



Motivation and Satisfaction Among Public Sector Employees

Frank Mulhern and Jenna Massey

Northwestern University

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A great deal of attention has recently been placed on employee engagement and related concepts such as motivation, satisfaction and performance. Almost without exception, discussion of these concepts has pertained to private industry, particularly service industries in which employee performance is instrumental for success. In this study, the Forum addresses the quality of employee experiences in a public sector setting. The objective of this study is to identify the workplace and employee characteristics that relate to the levels of motivation and satisfaction of public service employees. The study took place in an Employment Counseling department of a single Midwestern state.

The public sector presents particular challenges with respect to management, motivation and employee performance. Managers are often required to operate with limited administrative practices, limited resources for training, employee development and salary increases, restrictions on the ability to reassign or replace employees, and little or no usage of recognition and reward programs to motivate employees. Given this situation, substantial opportunity exists to enhance public sector workers' experiences through by understanding employee motivation and satisfaction.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted in the spring of 2012. The survey was designed to evaluate employee perceptions of a training program that had taken place several months in the past. Included in the survey were several questions regarding employees' overall perceptions and experiences in the workplace, perceptions about supervisors and descriptive information on the employees. The employees worked throughout the state in offices designed to facilitate in-person counseling services provided by the employees (hereafter referred to as counselors) and their clients. The counselors work consisted of assisting people in the general population in preparing for, and finding, employment. Specific counseling items included resume writing, interviewing skills, and searching job databases. Just over 900 counselors were asked to complete the survey. A total of 513 completed the survey for a response rate of 56%. The high response rate can be attributed to fact that regional supervisors sent the requests for participation directly to the counselors in their regions. The results we present below are for the 343 counselors who participated in the survey.

Of particular concern in this research setting was the morale, motivation and satisfaction of the counselors. State employment counselors are not paid well. They work in difficult situations given the nature of the clients they are serving, many of whom are chronically unemployed or lack the education or training necessary to make themselves attractive to employers. On the other hand, the employment counselors, when asked about their jobs, frequently mentioned how rewarding it was to help people with their employment situations and to see the resulting improvements in the quality of the lives of clients and their families.

Employee Satisfaction

Survey participants were asked the question: “Please indicate how satisfied you are with your current job?” The responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Self-reported Level of Job Satisfaction

| | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Very dissatisfied | 18 | 5.2% |
| Dissatisfied | 18 | 5.2% |
| Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | 50 | 14.6% |
| Satisfied | 173 | 50.4% |
| Very satisfied | 84 | 24.5% |
| Total | 343 | 100% |

Using numerical values to represent the level of satisfaction (1 for very dissatisfied and 5 for very satisfied) the mean level of satisfaction is 3.86 on the five-point scale. As indicated in Table 1, only about one-fourth of respondents reported being very satisfied, and half reported being satisfied, just one scale point above the neutral response. While these results are obviously more positive than negative, it is not a particularly strong positive result and is also not surprising given the challenges of the work described above.

Of more interest than the straightforward description of the job satisfaction is understanding what explains differences in satisfaction levels across employees. To explore this, we conducted a regression analysis – a statistical technique that explains the variability in an outcome measure, in this case job satisfaction, as a function of a set of causal variables. We investigated the impact of several variables on job satisfaction including job function, length of time employed, employee age and gender and several other factors. Results of the analysis appear in Table 2.

Table 2

Variables Explaining the Variability on Job Satisfaction

| Dependent Variable: Job Satisfaction | | R²: 0.14 | |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Independent Variable | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 3.00 | 9.684 | 0.000 |
| Workload | -0.12 | -2.488 | 0.013 |
| Value of the service | 0.12 | 2.433 | 0.015 |
| Relationship with supervisor | 0.28 | 5.622 | 0.000 |
| Job motivation | 0.13 | 2.592 | 0.010 |

Statistically some variables have no impact and have been removed from the analysis. Only variables found to predict satisfaction are included in the Table 2 (indicated by t-values above 1.96). The four variables that have a causal relationship with job satisfaction are:

- Workload – the number of clients a counselor is assigned at a given time
- Value of the service – the counselor’s perception of his or her contribution to a client’s employment situation
- Relationship with supervisor – the counselor’s perception of the quality of his or her relationship with the supervisor
- Job motivation – the counselor’s reported level of motivation on a three-point scale.

Of most interest are the coefficients in Table 2 which allow us to compare the relative impact of each of the variables on satisfaction. Three variables, workload, value of the service and job motivation have coefficients of approximately 0.12 indicating that they all have about the same impact on job satisfaction. The negative sign for the workload coefficient indicates that higher workloads are associated with lower levels of satisfaction. The most important driver of employee satisfaction is the employee’s relationship with the supervisor. The coefficient of 0.28 is more than twice as large as the other coefficients, indicating that this variable has more than twice the impact on job satisfaction than each of the other variables. One way to think of this result is that the most likely element in determining whether a respondent indicates being “very satisfied” or being anything less than “satisfied” is the quality of the relationship with the supervisor. Put another way, those indicating they are “very satisfied” are likely to have a favorable relationship with their supervisor and conversely those indicating a response that is less than satisfied are likely to have a poor relationship with their supervisor.

The relationship with their supervisor variable in Table 2 is a composite variable consisting of the following five questions:

- In general, I'm happy with my supervisor
- My supervisor communicates effectively with me
- My supervisor is very competent with his/her work
- My supervisor provides sufficient support for my work
- My supervisor treats me like an individual

Comparisons of mean scores between employees who report being satisfied versus unsatisfied confirm the above results. Table 3 shows the mean scores for relationship with supervisor, workload and value of service. Unsatisfied workers score lower than satisfied employees on all three dimensions.

Table 3

Comparison between Satisfied and Unsatisfied Employees*

| | Supervisor Relationship | Workload | Value of Service |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Unsatisfied | -0.56 | 2.19 | 2.23 |
| Satisfied | 0.17 | 1.94 | 2.47 |

*Satisfied and very satisfied have been combined as have the two unsatisfied responses

The statistical analysis allows us to conclude that the employee's relationship with the supervisor is the most important factor in job satisfaction. The most important conclusion we make from this analysis pertains to the primacy of people – an employee's satisfaction is influenced more strongly by the supervisor than any other aspect of the job or the employee.

A second people-related aspect in employee satisfaction is the employee's perception of degree to which he or she provides a valuable service to the clients. Employees are more satisfied when they feel they are serving their clients well. This result was reinforced by responses to an open-ended question asking what employees liked best about their job. One of the most prevalent responses was the feeling of providing a valuable service to people in need of assistance in finding employment.

As shown in Table 2, one of the drivers of satisfaction is job motivation. The inference we can make here is that when employees are more motivated, they are more satisfied. However, an obvious follow-up question pertains to the extent to which motivation drives satisfaction, or satisfaction drives motivation. We explore that issue in the next section.

Job Motivation

Survey participants were asked the following question:

“Which of the following statements best describes how motivated you feel about your job?”

- I am very motivated to perform my job well.
- I am somewhat motivated to perform my job well.
- I am not very motivated to perform my job well.

Results to that question are as follows in Table 4:

Table 4
Self-reported Level of Job Motivation

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|
| Very motivated | 273 | 79.7% |
| Somewhat motivated | 59 | 17.2% |
| Not very motivated | 11 | 3.2% |
| Total | 343 | 100.0% |

Clearly the overall level of motivation is very high. Of interest are the characteristics that relate to employees who did not report being very motivated. Table 5 shows the results of a regression analysis to determine causal variables that influence job motivation.

Table 5
Variables Explaining the Variability in Job Motivation

| Dependent Variable: Job Motivation | | R²: 0.11 | |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Independent Variable | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 2.00 | 13.349 | 0.000 |
| State policy access | 0.12 | 2.276 | .023 |
| Clearness of state policies | 0.16 | 3.030 | .003 |
| Job Satisfaction | 0.11 | 2.096 | .037 |
| Good relationship with supervisors | 0.11 | 2.074 | .039 |

Again, we evaluated the impact of numerous variables about the job and the employees. Four explanatory variables have a statistically significant effect on job motivation. They are:

- State policy access – the degree to which employees can access information about changes to workplace policies enacted by the state
- Clearness of state policies – how understandable and justified the policies are perceived
- Job satisfaction – the counselors reported level of satisfaction on a five-point scale.
- Relationship with supervisor – the counselor’s perception of the quality of his or her relationship with the supervisor

The coefficients for the explanatory variables are all about the same, with “clearness of state policies” being slightly higher than the others, 0.16 compared to about 0.11 for the others. The results show significant positive relationship between how much access the employees have to state policy, and how clear the policies are, and job motivation. In an environment where policies are critical for compliance and corresponding funding, “clearness of state policies” is a key driver of job performance. It is critically important for an employee to know and understand organizational policies that affect their work. The quality of the relationship with supervisors is then an important predictor of motivation, as it was for satisfaction. This further contributes to one of our main conclusions – personal relationships at work are a major factor in the quality of employee experience.

We find that job satisfaction is a significant predictor of job motivation. Given that we also found the reverse relationship above, we cannot conclude if satisfaction drives motivation, or the converse. We can conclude that motivation and satisfaction go together and explore that relationship in Table 6.

Table 6

Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Motivation

| | Unmotivated | Motivated | Total |
|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------|
| Unsatisfied | 39 | 63 | 102 |
| Satisfied | 46 | 280 | 326 |
| Total | 85 | 343 | 428 |

Two-thirds of the respondents report being both satisfied and motivated (280/428). The next most frequent occurrence, 14.7% (63/428) is being motivated, but not satisfied. Stated differently, over 60% of those reporting to be unmotivated indicate they are satisfied. These employees are in the somewhat paradoxical situation of feeling motivated to perform a job they are not satisfied with. From a measurement perspective, it is likely that the questions on motivation and satisfaction both tapped into an underlying feeling employees had about their jobs. Separating motivation from satisfaction is not as important as understanding the factors that lead to each of them, as revealed by the two regression models.

Conclusion

Our intent has been to evaluate employee satisfaction and motivation among public sector employees who work in a stressful environment. We find that the level of satisfaction and motivation are quite high and closely related to each other.

The nature of employees' relationships with supervisors is a major factor driving employee motivation and satisfaction. Combining this result with the positive feelings employees expressed about providing a valuable service to their clients, we can conclude that the people-related aspects of work are paramount in the quality of the work experience. This result presents a challenge for managers because influencing interpersonal relationships at work is difficult. The administrative capabilities available to managers for things such as compensation, benefits, training and career development are not as important as the interpersonal relationships at work. The qualities of those relationships are more likely to result from the quality and nature of people hired, organizational culture and other intangible factors. Our results suggest that managers are better off considering interpersonal relationships as part of ongoing administrative practice and utilizing practices such as recognition and rewards to enhance the quality of relationships between supervisors and employees.



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