

Speaking out: What Motivates Employees to be More Productive

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"How was work today, sweetheart?"

"Busy day. So many people bugging me about that football pool, then Andy was on my case about the meeting so I finally had to set that up. Then I lost \$20 on the new online casino the IT guys have been playing with, and, geez, you should have seen the joke that Jeff in Sales sent out in e-mail, wait till I tell you about it."

"Wow, tough day, dear. You must feel exhausted."

What allows us to be productive on the job? What conditions support us to increase productivity? Productivity – what it is and how it can be improved – is a major organizational concern businesses both small and large. While most managers want more from employees, they may be going about it the wrong way.

The plethora of research on this controversial topic is done from an outsider perspective. Researchers have used complex metrics primarily focused on defining, theorizing and explaining the declining rate of productivity. Sometimes strategies are offered to improve productivity, but these generally assume that the factors driving productivity are similar for businesses of varying sizes and for employees of all types.

Management often describes productivity in financial terms, quoting revenue, profit, ROI or the like. Perhaps that's why conventional approaches to increase productivity focus on incentives such as rewards, and on investments in technology and systems. These approaches generally add cost for the business, whereas intrinsic, non-cost ways may also effectively be within reach. This doesn't suggest that pay is not important, but rather that employees have ideas about how to increase productivity if someone would only care to ask.

Employees act and react on the basis of their own perceptions within a given work environment, irrespective of whether researchers or managers agree. Ultimately, employees carry the torch: productivity levels and their potential for increase are determined by the acuity of the employee pool about their own contributions, no matter how much management pushes.

So what do employees say about productivity? In phase one of an online survey on productivity,

employees and managers revealed that **almost one-third of their productivity can be attributed to four human factors**. While one might think work experience, training, and seniority would significantly affect productivity, they did not. We also found that gender and nationality of the 158 participants have little effect. Productivity varied slightly among different age categories, although these were not statistically significant. (For a more detailed description of the participants, please see "Study Group" in the sidebar).

The study was structured by two main themes:

- What makes employees productive?
- What makes employees want to increase their productivity?

The employees reported being generally positive and highly involved in their work. We asked about several "work attributes" that explore the employees' relationship with their jobs.

- 81% perceived their work climate to be from somewhat to very positive.
- Most felt good about their relationships with their supervisors.
- 65% reported they receive little to no useful feedback.
- Less than 10% reported receiving useful feedback 5 or more days per week.
- Half reported they have significant choice or control of their work – another third reported some control.

- Overall, they perceived their work as highly valuable.
- Youngest people reported receiving useful feedback least often; oldest reported most often.

We put all these "work attributes" together to get a picture of the employee-workplace relationship. Viewed on a scale from one (lowest) to ten (highest), most rated their combined work attributes between 5 and 8.

The employees described themselves as generally high performing, with scope to increase their productivity even more. These findings are in line with reports of similar studies conducted by other authors. Descriptively, two-thirds said their productivity levels are at least above average. However, 97% said they could be more productive; 49% could increase productivity by 50% or more. But how? What are the keys to a productive workplace climate according to employees?

There are three key conclusions that meaningfully add to existing productivity reports available today:

1. Together, as little as four human factors predict already 28% of productivity.
2. There are different factors involved in increasing productivity than those predicting existing levels of productivity.
3. People at different productivity levels have different motivators that will prompt them to increase their current productivity level.

Each of these key strengths is briefly discussed next.

1. Predictors of productivity

Statistical analysis revealed significant relationships ($p < 0.01$) between productivity and certain human factors that comfortably break the much sought-after 0.30 correlation barrier. The factors in order of relational strength can be labeled as *useful feedback* (as opposed to any feedback), *workplace climate*, *value of work*, and *choice/control over work*. This is not to say that other factors are not important with regards to productivity, but merely that together these four factors explain a sizable chunk of the variance found in productivity levels among the sample of employees.

Based on the individual strengths of their relationship with productivity and low inter-correlation among one another, we decided to try them in a predictive model, using the

technique of regression analysis. As expected, the four human factors performed well (see Table 1). A fifth factor, the *supervisor relationship*, was significantly associated with productivity on the 5% level, although not strong enough to have meaningful predictive power.

Table 1: Prediction of productivity level

Human Factor	Cumulative Variance in Productivity Explained
Useful feedback	16%
Choice/control over work	24%
Value of work	27%
Workplace climate	28%
Total R²	28%

Useful feedback alone, then, appears to be a major factor in predicting productivity. At the same time, a scant handful of people reported getting feedback they consider useful! In terms of frequency, only 4% said they get useful feedback seven or more times per week, while 61% get useful feedback less than once per week or almost never. The next phase of our study focuses on this factor, where we further explore what people mean by "useful", among other aspects.

Choice/Control over work refers to experiences of autonomy and independence in the work. It makes sense that people who are directing themselves are more engaged in the work they do. Traditional work environments, however,

Study Group

We surveyed 158 employed employees who had an average 10 years in their current career and 7 years in their current job. They were in a variety of jobs from technology, manufacturing, government, education, and more.

The employees' job positions varied from entry-level employees to executives, most being in middle-level and upper-level positions. 79% reported a high level of education and training.

The ages of the employees ranged from 36 to 50 years. They were twice as many women as men, and they worked in five different continents (80% were from a combination of US + Canada + Europe).

often attempt to direct people toward narrowly defined tasks and specialties. The employees reported to have rather more, than less choice or control over their work, which fits their demographic profile. Therefore it is telling that this factor is a significant predictor of productivity level.

With regards to *value of work*, employees were asked to balance work perhaps having personal value for them, and work that they might consider valuable because it is important to the organization. Ideally one would like to see that the value of work is high in both differentiated camps – and just more than half of the employees felt this way indeed. Equal portions of the remainder of the group provided moderate value scores, or slight favoritism to either one side. Most people (83%) who reported their work as having value for the organization also said it was valuable to them. It may be useful to investigate whether employees with a different demographic profile would report dramatically different work value.

Unlike the above factors, to some extent *workplace climate* can be viewed as an aggregate. However, the correlation matrix computed between the human factors suggests it can stand as an independent factor too, which is confirmed by the regression results reported above. Not surprising, then, is that the supervisor relationship had the highest correlation with workplace climate. Ratings on the latter factor ranged from “negative, hostile, unpleasant,” to “respectful, caring, positive”. Various research studies indicate that a more positive environment encourages people to complete their work. The employees reported their workplace climate to be generally positive, although with varying degree.

Taking a step back, it appears that the strongest human factors to significantly predict productivity level are intrinsic in nature. Most powerful in forecasting our productivity at work is how feedback can be useful to *us*, what choices/control do we have over our job task and what worth do we see in *our* work. It seems that if we have a lot to gain from our work, we are likely to be productive.

2. Increasing productivity

While it is useful to know what predicts productivity levels, it will be highly valuable to know which human factors will increase it. According to the employees themselves, a

productivity increase is possible: **almost all (97%) agreed they could increase their productivity if they wanted to.** In fact, almost 20% said they could double to triple their productivity! Imagine your current workplace – what would happen if the employee pool increased productivity by just 10%? And, what if you could get that increase with no new technology, no process engineering, no capital expenditure? To see what leads employees to increased productivity, we applied a two-way strategy.

First, we looked at the predictive power of the same human factors as before, but this time with regards to *potential productivity*. This variable is a combination of current productivity plus how much they can increase on top of that. Because productivity increase is generally inversely related to current productivity, a small productivity increase may still be viewed as desirable if the existing productivity level is already high. Regression analysis revealed the following:

Table 2: Predictors of Potential Productivity

Human Factor	Cumulative Variance in Potential Productivity Explained
Useful feedback	15%
Workplace climate	19%
Supervisor relationship	20%
Choice/control over work	21%
Total R²	21%

It is noteworthy that some of the human factors switched their order of importance when productivity increase come into play, while the *supervisor relationship* was added and the *value of work* did not make it into the model. The slightly lower cumulative R² percentage indicates that productivity increase may be a more difficult phenomenon to address than current productivity alone. Nevertheless the results are telling.

Again, *useful feedback* is found to be the dominant predictor, which is not surprising given its strong position in predicting productivity level alone. Note how *workplace climate* moved up in importance, and that the *supervisor relationship* was powerful enough to contribute to predicting potential productivity despite being fairly

correlated with workplace climate. A positive relationship with one’s supervisor is likely to encourage us to go that extra mile. The regression model is rounded off with the inclusion of *choice/control over work*.

In comparison with productivity level where many of the predictors are intrapersonal (self), the model for productivity seems to draw more heavily on interpersonal, relational factors. Our willingness to increase our current productivity co-depends on the general mood at work and whether we get along with our boss. If we enjoy the vibe in which we work and it doesn’t get disturbed when seeing a superior’s face, we might put in extra effort.

Second, we asked an open question to employees about what would motivate them to increase their existing productivity level. Three-quarters of the employees responded, while some provided up to three ideas, which were all pooled. A total of 41 different motivators for productivity increase were provided.

The motivators and the seven categories to which they were grouped were also weighed. This provides for an additional perspective on strong motivators for productivity increase (see Table 3 below). Unlike the pooled approach, the weighed approach also takes into account what motivators were mentioned first (allocating a weight of 3, representing highest importance), then second (a weight of 2) and then third (a weight of 1). (See sidebar: “Two Methods” for

Two Methods

Percentages within the pooled approach may be slightly under-inflated because contributions from second and third responses customary taper off, while the exact weights used to credit position of mentioning may be open to argument.

Perhaps the best representation of motivators lies somewhere in the middle between these two complimentary approaches. Note that there is little difference found between these two approaches, with no change in rank-order.

more details about the two methodological approaches used.)

Appreciation, forming one of the interpersonal factors that relates to reassurance (see Table 3), topped the list by distinction. It was often mentioned as the first motivator for productivity increase. Other important factors coming to employees’ minds immediately are *recognition* and *positive feedback* (from the same motivator category as appreciation) and *better time management* (a workplace skill).

The full list of motivators, along with the category to which they belong, is provided in Table 5 at the end of the article. Note how many of these motivators relate to the human factors as described above.

Table 3: Motivator Categories for Productivity Increase

Motivator Category	Pooled Approach		Weighed Approach	
	Percentage	Rank-order	Percentage	Rank-order
Interpersonal Factors – Reassurance	26.5	1	28.2	1
Workplace Climate	18.9	2	18.7	2
Workplace Skills	15.3	3	15.6	3
Interpersonal Factors – Connectedness	12.8	4	12.0	4
Intra-personal Factors	11.2	5	10.1	5
Reward	8.2	6	7.7	6.5
Resources	7.1	7	7.7	6.5

Clearly, interpersonal factors that awaken the warm feelings in employees are important drivers of productivity increase. In addition, note the confirmation of earlier findings related to the

workplace climate, as well as the placing of workplace skills. Contrary to expectation and while important, reward (which may be either

higher salary, promotion, or better benefits) only takes sixth place.

3. Marking motivators for increasing productivity at specific levels

Interestingly, we found that people who say they are less productive and those who say they are more productive have different motivators for increasing productivity. Yet most employers try to motivate all their employees using the same methods. People who were the least productive

are looking for *recognition*, while more productive people also welcome *better time management*. *Appreciation* seems to concern employees on all productivity levels.

Table 4 displays within each productivity level which motivator categories are said to be most important for productivity increase. Each dot represents the number of times a motivator category was spontaneously mentioned to the nearest 10%. Care should be taken to read the dots in column format only.

Table 4: Dominant Motivator Categories within each Productivity Level

Motivator Category	Code	Unproductive	Slightly productive	Some-what productive	Above average	Highly productive	Exceptionally productive!
Interpersonal Factors – Reassurance	TER-R	•••••	••••	•••	•••	••	
Workplace Climate	WPC		•	••	••	••	
Workplace Skills	WPS		•	•	•	••	•••
Interpersonal Factors – Connectedness	TER-C		•	•	••	•	
Intrapersonal Factors	TRA		••	•	•	•	•••••••
Reward	REW	•••••	•		•	•	
Resources	RES		•	•	•	•	

The dots in Table 4 reveal that a different mix of factors is needed by employees with different levels of productivity:

Employees who describe themselves as unproductive will be motivated by interpersonal factors that tend to be reassuring in nature – mostly *appreciation*, but also *positive feedback, recognition* and *team inclusion*.

Those with **middle levels of productivity** can increase efficiency by relying on all seven motivator categories, with slightly higher emphasis on interpersonal factors that underscore reassurance, and perhaps also on aspects pertaining to workplace climate, such as provision of clear *structure* and *direction*, a *change* in an employee's current *role*, allowing for lateral movement within the organization, and a *decrease in bureaucracy*.

The **most productive employees** respond well to workplace skills, such as improvement in *time management, focus* and *continuing education*, and especially to aspects that are intra-personal in nature, such as *intrinsic satisfaction* and *increased responsibility*.

It seems the mantra of the last years is, “We’ve got to do more with less.” In this era of intense competitive pressure, organizations need every edge, and conventional approaches to productivity are not going to cut it. The “OSFA” (one-size-fits-all) approach will not produce the results management needs. Individualization is essential which means employees and managers need an increased awareness of “what makes people tick.” Perhaps most importantly this data reinforces the “emotional intelligence truism” that relationships drive business success.

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Table 5: What would make you more productive?

Motivator	Code for motivator category (see Table 4)	Frequency	More than 2 SD from average	More than 1 SD from average	Close to average
		Number of times this motivator was mentioned	Mentioned 95% less or more than other motivators	Mentioned 68% less or more than other motivators	More or less on par with the average number of times a motivator was mentioned
Appreciation	TER-R	27	•		
Recognition	TER-R	13	•		
Better time management	WPS	11	•		
Positive feedback	TER-R	11	•		
Commitment from others	TER-C	10	•		
Good interpersonal relations	TER-C	10	•		
Higher salary	REW	9		•	
Support	RES	9		•	
Intrinsic satisfaction	TRA	8		•	
Structure	WPC	8		•	
Increased responsibility	TRA	7		•	
Continuing education	TRA	6			•
Focus	WPS	6			•
Job role change	WPC	6			•
Funds	RES	5			•
Decreasing bureaucracy	WPC	4			•
Direction	WPC	4			•
Reward non-specified	REW	4			•
Being goal oriented	WPC	3			•
Constructive corporate climate	WPC	3			•
Peer networking	TER-C	3			•
Being organized	WPS	2		•	
Challenge	TRA	2		•	
Decreasing interruptions	WPC	2		•	
Fairness	WPC	2		•	
Good communication channels	TER-C	2		•	
Have fun	TRA	2		•	
Known job competencies	WPS	2		•	
Promotion	REW	2		•	
Team inclusion	TER-R	2		•	
Being less self-critical	TRA	1	•		
Better benefits	REW	1	•		
Cutting down on double work	WPC	1	•		
Good clients	WPC	1	•		
Having tangible results	WPS	1	•		
Human resources	RES	1	•		
More experience	WPS	1	•		
More time	WPS	1	•		
Organizational mission	WPC	1	•		
People contact	TER-C	1	•		
Reduced travel	WPC	1	•		

Average number of times a motivator was mentioned: 4.8 times

Standard deviation: 2.2

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