

The 1996 Motivational Survey

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This paper is a short summary of the first comprehensive motivational survey of the UK IT industry using the well-established Job Diagnostic Survey. The full report, 91 pages in length and containing over 30 charts and diagrams, is available as a pdf download from Software Future's web site.

It is five years since we performed this motivational survey of IT staff, when more than 50% of those who took part reported significant problems affecting their work performance.

The 1996 Motivational Survey was the first major survey of work motivation of IT staff in the UK. Four professional associations supported the survey and 66 organisations took part, to ensure a wide coverage of many types of IT jobs including; development, support and maintenance; IT infrastructure development (in the ITIL context), testing and quality management.

Summary

Just over half of IT staff are affected by serious work motivation problems. This is causing significant under-performance and wasted investment in staff. Many organisations have not learned how to design jobs that are motivationally sound. The problems are endemic - they affect all disciplines and all sectors. The potential for improvement is large. The need for improvement is large.

The People

IT staff generally have very high motivational needs, known as Growth Needs Strength (GNS). This can be an asset. High GNS staff are capable of doing the demanding jobs and delivering the high work performance that organisations need.

We studied people performing a wide range of jobs in the key disciplines of; software development, software maintenance, IT infrastructure, software testing and quality management. People in one discipline often hold very different views about those in others. A typical stereotype is that developers are people who do the most demanding jobs in IT, whereas testers are satisfied by doing work that anyone could do.

From the way that people in different disciplines view each other, and their jobs, one may think that the people's motivational needs will vary significantly. This is not the case. We were surprised to find that ALL disciplines show staff with similar Growth Needs Strength. On a scale of 1 to 7, 85% of people were in the range 4.5 to 6.5.

This is a very important outcome for managing staff. It means that in all areas of IT, staff require jobs that will meet high motivational needs. In our example, it means that the highly motivated tester is capable of the same work performance as the developer. Managers need not let stereotypical images limit what they expect from any group of IT staff.

The Jobs

The next step in the survey was to look at people's jobs. Every job has an ability to motivate, known as its Motivating Potential Score (MPS). We measure MPS by examining six Core Job Dimensions that are the most powerful motivators.

MPS is measured on a scale of 0 to 343. Zero represents a job with no motivational content whatsoever, i.e. it is completely undemanding, and 343 represents a job with a motivational content so high that it is impossible to do.

The jobs examined had MPS values ranging from 18 to 296. This is quite astonishing.

Jobs with MPS values <100 lack the motivational stimuli high GNS staff need. We find it difficult to understand why such undemanding jobs still exist, given the pressures on IT organisations to improve performance.

Jobs with MPS value >200 become increasingly difficult to do. We have seen a growth in numbers of this type of job. One cause is that through re-organisations, downsizing and a misunderstood use of empowerment, jobs are created with degrees of responsibility and significance that individuals cannot cope with.

The Job-Person Match

We can only learn so much by examining people and their jobs independently. The key factor is the match between an individual's motivational needs (GNS) and their job's motivational content (MPS) - the Job-Person match.

There is a well defined relationship between GNS and MPS which allows us to look at an individual, and determine how well their motivational needs are being met by their job. We used this to assess the Job-Person match for every participant in the survey.

The result is that 44% of IT staff have a good match, where the work outcomes are good. They may still have some minor motivational problems, but not of a severity that affects their performance.

The other 56% have a poor match, where motivational problems are affecting their performance, in some cases severely. Within this group 23% have jobs that lack

motivational content, and 33% have jobs that have too much.

This finding can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, it is remarkable that the majority of these expensive, very able, and highly trained people are given jobs that de-motivate them. Why does this situation exist? Secondly, the potential for improvement is very large and this is an opportunity that cannot be overlooked. What are organisations doing to exploit this?

We took this analysis a stage further by asking a simple question. Is there any evidence that organisations are designing jobs to meet individuals' motivational needs? We could test for this because there is a known relationship between MPS and GNS. If the answer was Yes, we would find a significant number of staff near the optimum MPS/GNS match. **Instead we found that MPS/GNS match is random.**

While we have seen random MPS/GNS match in smaller groups that were known to be significantly demotivated, we were surprised to find this a group that could be expected to be better motivated than average.

This finding was supported by feedback from participants. When organisations create new jobs, or radically change existing ones, they may use various forms of best practice to guide them. For example, the CCTA's IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) describes best practice for creating infrastructure jobs. Likewise, quality practitioner jobs may be developed from TickIT and other quality standards. The problem with practice guides, standards and similar documents is that they were never written to take into account the human motivational issues. ITIL may give a good job description for a Help Desk manager, but it will not tell you how make that job motivate the person doing it.

Job Design Issues

When we raised the concept of job-design at feedback meetings, managers asked what this term meant. That they asked the question tells us something important. While everything that

contributes to the working environment in IT, from the buildings, phone systems, and office equipment to the computers, software technologies and procedural systems are designed for a purpose, the one item that staff hold dearest, their job, is not.

We are not saying that jobs are designed thoughtlessly. The adoption of best practice is a valid starting point, but it also appears to be the end point for many. What managers and staff have overlooked are the dynamics of work motivation that make job design a two-stage process.

Firstly, a job is created or changed and a person is appointed to do it. Clearly some job-person matching goes on at this stage to ensure that the person wants to do the job, and has the experience, skills and ability it demands. A variety of techniques may be used to help, such as personality profiling, aptitude tests and skills databases.

Secondly, when the person is doing the work the dynamics of motivation come into play. The person interacts with other people and groups in the organisation, and finds out whether the job is motivating. During this stage any motivational problems need to be recognised and solved. If they are not the person will continue to under-perform. This is the vital stage that is being ignored.

Why do staff tolerate this situation?

One may wonder why so many IT staff put up with so many motivational problems. There are a number of reasons.

Job insecurity remains very high, and job mobility relatively low. Staff would prefer to have a job with motivational problems than no job. Staff may be very cautious of raising

problems if they think that this will be taken in a negative light. People are choosing between the lesser of two evils, because neither they nor their managers expect to find practical methods that can and do improve motivation.

IT staff have a very strong desire for professional success. Given a job with motivational problems staff will make attempts to live with them, and still perform well. This approach is known as a coping strategy. For example, if a job does not provide the feedback the person needs, he or she will try and find other ways of getting feedback. Coping strategies bring short-term relief, but they require effort to sustain. Effort that goes into coping is effort that is being diverted from the person's real work. Every person has a point at which they cannot sustain the effort any more. This is the point of resignation.

Postscript

The above was written in 1996 before many started pre-fixing everything they did with "e-". Since then we continue to see motivational problems; the lack of job design appears as commonplace in 2001 as it was in 1996. The changes created by the e-revolution do not appear to have improved matters. If anything they are worse; IT staff are having to adapt to new ways of working but issues of motivation and job design are still overlooked.

Instead of relying on anecdotal evidence about today's situation we are performing a new survey to find out how people's work motivation has changed over the last five years. We had hoped to perform a follow-up survey earlier, but the nature of the Millennium Bug problem meant that any survey in the late 1990s would generate findings that would be skewed by its unique characteristics.

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