Workplace Motivation – Case Study Engaging Students during a Pandemic

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Abstract: Professionals in all fields are to work even when societies go through crises (i.e., the current pandemic), natural disasters, or catastrophes. Studies conducted by specialists in different areas, indicate that numerous people are not willing to work under stressful conditions. In this paper, we want to find out what can motivate a person to work in abnormal conditions of stress, risk of illness, which motivational tools may be applicable with a direct view on students who remained online for more than 21 months.

Humanity is facing one of the greatest challenges of this century: the COVID-19. People are going through a period of fearful insecurity and stress causing many problems and even mental health issues, some of them probably hard to remediate. Education is among the most affected fields of activity. The purpose of the paper is to discover workplace motivation of teachers and students to respond and react to such unfortunate circumstances and to continue their activity, thus avoiding long term blockages and drawbacks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation, the ‘force or influence that causes someone to do something’ as defined by The Merriam-Webster dictionary or ‘the energizing of behaviour in pursuit of a goal’ (Simpson and Balsam, 2016, p.1) or ‘the drive’ (Pink, 2011) lies at the basis of our interaction with the world and with each other. The fascinating thing about motivation is that from a biological point of view, seen a four-programme framework (the four basic pillars being safety, status, sex and self-reliance) human beings act like animals, that is they all share motivation to obtain the basic needs, including food, water, reproduction and social interaction (Natterson-Horowitz, Bowers, 2019, pp 187). Life is about meeting these needs as a requirement for survival, but the differentiation relies on the goals that particularize actions in each case. Therefore, motivation must be perceived both as an intrinsic and extrinsic power, a response to internal states and external environmental conditions. Basically, motivation is the outcome of an exchange of chemicals released by the brain (peptides, hormones, neurotransmitters, etc.), determining complex decisions to be made. In the past few years, there has been a great deal of research on the biology and psychology of motivation of people as they have had to deal with the physical and emotional stresses and rapid changes brought on by COVID-19.

Academics and students have faced a sudden twist in their lives being forced to rapidly learn and adopt a new way of working or learning remotely. The greatest challenge for academics has been to keep students motivated, and help them adjust and finally embrace the new mode of learning and deal with feelings of isolation due to a lack of physical interaction with peers and teachers.

Motivation for learning influences the educational process itself, and, implicitly, the results of this endeavour. Deficits in motivation can be devastating. Negative phrases and labels such as students are no longer interested in learning, do not like books, are not motivated to learn have

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often appeared in educational institutions in Romania. It is a reality frequently reported by academics and teachers in our country and a current problem, in which specialists in the field of education sciences, but also practitioners have tried to find solutions. The working from home and learning from home pattern only added to the problem.

2. WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE

In order to successfully overcome the challenges that appeared and to support mental health, well-being, and behaviour of people, a better understanding is required of how individual people experience and psychologically react to the new reality, how they think, feel, suffer and cope with the situation, and how they are handling threat perception, how they perceive and regulate emotions and behaviour, how they remain motivated in their workplace to remain productive.

Focusing on the changing nature of work and the workplace, it is wise to conduct research on the intrinsic power of motivation that can help people to overcome stress and demotivation. According to Pink (2009) there is a significant distance between what science proves and what economics do about human motivation – and how this discrepancy affects all aspects of human life by analysing three elements of true motivation – autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Autonomy is actually the self-reliance, the desire to leave the nest and live and direct our own lives. When it comes to the workplace, allowing employees autonomy contradicts the traditional view of management and education system which wants employees/students to “comply” with what is required of them. Nevertheless, if teachers or managers want students/employees to be more engaged in what they are doing, then autonomy is the choice. As an example, freedom offered to employees to spend time doing their own thing leads to many more innovative ideas and solutions. This should also apply to the learning activity of students by growing more flexible time providing the technology and freedom to study from home.

Mastery is closely related to the biological motivation for status, as people show the desire to continually improve at something that matters, to become better, to enjoy the satisfaction from personal achievement and progress. Allowing employees and students respectively, to feel a sense of evolution hugely contributes to their inner drive. Whenever people feel left aside or lack opportunity for self-improvement they are liable to become bored and demotivated. The solution to this drive is to take into account the stress curve whenever tasks are assigned – they should not be too easy or excessively challenging, they only need to get people out of comfort zones, and allow them to stretch themselves and develop their skills and experience further.

The purpose is the third pillar defined by Pink as the desire to do things in service of something larger than ourselves (Pink, 2009) and human beings naturally tend to do things that matter. Briefly, there are numerous and diverse factors that influence motivation, both inner physiological ones, and the exterior current conditions, along with each and every being’s own experiences. These factors influence motivation if the information is processed completely, when it is encoded, decoded, interpreted, perceived, assessed and eventually learned and retrieved. For that, interactions and communication are vital.

The restrictions imposed by authorities when the pandemic hit the world impacted greatly all living world. People underwent crucial changes. Being forced to function, work, study from home, motivation was difficult to sustain. Academia and education are two social and public do-
mains that have been seriously affected by the pandemic lockdown in every country. Romania, for instance, decided for both public and private universities to close the campus for students and switch all teaching activities to e-learning.

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

All levels of education, from kindergarten to university, have been severely affected by the new coronavirus, and most institutions have either been completely shut down or have been operating at very limited capacity for several months. Despite the various challenges the pandemic has generated, it has also initiated some really creative responses within the higher education sector.

3.1. The Extraordinary Push Towards the Digitization of Education

Safety measures taken have been designed to help university personnel stay healthy, secure and still to support the ongoing work; not an easy job, nevertheless, workable and sometimes even generating enthusiasm by trying out new ideas.

Although the idea of digitizing education systems has been debated for some time, the acceleration of this initiative under the Covid-19 pandemic has been truly impressive. After the initial shock, educators and members of the administrative and technical staff in the education systems reacted in a truly extraordinary way, trying to transfer the whole teaching – learning process to the online environment and succeeded in relatively short time to operate efficiently on digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets and Microsoft Teams, which in most cases they were not even aware of before this crisis; most of those involved have adapted surprisingly well to the new systems, appreciating the advantages (the ability to offer and participate in educational courses at home, without the need for a physical presence in a classroom, the improvement in the quality and quantity of digital resources) and trying to overcome the encountered disadvantages (difficulties for the practical disciplines based on experimental or activities, the need for teachers to become accustomed with digital platforms and resources, socio-economic division, harsh on both teachers and students who do not have modern technological devices or uninterrupted access to high-speed Internet). Among the problems encountered as a result of online education, the reduced social interactivity with other students, which is a particularly critical factor especially for young people at the beginning of their higher education, has led to difficulties in concentrating and finding or maintaining motivation. Thus, the psychological issues related to social isolation or reduced social interactions despite the strengthening of psychological support networks in most academic institutions was a real challenge.

3.2. Difficulties for the International Mobility That Could Turn Virtually

One particularly negative impact of the health crisis was on the mobility of international students, both those seeking full-time courses abroad and those in exchange for experience, such as the Erasmus program, which has allowed almost three million students to take university courses abroad, over three decades. The pandemic forced many international students to interrupt their Erasmus programs, and led to the cancellation of others. The consequence is the much lower number of students who apply for such programs and the number of international students is less likely to return to the level of the years before the pandemic.

A solution will eventually be the virtual mobility that could offer the opportunity to take courses offered by different institutions around the world at the same time; however, in order to implement
virtual mobility there are some necessary steps to follow such as the formation of new academic partnerships, the setting and defining of academic credits that a student can obtain by following the digital courses offered by foreign universities, recognition of academic credits obtained abroad, the financial support offered to virtual mobility as it was offered the physical one, etc.

3.3. Good Leadership Was Required

Once the technological resources and pedagogical support were provided to facilitate academics in their teaching, institutions focused on senior leadership that had to become highly visible to ensure a smooth performance of the process. From informal conversations with employees aimed to unite staff and demonstrate an identification with the new environment, to follow-ups that encouraged academics to share teaching practices and observations and become part of the decision-making process, all these actions forced managers to adapt quickly and correct university procedures and to set different work expectations to better accommodate the ‘new’ working environment.

4. THE IMPACT OF WORKING/LEARNING FROM HOME ON STUDENTS’ MOTIVATION

Social contexts affect people’s life goals or aspirations which tend to be more intrinsic or more extrinsic, thus affecting important life outcomes. Working from home is different from learning from home, nevertheless, the two realities, especially during COVID-19, have a lot in common. Working from home is not a new concept. Technology enabled an ever increasing number of people to work from home regularly. Some studies point out that ‘telework can reduce turnover rates and increase employees’ productivity, job engagement, and job performance’ (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2020, p. 6). On the other hand, studying from home without any possibility of coming to the university campus and not being able to attend traditional face-to-face lectures and courses, not interacting with colleagues, tutors, and teachers require from students to learn and adapt to new behaviour rules.

There is a gap in the existing literature regarding students’ experiences during COVID-19. Yet it is a fact that psychologically, students felt uncertainty, stress, lack of motivation, all in all, a twist in the behaviour routines and habits. Despite their highly developed digital skills, the abrupt change to the new forms of teaching and sole reliance on digital interaction as a means of social interaction might have caused students serious troubles. Students’ ability to cope with the new situation rely on each student’s personality and current cognitive, affective, and motivational state.

Becoming a student brings along, besides the initial enthusiasm and curiosity or eagerness, high levels of anxiety, and mental stress due to excessive demands and uncertainty in finances, job, or social relationships. This prevalence of academic stress and mental health turns university students into a particularly vulnerable social category with all the stress-related lifestyle changes associated with the current COVID-19 pandemic, where lack of motivation may seriously impede the educational process.

As mentioned above, the theory maintains and has provided evidence that all human beings have fundamental psychological needs to be competent, autonomous, and related to others. Satisfying these basic needs facilitates people’s autonomous or inner motivation, whereas denying these needs determines controlled motivation or demotivation. The more autonomous a student, the more effective he/she will prove in performing an activity, such as learning and it all relies on satisfying the basic needs. Thus, universities have had to concentrate on keeping students motivated while struggling to maintain their own morale up.
Beyond the positive aspect of improving digital skills, learning from home shows several drawbacks as well: with no face-to-face contact, it is quite difficult for educators to pick up nonverbal cues from students that can indicate they are disengaged, frustrated or unenthusiastic. The same, sharing emotions and enthusiasm, encouragement or concern is challenging for educators. Moreover, when cameras are off, the anonymous feeling of the online environment can make it easier for students to withdraw, participate minimally, or completely disappear from the course, having very little or no motivation to persevere.

In the attempt to preserve or even increase motivation for learning, especially the intrinsic one, the focus is on the affective-motivational aspects of the educational process, including emotions related to a specific situation or interest and motivation related to a task or subject matter. Therefore, students who experience enjoyment in the process, or the intrinsic motivation to engage in the task or situation will remain motivated. Previous research showed that enjoyment eventually contributes to students’ intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.17). Moreover, research argues that students’ engagement depends on the type of motivation for a task (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.15), i.e. mainly intrinsic motivation is seen as a beneficial ground, self-driven students show higher levels of persistence, achievement, and engagement. The pandemic highlighted this aspect as, in harsh times students’ affective and motivational drives may have been even more important than during normal times – when there is no teacher present, students are responsible for regulating their own learning process.

The key is, thus, in the educators’ pockets as intrinsic motivation should be mostly initiated by interest and the way in which students’ attention and exploratory behaviour are directed. These essential factors like positive emotions determining learning enjoyment, as well as motivational aspects, such as intrinsic motivation, might have affected students’ learning efforts during university lockdown.

5. STRATEGIES AND PRINCIPLES THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MOTIVATION

With students in contact only via the Internet, several new challenges arise. For extrinsically motivated students, online courses enable self-paced rhythm and fitting the work time into their schedule; they can be engaged with interactive activities that offer instant feedback. The Internet provides flexibility, interactivity and creativity engaging students in motivating experiences. Yet, there are more types of students ranging from high achievers to students currently on academic probation who may take courses through continuing education. Among them, there are those with the intrinsic motivation that has to be maintained continuously.

According to Weimer (2018) the principles of motivation might be adapted in various pandemic learning modes to raise student motivation.

1. Adaptive self-efficacy and competence perceptions motivate students. This appeals to the fundamental biological principle of motivation – status, meaning that if students believe they can do something, they are motivated enough to do it. And if the task follows the correct stress curve, being challenging but doable, the problem is almost solved. The course design is essential, technology and visual tools help in conceiving tasks that keep both students below the grade level and those above level motivated. Providing an option to obtain extra credit on performing additional challenging tasks will keep students above the grade level motivated, whereas students below the grade level will be motivated to complete the task or follow feedback for improvement.
2. **Adaptive attributions and control beliefs motivate students.** Students get and remain motivated if they feel their work counts, is appreciated and fairly assessed. This turns crucial with pandemic learning modes when student voices and feedback will have to be incorporated into the course design; such attitudes, talks, meetings preserve students’ motivation and involvement in the course.

3. **Higher levels of interest and intrinsic motivation motivate students.** If the above presented principles referred more to extrinsic factors, there is a “distinction between personal and situational interest. Personal interest represents the attraction a student feels for a content area—what’s motivating the decision to major in a particular field. Situational interest refers to positive feelings generated by the learning tasks or activities themselves. Students can catch motivation from a teacher who is obviously, unabashedly in love with the content and teaching.” (Weimer, 2018) Motivation might appear from an external factor, yet, if filtered and turned into an inner calling, need, desire, it becomes more powerful and long lasting.

4. **Higher levels of value motivate students.** It is, in fact, the purpose of Pink (2011), namely, students have to understand the value attached with what they are learning and where it will be applied in their future lives to keep them motivated. Linked to the biological factor of self-reliance, where students are directed to find out through directed readings and experiential learning the relevance and future application of each topic, it enforces the power of motivation for learning. During these challenging times when traditional education was affected, these principles and strategies can really help in the process.

Some strategies involving instructor behaviour promote engagement through setting expectations and that is helpful especially to intrinsic type of motivation:

- creating explicit course and activity goals (Ames 1992) and thus students feel more motivated to put effort into a course that they consider worthwhile. It develops mastery (Pink, 2009) which acknowledges the fact that while learning a new skill or concept, a person may need multiple attempts.

- communicating work/learning expectations clearly from the very beginning.

- providing a detailed syllabus with assignment information, format of class, course and assignment schedule and advice for completing work.

- keep an accurate course website with updated information about activities that are opening, closing or changing.

- communicating effectively with students: logging in often, responding quickly, and convey permanent feedback (Crumpacker 2001). The use of feedback is another way of increasing mastery and it boosts their desire and dedication to learn. Students may not know where they are making errors. Providing constructive criticism and allowing students to apply feedback increases the intrinsic motivation to master a concept.

- recognizing and praising students who improved or performed tasks successfully.

- providing correct, specific and personalized assessments.

- ensuring autonomy which gives students the ability to lead their learning and this is motivating.

- building purpose as it provides students with a reason to engage and learn. Students need to feel like they are working toward something worthwhile and are doing something important; students feel good about their work—which reinforces the desire to keep working.

All these efforts are worth as, following the boomerang principle, what one offers, one receives in return (Nagpal, 2000). The more effort is spent to motivate students and keep them constructively engaged, the better the chances are for students themselves to take their turn and get involved, and naturally, to progress. And the wonderful part is that it does not end here, the circle
closes and completes only when the teacher’s motivation grows fuelled by student involvement and engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

After COVID, there will be no return to the way of life that was actually before COVID; lifestyle, habits in the workplace, working conditions of higher education institutions have changed. In a post-pandemic era, it is likely that online learning will become a fundamental element in higher education. Remote education has impacted the learning process in various ways. The focus remains on human resources. Students, as “receptors” of education have to remain motivated. There are biological factors fundamental for any being. Humans add purpose and drive to make sense of life and work. Psychological principles of motivation clarify the mechanisms brains use to keep people motivated. Using the right strategies and methods can help maintain and even increase the motivation of distance learners.

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