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How fostering intrinsic motivation for high work intensity can benefit employers and employees

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Introduction

How work affects employee wellbeing is a matter of great interest to business owners, policy-makers, academia, and of course, workers themselves. It's commonly held that working excessively long hours over extended periods of time can have a pronounced, negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of the worker. Work intensity, which is the amount of effort per unit of work time, is also an important factor to consider. In fact, work intensity is one of the strongest predictors of reduced job satisfaction and of increased desire to quit. It is also linked with anxiety, fatigue and stress (Avgoustaki and Frankort, 2019). Its negative ramifications for health are so serious that some have even compared them to those of passive smoking (Goh et al, 2015).

A sound understanding of how work intensity affects staff could help employers mitigate its adverse effects. Prior research has shown that employees can differ in their ability to cope with work intensity (Karasek, 1979). For example, it has shown that the wellbeing of employees engaged in intensive work can vary depending on the discretion or autonomy they have over how and when they complete their work. Although this discretion may lessen some of the negative effects of work intensity, it doesn't explain the full variance observed. Individual motivations for working intensively are themselves a potent predictor of wellbeing, and therefore may improve our understanding of an employee's resilience when performing intensive work.

Our research explores this point: that wellbeing also varies according to the individual's motive for working intensively. We focused on three types of motivation for intensive work, these being:

- extrinsic
- extrinsic with explicit or implicit incentives
- intrinsic.

Based on original survey data from a major grocery chain in Greece, our research paper, ['All work intensity is not created equal: Effort motives, job satisfaction and quit intentions at a grocery chain'](#), tests two hypotheses. First, do employees experience greater job satisfaction when intensive work is driven by explicit or implicit incentives rather than job demands? Second, do employees experience greater job satisfaction when intensive work is driven by intrinsic motives rather than explicit or implicit incentives? Apart from studying job satisfaction, we also assess equivalent effects on (reduced) quit intentions.

Work intensity and its effects

Work intensity has been defined as "the rate of physical and/or mental input to tasks performed during the working day" (Green, 2001, p56). Acknowledging that a working day includes periods of time when no work is undertaken, work intensity (as opposed to work duration) refers to the intensity of effort during working time.

Work intensity is characterised by high-speed work and tight deadlines, some being impossibly demanding. Due to such demands, employees undertaking intensive work experience higher levels of stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. They are less satisfied in their job and can suffer from ailments such as backaches, headaches and insomnia. They may also be at greater risk of attempting suicide.

Short breaks help employees recover, but the nature of intense work is that it tends to offer few gaps between tasks, and less opportunity for employees to recharge. Day after

day, the effects accumulate. Workers may feel drained at the beginning of a working day, let alone at its close.

Not all employees are equally susceptible to the pressure of intensive work. Job discretion can enable workers to meet the demands of their job, give them greater job satisfaction and help buffer the worst effects of work intensity. However, as previously mentioned, job discretion is just one of the potential factors that may help people cope with intensive work.

To achieve a more comprehensive account, we look at individual motivations for engaging in intensive work. We draw on self-determination theory (Gagné and Deci, 2005) to examine how the underlying motives that drive employees to work intensively help explain wellbeing outcomes.

Three types of motive for working intensively

When employees perform their activities to achieve a reward, or to avoid censure or punishment, they are said to be **extrinsically motivated**. When extrinsically motivated, employees may work intensively to cope with job demands and an excessive workload. These demands may come from management, colleagues or customers - but not workers themselves. To cope with high-pressure demand, workers may find themselves working without breaks, at high speed and to strict deadlines. Work intensity driven by the demands of the role and management targets are often unavoidable, and therefore extrinsically motivated and controlled.

Some extrinsic motivation may allow for more autonomy. For example, when an activity is key to an employee achieving a desirable reward, it may be perceived as involving less external control. And employees may work intensively to signal their value, in the hope of receiving recognition, increased wages or to improve their career opportunities. By their own volition, they may also work more intensively due to a desire to conform to the expected level of effort, or to match the effort of colleagues, or simply to avoid the feeling of guilt for not working hard enough. We thus divide extrinsic motivation into two types:

- **job demands** that come from management, colleagues or customers
- **incentives** that employees believe reward achievement or punish underachievement but allow for more discretion.

Intrinsic motivation is the most autonomous form of motivation. Here, work is performed because it is interesting or even provides enjoyment. Employees who are intrinsically motivated engage in an activity of their own volition. The drive to work more intensively comes from within the employee. They may be driven by their personal interest in the work, or by the satisfaction they derive from it. They may be driven by the psychological rewards that can come with meeting a challenge. They may also work intensively to fulfil an inherent feeling of commitment to their employers, their colleagues and their job.

Self-determination theory proposes that wellbeing will vary depending on the way in which employees are motivated. Specifically, the greater the degree of perceived relative autonomy, the more positively a motivation type should be associated with employee wellbeing.

The study

The data this study draws on comes from a cross-section of employees at a major grocery chain in Greece, virtually all of whom experience work intensity, and so can credibly report their motives for working intensively. Roughly 650 individual employees were sent the research survey. Respondents were given the assurance of anonymity. A total of 560 responses were received, with between 351 and 407 complete across all measures.

Job satisfaction and quit intentions are the two indicators of work-related wellbeing that were focused on.

The survey contained open-ended questions regarding what made employees happy or stressed while working for the firm. Around job satisfaction, employees rated how happy they were with their job, and were asked to score how satisfied they were with the type of work, hours, working conditions, company rules, relationship with colleagues, relationship with superiors, company management, their salary, rewards, benefits and career prospects.

Regarding quit intentions, respondents indicated how likely they were to resign but not look for another job, how likely they were to seek a similar role outside the company, and how likely they were to seek something different from their current role, outside the company.

Finally, the employees' motives for working intensively were elicited and used to construct three indices:

- working intensively: job demands
- working intensively: incentives
- working intensively: intrinsic motives.

With regards to motivations for working intensively, the results show that, statistically speaking, explicit or implicit incentives are associated with greater job satisfaction and lower intention to quit compared with job demands. Results also show that employees intrinsically motivated to work intensively experience greater job satisfaction and are less likely to quit than those driven by explicit or implicit incentives. Thus, the findings are consistent with the study's original hypotheses.

Implications

A growing body of research suggests that work intensity can be damaging to employee wellbeing. Our research builds on this by examining the relationship between employees' motives for working intensively and work-related wellbeing.

The study confirms that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for intensive work have distinct effects. And it shows that more and less controlled types of extrinsic motivation have distinct associations with job satisfaction and quit intentions. By implication, while intrinsic motives for intensive work predict the most positive outcomes, not all extrinsic motives would appear to be equally unfavourable for employee wellbeing.

These findings have potential implications for workers and employers. When considering a high-intensity job, workers could benefit from developing some notion of what their motives for intensive work might be. From the standpoint of subjective wellbeing, jobs in which an employee believes they would be intrinsically motivated to work hard seem

preferable to jobs in which the employee feels they could only be motivated to do so by incentives or job demands.

The negative implications of controlled extrinsic motivation relative to other types mean that employers should be mindful of the motivational states of their employees and the motivational aspects of work more broadly. For example, because intrinsically driven work intensity appears to have positive implications, employers might design jobs and tasks so they are inherently enjoyable and interesting to stimulate intrinsic motivation, and reap the rewards of improved productivity and happier, healthier staff.

The paper, '[All work intensity is not created equal: Effort motives, job satisfaction and quit intentions at a grocery chain](#)', was published in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*.

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