what really motivates
people at work?

Fiona Robb
Robert Myatt
Kaisen Consulting Ltd

Background

Whether you call it passion, enthusiasm or dedication, people want to be motivated and organisations want motivated people working for them. A motivated workforce is more likely to 'live the brand', support the organisational culture and respond positively to change. Studies have shown clear links between motivation and the bottom line:

■   An employee survey was carried out within a large US retail chain. The difference between the top and bottom 25% of stores in terms of how happy and motivated staff were equated to $104 million of sales. The top 25% group of stores also retained 1000 more employees per year than the bottom group of stores. (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999)

■   An accountancy firm ran Management Development Centres for 170 high-potential middle managers. These led to significant improvements in work attitude (motivation, job satisfaction and intention to stay), self-insight and job performance. The annual turnover for these managers was 7% compared to 12% for the whole management population. The study also showed that sending one extra participant from each of the 50 operating companies would increase the sales of that company by 2.7% over two years (Naish & Birdi, 2001).

These studies highlight just how important motivation is and the potential benefits for organisations in getting the motivation 'bit' right.

The Research

We undertook research to try and understand more about what motivates people at work - by asking people to tell us in their own words. We sought to discover the common factors that made people feel good and feel bad at work and whether there were any differences across age, gender and managerial level. We hoped that this would allow us to provide practical guidelines to help organisations and managers enable people to 'give of their best'.

KAISEN
DIFFERENT

Sample

We used a survey questionnaire that included two open-ended questions about people's personal experience at work. The questions were:

1. What are the things that make you feel good at work?
2. What are the things that make you feel bad at work?

The questionnaire was distributed alongside consultancy assignments, for example, during training programmes or after assessments.

In total, 250 questionnaires were completed. The sample covered a wide range of industry sectors, including retail, utilities, financial services, leisure, IT, medical, accountancy and consultancy, and consisted of:
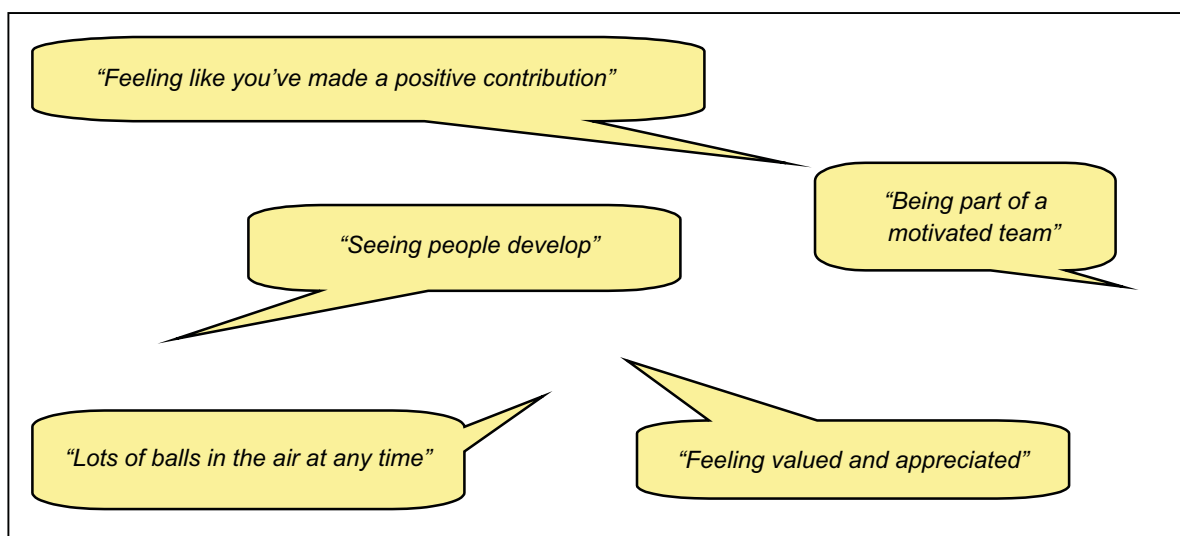
- *Gender:* **54%** female, **46%** male.
- *Age:* **35%** under 30, **35%** 30-39, **21%** 40-49, **9%** over 50.
- *Managerial level:* **39%** non-managers/specialists, **34%** managers/supervisors, **21%** managers of managers.

808 statements were made about what makes people feel good at work. These were analysed and classified into 40 distinct categories of motivators. 662 statements were made about what makes people feel bad at work. These were categorised into 44 distinct demotivating factors. There were no preconceptions about these categories; we simply looked for patterns in what people had written.
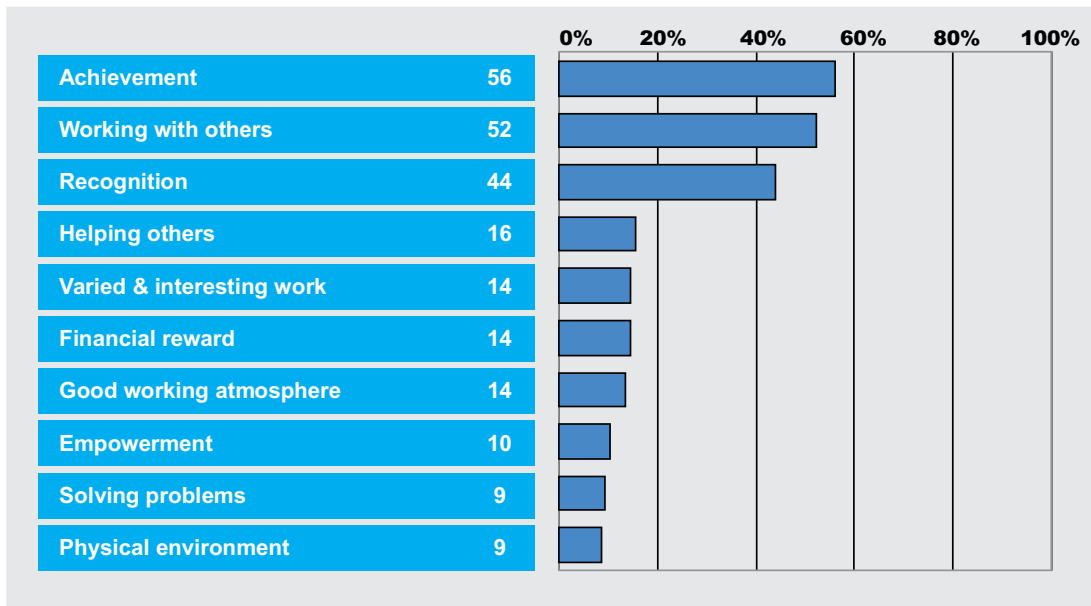
Results

What are the things that make you feel good at work?

People's responses were varied:

The Top 10 most common responses were:

		0%	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Achievement	56						
Working with others	52						
Recognition	44						
Helping others	16						
Varied & interesting work	14						
Financial reward	14						
Good working atmosphere	14						
Empowerment	10						
Solving problems	9						
Physical environment	9						

The most striking aspect of this Top 10 is the dominance of the first 3 categories. A sense of achievement and having that achievement recognised appear to be strong motivators. Positive working relationships also appear key, with quotes such as 'Having trust and respect from colleagues' and 'Being supported by those around you' indicating that social support is a significant motivator.
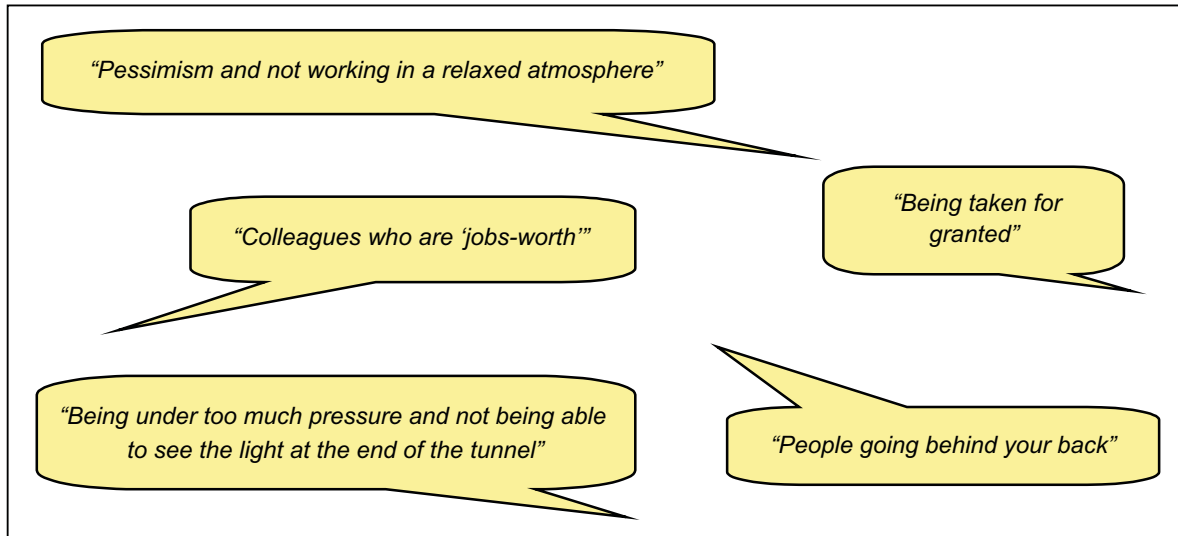
What were the differences?

The Top 10 motivational categories were largely consistent across genders, ages and managerial levels. However, there were some differences in the order in which different groups prioritised the motivational factors.
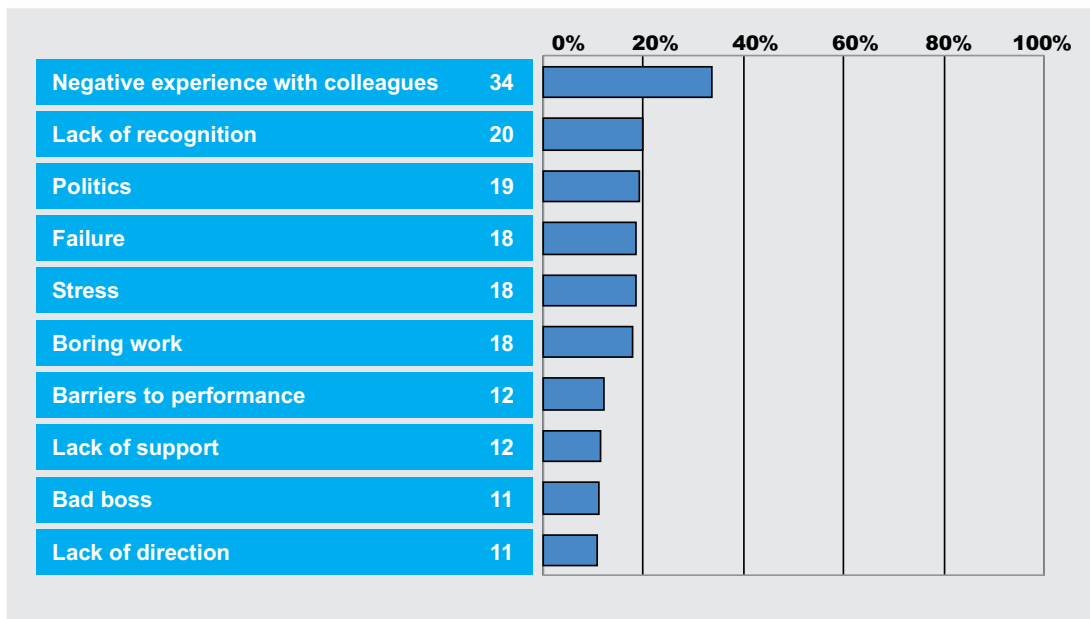
- **Managerial level**: Senior managers are significantly more motivated by achievement (74%) than managers (54%) and non-managers (47%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, pushing themselves and accomplishing goals particularly motivates those at the top. Senior managers (28%) and managers (17%) place a significantly greater emphasis on 'Helping others' than non-managers (10%). This may reflect their motivation for pursuing a people management role.

- **Age group**: More people under 40 (55%) mentioned 'Recognition' as a key motivator than those aged 40 to 49 (31%) and those over 50 (19%). Those under 40 are likely to be focused on career progression and need feedback to feel valued and be sure that they are 'on the right track'. Only people in their 40's (15%) placed 'Making Changes' within the Top 10. This was compared with under 30's (1%), 30-39 (7%), and over 50 (0%). This suggests that those in their 40's seem to be particularly motivated to make a difference and have an impact. Those over 50 (19%) were the only group to put 'Job satisfaction' in the Top 10, with other age groups mentioning job satisfaction far less frequently: under 30 (6%), 30-39 (6%) and 40-49 (0%). The over 50's seem to be the age group most motivated by actually enjoying what they do.

- **Gender**: Women attach higher importance to the quality of their working relationships (60% women vs. 44% men) whilst men place 'Solving problems' (11% women vs 6% men) significantly higher up the list. This suggests that women are more concerned with the context in which they work whilst men are more motivated by a sense of accomplishment and pride in what they do.

What are the things that make you feel bad at work?

People's responses were varied:

> "Pessimism and not working in a relaxed atmosphere"

> "Colleagues who are 'jobs-worth'"

> "Being taken for granted"

> "Being under too much pressure and not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel"

> "People going behind your back"

The Top 10 most common responses were:

Factor	%
Negative experience with colleagues	34
Lack of recognition	20
Politics	19
Failure	18
Stress	18
Boring work	18
Barriers to performance	12
Lack of support	12
Bad boss	11
Lack of direction	11

The results for demotivation were more evenly spread, suggesting that there is a broader range of factors that demotivate people than motivate them. However, the findings further emphasise the impact of working relationships on our motivation. It's interesting to note that whilst 'Achievement' was the strongest motivator (56%), here 'Failure' is only mentioned by 18% of the sample. This underlines the idea that the factors that motivate and demotivate people are not equal and exact opposites. Removing the cause of demotivation does not guarantee motivated staff.

What were the differences?

'Negative experiences with colleagues' stood out as the number one demotivator across the board for different managerial levels, age groups and genders. Typical quotes included, 'People undermining you' and 'Working with difficult or unpleasant people'. However, there were also some significant differences in the importance attached to other demotivators.

- **Managerial level**: Senior managers were the only group for whom 'Resistance to change' (11%) appeared in their Top 10. Only 2% of non-managers and 6% of managers mentioned this as a problem. Managers and senior managers are more likely to regularly encounter the frustrations of politics and 'hidden agendas' at work. In line with this, 'Politics' ranked differently for the 3 groups; senior managers 28%, managers 22% and non-managers just 3%. Those at the top of organisations appear to be less demotivated by feeling isolated; 'Lack of support' was mentioned by 14% of non-managers and 13% of managers, but only 5% of senior managers. There was a similar pattern for 'Lack of recognition'. This was mentioned by 22% of non-managers and 25% of managers, but only 9% of senior managers.
- **Age groups**: Potential barriers to career progression are particularly demotivating to people in their 30's (24%) and 40's (25%). For these age groups, 'Internal politics' and the associated perceived unfairness ranked higher (Under 30: 12%, over 50: 10%).
- **Gender**: Women commonly report feeling undervalued (25% women vs. 14% men) and isolated (14% women vs. 9% men) as being demotivating. For men, the content of the role and boring work ranked in 2nd place (19%), whilst it was only the 6th most common response amongst women.

Implications

The findings from this research suggest that organisations need to address a number of key areas when considering how to motivate people**:**

- **Ignore relationships at your peril**; working relationships are the number two motivator and the number one demotivator. However brilliant the task focus of an organisation may be, if no attention is paid to the 'emotional dimension' motivation will suffer. Therefore, managers should be given support to develop their 'emotional intelligence'.
- **Teambuilding matters**; the profound effect that working relationships have on motivation further emphasises the importance of organisations investing in building their teams.
- **Positive 'strokes' lead to a positive bottom line**; recognition is the oxygen of motivation. Giving positive feedback and making people feel that their contribution is valued is likely to make people more motivated and committed to the organisation.
- **Managers make the difference**; many of the key factors which motivate and demotivate people are directly influenced by the manager. This finding re-affirms recent CIPD research which showed that the managers who were rated more highly in terms of management capability had more satisfied, committed and higher performing teams (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2003).
- **What's in it for me?**; business success and customer satisfaction barely featured as motivational factors. This would seem to imply that motivational initiatives which are focused on the benefits for customers and business results are unlikely to have a long-term effect. It is the way people are managed day-to-day which keeps people engaged, by answering the question: 'what's in it for me?'

- **One size does not fit all**; our findings suggest that men and women, people at different levels and different age groups may be motivated by different things. Managers need to keep in mind the individual differences in their team when seeking the best ways to raise levels of motivation.

Further areas of interest

Several findings were somewhat surprising and suggest some avenues for future research.

- **Money**; 'Financial reward' was only ranked 6th overall in the Top 10 motivators and was mentioned by just 14% of respondents. In addition, unsatisfactory levels of pay did not feature at all in the Top 10 of demotivators. There is a clear message for organisations to pay attention to other ways of motivating people.
- **Physical environment**; the 'Physical environment' was ranked just 10th and was mentioned by only 9% of respondents as something likely to make them feel good at work. For organisations spending millions on new offices and facilities, this provides a warning sign that changing the physical environment alone will not guarantee a motivated workforce.
- **Helping others**; 'Helping others' was ranked 4th as a motivator and was mentioned by 16% of people. Yet this drive has not been addressed in established theories of motivation. Further exploration of this finding will help us to understand the role of helping others in motivation.

Bibliography

Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). *First, Break all the Rules*. Simon & Schuster Business Books: New York.

Hutchinson, S. & Purcell, P. (2003). *Bringing Policies to Life: The vital role of front line managers in people management.* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Naish R. & Birdi K (2001). Evaluation of the Effects of a Management Development Centre Program on Development, Retention and Business Performance. *The British Psychological Society Occupational Psychology Annual Conference, Book of Proceedings, 24-25.*