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POSTED ON [DECEMBER 3, 2014](#)  
([HTTP://ADIGASKELL.ORG/2014/12/03/WHAT-MOTIVATES-HIGH-PERFORMERS/](http://adigaskell.org/2014/12/03/what-motivates-high-performers/)) BY [ADI](#) ([HTTP://ADIGASKELL.ORG/AUTHOR/ADI/](http://adigaskell.org/author/adi/))

## WHAT MOTIVATES HIGH PERFORMERS?

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[content/uploads/2014/01/what-motivates-high-performers-employee.jpg](#) Being a blog with a social focus, I've explored a number of times the kind of things that motivate high performing individuals to get involved in crowdsourcing or citizen science projects.



## THE 8 STEP GUIDE TO A SOCIAL WORKPLACE



(<http://adigaskell.org/the-8-step-guide-to-a-social-workplace/>)

Research into that typically means things such as working in a field that excites the person, and a strong amount of control over how they go about doing their work.

Do the same kind of motivations occur inside our organizations? One [study](http://www.successfactors.com/en_us/lp/oxford-economics-workforce-hub-social.html) ([http://www.successfactors.com/en\\_us/lp/oxford-economics-workforce-hub-social.html](http://www.successfactors.com/en_us/lp/oxford-economics-workforce-hub-social.html)) suggests that when it comes to our paid work, we really do value the extrinsic stuff most of all. The research was conducted across 27 countries to try and learn what it was that really motivated employees. The researchers were particularly keen to learn if there were any differences between high and low performers.

Contrary to research in the open innovation world, the top results were all extrinsic motivators, with compensation #1, bonuses in 2nd place, and retirement plans in third.

What's more, the research suggests that these factors are even more important amongst the high performers in an organization. Now, I should say that the paper did also reveal the value placed on things such as regular feedback from their boss, and a strong degree of freedom over ones own learning, but nevertheless, the learning towards extrinsic factors was surprising.

### The importance of autonomy

Suffice to say, the jury is far from out on the matter. Step forward a recent [study](http://alexandramichel.com/Self-entrapment.pdf) (<http://alexandramichel.com/Self-entrapment.pdf>) published by the University of Pennsylvania. The study found that when highly educated people are given autonomy over how, when and where they work, they produce much more than when they are micro-managed.

The research found that when people had control over their own schedule they were empowered enough to accept whatever work pattern they themselves adopted. This often meant working longer and harder than before.

## PLACES I WRITE

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**Are entrepreneurs really corporate rebels?**  
(<http://adigaskell.org/2014/12/09/are-entrepreneurs-really-corporate-rebels/>)

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## When work is a calling

Another [study](http://adigaskell.org/2014/10/15/is-your-job-a-calling-and-its-impact-on-your-engagement/) (<http://adigaskell.org/2014/10/15/is-your-job-a-calling-and-its-impact-on-your-engagement/>) set out to explore the impact working in a field you can aptly describe as a calling has on your motivation.

The results revealed that when people believed that they had realized their personal calling, they were generally more satisfied with their lives. To maintain this level of satisfaction, it was important that each person had a good fit between their ideals and the reality of their work. If they weren't engaged, the deal was broken.

## Can extrinsic rewards de-motivate us?

Indeed, [studies](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2950946) (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2950946>) have shown that incentivizing us to do something, actually reduces our motivation to do it. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, [studies](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ734309) (<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ734309>) have also shown that offering incentives for doing an activity also reduces our enjoyment of the activity, which in turn makes us less likely to want to do it in future.

It all seems counter intuitive, which is probably why the practice of extrinsic rewards remains so common place. It's incredibly seductive after all to believe that a bit of sugar here and there is enough to prompt extraordinary performance, to the extent perhaps that eventually you can remove the sugar and high performance will persist.

This is especially difficult in fields that are traditionally thought to be beyond excitement. It's easy, people say, for individuals to be intrinsically motivated by jobs they love and that excite them. Of course. What about the people doing work that is hard to stir the soul however? What about them?

A new [study](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12151/abstract) (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12151/abstract>) might provide a slight glimmer of hope. It looks specifically

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**Why middle management being upset is bad for innovation**  
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**Adi Gaskell**  
(<http://www.adigaskell.org/blog>) on **Unlocking the sharing economy – a review by the UK government**

at how to motivate sustained engagement in what is otherwise quite a dull task. Participants were split into four groups. Group one was offered a badge for successful completion, group two was offered nothing at all for doing the task well, whilst the final two groups were promised extra insights and learning upon completion. The only difference in these final two groups was that one group was given 'casually rich' information, whilst the other was given 'casually weak' info.

Rich and weak in this context refers to the volume and depth of information provided. Rich information is loaded with purpose and meaning. Weak information is just descriptive type stuff.

So, what were the results I hear you cry. Well, participants who were given no incentive performed worst of all, alongside those given casually weak information. Those who were given the incentive of a badge performed twice as well as the laggards (good news for gamification advocates). The star performers however were those that were given information loaded with purpose and meaning. They were over 2.5 times as effective as the worst performers.

Rich information full of purpose and meaning therefore produced the best results, even in tasks where one would not readily associate participants with caring much about the purpose or meaning of it.

*"If expectations for extrinsic reward are generalized too broadly, insidious degradation of peoples global intrinsic motivation to learn can result. [But] because causally rich rewards inherently capitalize on their intrinsic desire to learn, we suggest that they may be less likely to have this detrimental effect on a peoples overall intrinsic motivation", the paper says.*

So, there you have it. If you want great performance and great engagement, you better get working on purposeful feedback.

(<http://adigaskell.org/2014/11/27/unlocking-the-sharing-economy-a-review-by-the-uk-government/#comment-400765>)

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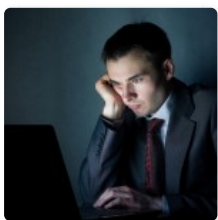
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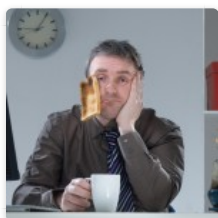
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Hmm, I'm more inclined to think that once you've got past a certain amount of money then other things take over in terms of motivation.

What's an extra few quid if you're in a job you hate selling your soul?

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