; Vrba, 2014). Overall motivation is evaluated by four factors in the workplace (Nohria, Groysberg, & Lee, 2008): engagement, the drive, vigor, and endeavor employees bring to their employment; how much, in their opinion, the organization upholds their expectations for employment and upholds its express and implied promises; commitment: the degree to which employees participate in corporate citizenship activities and intention to quit, is the most accurate predictor of employee turnover.

However, it is essential to remember that as social creatures, humans have a variety of demands and rarely behave with economic considerations in mind (Ozkeser, 2019). Interpersonal needs, desires, and factors inside and outside one's own, such as corporate reward systems, can impact an individual's motivation (Werner, 2021). Employees react to rewards unevenly, which motivates them to exert minimal or no impact on other employees and could potentially be demoralizing, according to Kiley (2018). The problem identified in this study is that most organizations lack a flexible and universal reward system that does not consider employees' individual needs, and the toxic work environment affects employee motivation. Employee motivation declines because of the toxic workplace environment. Simultaneously, organizations often miss the financial and non-financial rewards that drive employee motivation. Typically, most organizations lack the means and strategies to motivate employees, as most organizations rely on or think that money motivates employees. Organizations create a reward system without considering employees' demands and needs. This study aimed to investigate and understand the relationship between the impact of employee rewards and toxic work environments on employee motivation. Organizations ought to be able to assess the inner motivation that employees receive from their jobs and supplement them with external rewards as needed.

The statement "a toxic work environment" is frequently heard. Even though this phrase is commonly used, few studies have been conducted on toxic work environments (McCulloch, 2016). Thus, the research gap identified in this study concerns the impact of a toxic environment on the relationship between employee rewards and employee motivation. In a perfect workplace, every employee can thrive in a courteous, uplifting, and supportive environment. However, specific settings at work can be toxic, depleting employees' motivation and energy (Saeed, 2023). This study hypothesises that H_1 : Employee rewards affect employee motivation levels in the work environment. H_2 : A toxic climate moderates the relationship between employee rewards and employee motivation. In a nation like South Africa, with a high unemployment rate of 34.20% in 2023, employees see money as a motivating element (Stats SA [Statistics South Africa]). As a component of pay, salary is the most significant compensation element and ranks highest as a motivating factor for employees (Colic, Arapovic & Mekic, 2022). Although financial benefits are the most effective motivator for most employees, selecting individuals is driven by intrinsic rewards (Mdhlalose, 2022). Uzair and Mehmood (2021) argue that money alone is not always sufficient to stimulate excellent performance. By increasing the views of a reward program's overall fairness, non-financial advantages would increase employee motivation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Constructs Of Employee Motivation

According to [Nel et al. \(2008\)](#), an individual's level of motivation is contingent upon their conception of what constitutes motivation. The motivation issue begins with an essential overlap in the interests of employees and organizations. Employees aim to increase their salaries by exerting the least effort necessary. In contrast, organizations want their employees to put in much effort and receive the lowest possible wage ([Falk, 2014](#)). Table 1 shows the constructs of employee motivation.

Table 1. Constructs of Employee Motivation

Theory	Motivation Construct	Conceptual Definition
Self Determination Theory (SDT)	Intrinsic Motivation	People engage in behaviours for their own sake – “for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from their performance” (Deci et al., 1991). These behaviours are initiated from innate curiosity, interest, and the will to learn new things, even when specific rewards are absent (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
	Avoidance	This study's conceptualisation of avoidance motivation combines motivation from SDT and work avoidance from the Goal Theory. Motivation “can be defined as a state in which individuals cannot perceive a relationship between their behaviour and that behaviour's subsequent outcome” (Legault, Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2006). This perception can lead the individual towards exhibiting work avoidance goals and behaviours, such that they “deliberately avoid engaging in academic tasks or attempt to minimise the effort required to complete academic tasks” (Dowson & McInerney, 2001).
Social-Cognitive Theory	Self-Efficacy	Self-efficacy can be described as “people's beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their functioning and environmental events” (Bandura, 2001). In the context of literature, self-efficacy is described as “beliefs regarding ability and proficiency in reading tasks” (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995).
	Perceived Difficulty	According to Bandura's theory, a person's perception of the task's difficulty affects their ability to express views. Those who perceive reading as challenging have “beliefs that reading activities are hard, or problematic” (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995).
Social Goals	Pro-social Goals	Objectives allude to “what an individual wants to achieve in a particular situation” (Wentzel, Filisetti & Looney, 2007). This notion suggests that pro-social objectives in educational settings represent pupils' preferences. “To help, cooperate, and follow the rules in the classroom” (Wentzel et al., 2007).
	Pro-social Interactions	This investigation inherently studied pro-social relationships as pro-social aspirations. These encounters involved the following goals and behaviours: discussing and consuming literature, expressing enthusiasm for the books that fellow students and peers are reading, and lending a hand to acquaintances and pupils who need assistance with learning.
	Antisocial Goals	Expanding upon our knowledge of pro-social aims, we identify an unfriendly pupil as someone who triggers mockery of fellow pupils' reading-related remarks and thoughts, attempts to prevent assisting other pupils, and attempts not to interact with other pupils.
	Antisocial Interactions	This research looked at antisocial relationships as directly as antisocial aims. During these exchanges, three wants and behaviours were expressed: mocking other pupils' and acquaintances' attitudes on reading, disrespecting them, and persuading them that consuming literature is an inefficient leisure use.

Source: Coddington (2009)

Employee motivation is crucial to an organization's expansion and success. Managers must understand what motivates employees and how to maximize their output ([Uzair & Mehmood, 2021](#)). Financial rewards motivate employees ([Abubakar et al., 2020](#)). The combination of financial rewards and proficiency improvement substantially increases self-governing motivation and decreases turnover intention ([Mustafa & Ali, 2019](#)). [Kefay, Kero and Kumera's \(2020\)](#) study showed that employees are unsatisfied with their

compensation and neither pleased nor dissatisfied with fringe benefits. Therefore, financial reward factors (wages and perks) are not significant predictors of employee motivation.

It is not immediately apparent that external rewards kill internal drivers (Ledford, Gerhart & Fang, 2013). Motivation from outside sources may be counterproductive, as shown by the many ideas summarized in Table 2. Ledford et al. (2013) asserted that the social context in which a reward is given affects its outcomes. If the incentive is well designed, it should increase intrinsic motivation rather than decrease it, increasing its impact compared to when it relies on extrinsic drive. Four drives were encoded in our minds. Their satisfaction immediately affects our feelings, and therefore, our conduct (Nohria, Groysberg & Lee, 2008).

Table 2. Concepts Regarding Extrinsic Rewards' Impact on Internal Motivation

Theory	Key Reference	Major Claims Concerning Effects of Extrinsic Rewards
Cognitive Evaluation Theory	Deci and Ryan (1985)	Extrinsic rewards can impede intrinsic motivation under some circumstances
Attribution Theory / The Justification Effect	Lepper, Greene and Nisbett (1973)	Extrinsic rewards have the potential to reduce intrinsic motivation
Self-Determination Theory	Gagné and Deci (2005)	Extrinsic rewards have the potential to increase intrinsic motivation in some situations
General Interest Theory	Eisenberger, Pierce and Cameron (1999)	Extrinsic rewards may, under some circumstances, increase intrinsic motivation
Motivation Crowding Theory	Frey and Jegan (2001)	Extrinsic motivation derived from rewards has the potential to overshadow intrinsic motivation

Source: Ledford et al. (2013)

Nohria et al. (2008) state that there are four motivating factors underlying motivation, and they are discussed as follows: The drive to acquire: Everyone is encouraged to obtain scarce items that enhance their well-being. Humans feel happiness when this desire is satisfied, and displeasure when it is frustrated. This phenomenon applies to tangible items like food, clothes, housing, and wealth, but also to situations such as travelling and amusement, as well as activities that boost social standing, such as receiving a promotion, a private office, or a seat on the organization board; the drive to bond: humans are the only species to extend this tie to more giant collectives, such as organizations, groups, and countries. When the impulse to connect is satisfied, it is related to good feelings, such as love and care, and when it is not, it is linked with adverse emotions, such as solitude and apathy. When employees are happy to be part of the organization, they experience a significant increase in motivation. However, when the organization fails, they experience a substantial decrease in the drive to comprehend. Typically, humans are energized by figuring out solutions and irritating situations that lack logic. At the job, the need to grasp drives the urge to make significant effort. Employees are motivated by occupations that provide them with opportunities for growth and learning, while they are disheartened by those that seem routine or lead to a dead-end. Brilliant people who feel surrounded typically quit their organizations to find other trials elsewhere and the drive to defend themselves: Humans all instinctively protect themselves, their possessions and achievements, friends and family, as well as our views and beliefs from external dangers. This motivation was derived from the fundamental fight-or-flight reaction observed in all animals. In humans, it emerges not just as aggressive or protective behavior but also as a yearning to construct organizations that promote justice, have clear aims and intents, and allow individuals to express their thoughts and beliefs. Satisfying the need to protect provides a sense of safety and assurance, but failing to do so generates anxiety and anger.

2.2. Basic Emotional Needs/Drives

While satisfying employees' four fundamental emotional needs is vital for any organization, the study by Nohria et al. (2008) indicates that a separate organizational lever best serves each need (see Table 3). Organizations do not have a stranglehold on employee motivation or satisfy the emotional needs of individuals. Employees' views on their immediate supervisors are necessary. Individuals know that various

organizational elements, some beyond their managers' control, affect their motivation. However, they cautiously evaluate their supervisors' capacity to keep them motivated (Nohria et al., 2008).

Table 3: Four Basic Emotional Needs/Drives

Drive	Primary Lever	Actions
Acquire	Reward System	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sharply differentiate good performers from average and poor performers• Tie rewards clearly to performance• Pay as well as your competitors
Bond	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foster mutual reliance and friendship among coworkers• Value collaboration and teamwork• Encourage sharing of best practices
Comprehend	Job Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design jobs that have distinct and essential roles in the organisation• Design jobs that are meaningful and foster a sense of contribution to the organisation
Defend	Performance-Management and Resource-Allocation Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase the transparency of all processes• Emphasise their fairness• Build trust by being just and transparent in granting rewards, assignments, and other forms of recognition

Source: Nohria et al. (2008)

Finance or pay the rewards provided to employees to boost their need for performance, work connections, and willpower. Providing financial rewards serves as a foundation upon which employees may enhance their performance in the workplace, boost their drive to accomplish objectives, raise their standard of living, and strengthen their motivation to reach their full potential (Novianty & Evita, 2018). Noor et al. (2020) believed that most employees believe that inadequate reward systems are to blame for low job motivation. A cascade of adverse effects stems from low levels of motivation within the job, including increased absenteeism, falling productivity, and shrinking profitability. Employees believe that financial rewards, public acclaims, and career advancement opportunities may motivate them. In addition, the findings highlighted that the employees needed more than simply better compensation systems; they also deserved recognition of the value they brought to the organization, something that management gave less weight.

3. Methodology

This study used an exploratory research strategy. Exploratory research aims to identify recognized and unidentified elements and assess pre-existing theories (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). When you want to learn more about an issue, subject, or occurrence, but need to gain knowledge of its entirety, exploratory research might be helpful. Internet publications, dissertations, Internet-based resources, and books pertinent to the subjects under study were used to source content. Secondary research is a compilation of earlier studies on the same topic into a logical whole (Babbie, 2005). To deepen our understanding of a topic and uncover novel perspectives, secondary sources evaluate or argue for the significance and setting behind primary materials (Davis, 2007; Dolowitz et al., 2008).

4. EMPIRICAL REVIEW MODERN

4.1. Employee Rewards

Non-financial rewards are crucial to motivation, yet they do not affect productivity in any way. Although there is no causal link between non-financial rewards (the predictor variable) and the outcome (performance), these benefits influence human situations. "Efficient nonfinancial rewards have a favourable effect on staff motivation" (Mohammed, Sebyala & Micheal, 2019). Most employees are motivated by financial gain (Kiley, 2018). Maslow's (1954) hierarchy theory states that it becomes a source

of motivation only when money is used to acquire a need. The [Chartered Institute of Personnel Development \(CIPD\) \(2015\)](#) acknowledged that financial compensation is not the primary factor determining behavior. [Armstrong and Murlis \(2007:345\)](#) concur that employees should be rewarded in more ways than just financially. In summary, financial compensation is meaningless if employees are dissatisfied with their work, do not receive intrinsic rewards, and receive no satisfaction from it themselves, as this will lead to poor performance ([Kiley, 2018](#)). Herzberg's two-factor theory states that pay, perks, working conditions, and business regulations are all examples of extrinsic rewards that do not motivate employees but rather raise employee performance to an appropriate standard ([Herzberg et al., 1959](#)). However, [Lawler \(1996\)](#) argues that if financial rewards lead to aberrant behavior, they must also impact employee performance. [Lawler \(1996\)](#) further argues that poorly designed compensation structures fail to encourage or incentivize incorrect kinds of behavior. [Landry and Whillans \(2019\)](#) emphasized that workplace reward satisfaction is generally linked to greater fulfilment of employees' psychological demands for competency, independence, and belongingness. Using rewards to promote mental well-being and motivation and to increase productivity and loyalty in the workplace is a powerful strategy when these demands are met.

The study found that learning, career development, and work-life balance are effective management strategies to motivate employees ([Wachira, Wanjiku & Odiko, 2020](#)). [Riyanto et al. \(2021\)](#) confirm that financial rewards have an excellent effect on job satisfaction among young employees in the organisation, but non-financial rewards also have a beneficial effect. Work motivation has a favorable impact on young employees' job happiness. Employees have a neutral attitude toward choosing non-financial rewards, meaning they neither concurred with nor disapproved of the decision. The topic of acknowledgement had the most significant level of employee agreement, indicating that employees regularly receive praise for their contributions to their businesses. Some non-financial benefits include scheduling flexibility, possibilities for advancement, performance reviews, endorsement, emancipation, a challenging workplace environment, and job control. The fact that these non-financial benefits are more frequent on a memorandum of understanding than disputes shows that organizations are gratifying and rewarding their employees by offering them ([Akbar et al., 2018](#)). Increasing employee motivation by using non-financial benefits can help manage the team more successfully. Employee happiness and satisfaction are beautiful ideas that promote individual and organizational performance and enable managers to accomplish their objectives ([Kerdasi & Azam, 2021](#)). [Twinkle's \(2022\)](#) findings support the assertions of other academics that financial rewards alone are insufficient to motivate employees. Also, it is best to employ both financial and non-financial rewards to their full potential since, as they say, "Variety is the spice of life." The function, efficacy, and appropriateness of financial and non-financial rewards differ from one another. A balance between economic and non-financial rewards should be found to accommodate the various requirements and interests of employees. Motivation is a complicated and individualized topic, so there is no single optimum method for dealing with it.

4.2. Toxic work environment

According to [Toxic \(2016\)](#), the term "toxic" designates something that is "very severe, nefarious or destructive" in addition to having or being a poisonous substance, particularly if liable for inflicting mortality or significant impairment. Oral and behavioral harassment, bodily aggressiveness, sexual assault, and predatory behavior are examples of toxic, damaging, and destructive behaviors. Low employee morale in toxic environments frequently results in job discontent and decreased motivation ([Vaid, 2023](#)). Employees tend to be motivated to provide their best work when it is appreciated, endorsed, and supported. On the other hand, a poisonous or unfavorable workplace culture may demotivate employees. Employees might think that they are underappreciated, undersupported, and devalued in such a setting. This may have resulted in decreased motivation. Employees may become disinterested in their jobs in such a situation, which could negatively affect the organization ([Bhat & Patni, 2023](#)). If managers practice discriminatory behaviors, such as prejudiced appointments or rewards, this can lead to animosity and feelings of disparity between employees. This may result in more significant stress/burnout, lower output and efficiency, impeding career growth, and larger resignations ([Perna, 2023](#)).

According to the Oak Engage (2023) survey, 75% of employees in the United Kingdom acknowledge that they have dealt with a toxic workplace atmosphere, and 83% of these employees described their experiences as unfavorable. Oak Engage polled participants to discover who they thought was mostly blamed for toxic work environments. Toxic cultures were determined to be the fault of 33% of managers in middle management and 28% of all employees, with administrations accounting for 27.5%. A startling 81% of the employees concurred that administrators and managers who do not have humanity are frequently blamed for toxic working climates. Employees who experience this absence of humanity feel devalued and uncorroborated, eventually creating hostile work environments. Eighty-seven percent of employees concur that their psychological well-being has suffered because of the toxic culture in the workplace. Seventy-three percent of employees agreed that a hostile working culture exacerbates their sense of burnout. To escape unfavorable workplace cultures, 71% of the employees acknowledged that they were inclined to operate from home. Sixty-one percent of employees quit because of problems with the organization's culture. Semedo et al. (2022) found that amotivation and centralised legislation (extraneous work motivation) are more connected with personality types that exhibit more significant quantities of toxic leadership.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was limited to the available secondary resources online, the effects of employee rewards on employee motivation, and related topics. Secondary sources occasionally need to be updated to accurately represent the industry's most contemporary methods or developments. Rewards may be utilized inside an organization to encourage cultural values and excellent behavior. Rewarding performance goals or behaviors that support an organization's goals is one of the most successful methods of employing rewards. The death of internal drivers by external rewards is not readily apparent. Since rewards from outside stimuli may be counterproductive, they should increase intrinsic motivation rather than decrease it, making the reward impact larger than if relying only on extrinsic drive. Employees desire to be recognized beyond improved remuneration methods; additionally, they demand acknowledgement of the worth they have delivered to the organization, on which management places less emphasis. Management must enhance their reward programs by analyzing and understanding each employee's demands. In many organizations, many employees have little prior knowledge of the reward system, and even fewer have received immediate input on their reward system. Organizations must encourage employees to participate in creating a reward system. Such reward systems will directly address employee needs and organizational strategies.

Organizations must train managers and employees on professionalism, fairness, positivity, and workplace cultures and create a positive workplace environment. Managers or employees who practice toxicity toward other employees should be dealt with immediately. If employees are not content with their jobs, do not obtain intrinsic rewards, and do not derive enjoyment from them, this results in low performance, making financial remuneration useless. Financial rewards are no longer the primary motivators for employees; therefore, they require additional benefits in the form of rewards that are not financial. Two types of rewards influence employee motivation and commitment: financial and nonfinancial. Thus, commitment increased motivation. Employees' engagement also serves as a bridge between financial and nonfinancial benefits. Employees could be motivated if non-financial rewards were provided; therefore, they would be trustworthy and dedicated to the organization, improving performance. Since employees' needs are different and they are motivated differently, organizations should study their employees and create a reward program that considers the requirements of the employees and aligns with the organization's goals, operation, and visualization.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Except for pay development, all reward system components under the topic of rewards and perks are hygiene components, which means that their absence results in emotions of discontent rather than motivation. Financial benefits are the most effective motivators for most employees. However, the selection of individuals is driven by intrinsic rewards. Money alone is sometimes sufficient to stimulate

excellent performance. Increasing views of a reward program's fairness, non-financial advantages, and a positive workplace environment would increase employee motivation. When money is utilized to meet a need, it becomes a motivator; however, in a toxic work environment, cash and other rewards become insignificant to employees due to stress, lack of happiness, and negativity. Employees may offer significant financial benefits such as bonuses, compensation for overtime, and living expense adjustments. Perna (2023) stated that employees must remember that their psychological and physical wellness should always be prioritized and that working in a profession or compensation cannot be placed at the price of someone's good health.

Conversely, employees prioritize job security, recognition, and a pleasant office environment over financial remuneration. Employee motivation increases an organization's productivity, engagement, efficiency, and effectiveness. Employee motivation also improves individuals' performance. The factors that motivate employees are the workplace environment, profit-sharing, recognition, team cohesion, and unity, which constitute the cause of employees' motivation to create a longing for employment. Employees value recognition and appreciation more than financial bonuses or other rewards, and value holiday rewards more than other intrinsic benefits. Due to the toxic work environment, most employees appear unhappy with their jobs, work environment, colleagues, and the organization's rewards. Employees respond to rewards differently, so what drives one person may have little to no effect on others and can be discouraging as employees' needs are unique. Simultaneously, employees are frustrated and demotivated in their workplace.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

The author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies, such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators, have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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