

The Intrinsic Motivation Fallacy

Description

“All you need is autonomy to be happy in work”

This is a quote I have heard on more than one occasion in my life as a gamification consultant. I have even had a friend quote his boss to me saying the following:

“You don’t need a pay rise, I read a book that said money isn’t a motivator. So with that, I will give you more autonomy and purpose in your role.”

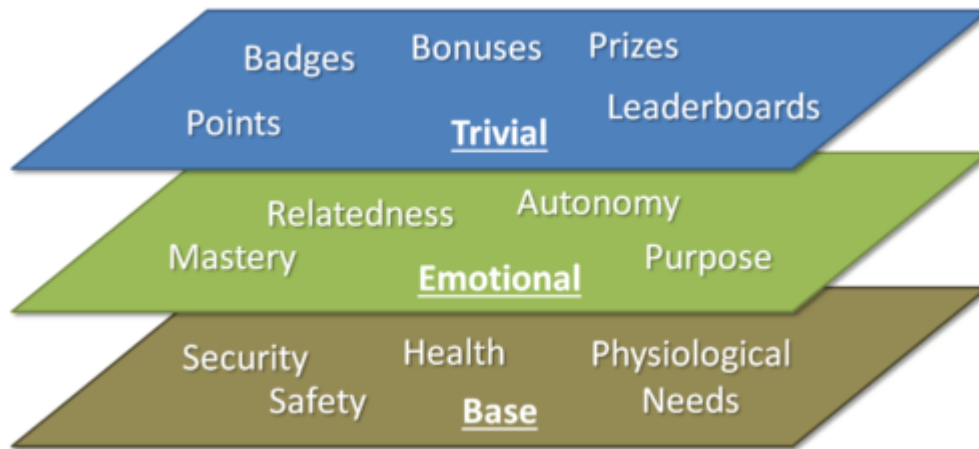
This idea that intrinsic motivation is an alternative to money comes from a misunderstanding of several studies and pop psychology books around motivation. A key book that is often cited is that of Drive by Dan Pink. I have mentioned it in the past and when I first started in gamification it was a great jumping off point for me. In the book, he describes three intrinsic motivations that all people need to be happy in their lives and work: Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose. This is based on the work of Deci and Ryan around motivation called Self Determination Theory [1] – another text I have referenced often and of course the basis for my RAMP framework.

Now, the misunderstanding relates to how intrinsic motivation works. There is a general understanding that money is not a motivator for creative works, but that reward can dramatically increase productivity around more mundane, *rote* tasks. This has been shown in many studies. It forms the basis of Over Justification Effect [2], [3], where the reward becomes more important than the task, which kills creativity and the love of the process itself in many cases.

Firstly, there are many things that drive us beyond those mentioned here as well as many alternative theories on motivation: Hertzberg’s Two-Factor Theory [4], Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs [5], Expectancy Theory [6] and much more. So, it is good to keep in mind that these three or four motivations are not all there is!

The second issue is that people misunderstand the difference between motivation in general. It works on many levels and in many ways. At a basic level, there are base motivations and emotional

motivations. A base motivation is something that one must have to function correctly: food, water, money etc. Emotional motivation is more about one's desires ultimately leading to *quality* of life rather than mere existence.



The Three Layers of Motivation

This is where the issue of money comes in and why Dan Pink often gets quoted out of context. The managers that say, “Money is not a motivator, you don’t need more” are not considering other things that Pink has said, crucially this from his Flip Manifesto [7],

“... often the best use of money as a motivator is to pay people enough to take the issue of money off the table—so that people can focus on the work rather than on the cash.”

In other words, all the intrinsic motivation in the world will not be enough to keep an employee happy if they are worried about money. People have the *need* to feel secure. In fact, Pink suggests that you pay over the odds! [8]

“And so I think you got to pay people enough. I would argue, pay people more than enough”

This is the big fallacy of intrinsic motivation and one that many people criticise gamification for. They seem to feel that the aim is to replace paying people fairly, which just is not the case. **Good** gamification is there to lower barriers, improve experiences, enhance learning and ultimately elevate engagement.

If I am not getting paid enough to cover bills and live in a way that I feel comfortable, then money will be my key need and thought. Adding gamification or other behavioural techniques to try and motivate me is likely to insult me more than motivate me! It is almost the opposite of Overjustification effect, a kind of **underjustification** effect if you will. It is not the fact that the *desire* for money has crowded out and lowered the intrinsic motivation it is that the **need** for reward/money is more important than any immediate intrinsic/emotional motivation!

That is not to say that just paying well will keep people in a boring dead end job. There comes a point where they do need to be intrinsically motivated as well, but you have to cover the base needs first. Intrinsic motivation is not a magic bullet, people need to feel secure and that requires fair pay

before any other behaviour focused interventions can work. Once that is covered, intrinsic motivation and gamification hand in hand can do a great deal to improve happiness, engagement and ultimately performance – done right.

Intrinsic motivation, like gamification, does not replace the need to be paid and feel you are comfortable, appreciated and valued and never should be used as such!

References

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Category

1. Gamification
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Tags

1. dan pink
2. drive

3. maslow
4. motivation
5. needs
6. self determination theory

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