Overjustification Effect

Before we get onto Underjustification effect, let’s talk about its inspiration. Many of you will know about The Overjustification effect, first described by Daryl Bem in his work on Self-Perception theory in 1967[1].

Put simply it is the decrease of intrinsic motivation to perform a task or tasks when an extrinsic reward is introduced, and the reward becomes more important than the original task. So, for instance, if you love painting and then start to get paid for it, the money can start to become more important than the love of painting. Once the money is removed, you may be reluctant to go back to it for free, your intrinsic motivation to paint has been undermined by the extrinsic rewards. There is plenty of research out there to back this up!

Most famous is the work by Lepper et al[2], who created an experiment with three conditions focusing on children who enjoyed drawing.

1. The first group were just asked to draw for fun.
2. The second was told they would get a “Good Player” ribbon for drawing.
3. The third group were not told about any reward for drawing but got one unexpectedly after the activity.

All the children had been previously observed enjoying drawing independently. After the experiment they were observed, to see if they still went back to drawing for fun, with no reward on offer. They found that those who had expected a reward in the first part of the experiment were less likely to return to drawing just for fun.

So, what is Underjustification effect?

Well, it is actually something I made up in an article I wrote, called the “Intrinsic Motivation Fallacy“, to describe a kind of opposite effect that I have observed in people.

Consider an environment where intrinsic motivation may be low, for instance in an organisation where redundancies are going on, or there are financial hardships of some kind. Often, in an attempt to improve motivation of the workforce, techniques are employed that some feel should “raise spirits”. A classic example is adding a pool table to the office. More recently, this can be seen where gamification is being added, potentially without due thought or understanding.

What happens in this instance is motivation actually decreases and people can become
angry with the people who decided to implement these motivational tactics. The reasons may differ. If their lack of motivation relates to concerns of financial security, then the addition of costly trivialities could feel like a slap in the face. “Why could they not use that money to pay me more?” If the lack of motivation is due to uncertainty around job security, then they may view it as a trivial attempt to cheer them up. “I’m not so stupid that a pool table is going to make me forget about the redundancies, how little do they think of me?”

Remember, these insecurities or feelings of unfairness may well be perceived rather than actual, but that does not make them any less concerning or demotivational the individuals!

Actually, in that instance, it could be linked to Solutioneering, where a solution is created without understanding the problem and reduces motivation because it ignores the core problem!

**Underjustification Effect:**
The decrease of motivation to perform a task or tasks when supposedly motivational techniques are applied in place of perceived fair compensation or treatment.

Andrzej Marczewski

Underjustification Effect Definition

**Be Careful!**

You have to be so careful that what you are trying to do with gamification is well thought out and will not be seen as some cynical way to get people “to do more for less.” If they feel that what you are doing undermines them in some way, then they will feel this Underjustification effect.

Understand the problem and then solve it. If the problem can’t be solved with gamification, then find another way!!
References
