

What makes teachers tick?

As a trainer on the International Diploma in Language Teaching Management course I have met, worked with, and discussed issues with a large number of managers of language teaching organisations (LTOs). One of the most common problems raised by those managers is that of employees (especially teachers) leaving their schools to take up positions elsewhere. To an extent, of course, this is unavoidable. But to what extent? Most schools don't have the resources or the financial sway of the British Council, for example, but is there something that managers of less well-resourced schools can do, to motivate their teachers and keep them inspired to work for their organisations? Why, indeed, do our employees come to work?

In his seminal work on employee motivation, Herzberg¹ postulated that there were two forms of motivating factors. The first type were what he termed “motivators” or “satisfiers”. These are features of ones job that actually inspire and encourage. These include such factors as the work itself, responsibility, achievement, recognition, advancement and growth. The second type he termed “Maintenance factors” or “dissatisfiers” – aspects of the job that in and of themselves do not actually motivate, but the *absence* of which can be demotivating. These include job security, salary, administration, supervision, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, and status.

Inspired by Herzberg, Montana and Charnov² surveyed large numbers of employees in US corporations at different levels of experience and seniority. The survey instrument asked respondents to identify the 6 most important factors that motivate them from a list of 25 possible options. These options ranged from factors like “Good pay” and “Steady employment” to ones such as “Having a local employee paper”. The groups surveyed by Montana and Charnov were 500 senior level executives, 50 recent college graduates, and 150 current college students. In addition, they compared their data with that provided by Gordon Lippitt who had used the same survey with 6000 managers. Table 1 below shows the 6 most important factors for each of these groups.

| Factors that motivate me: | A | B | C | D |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Steady employment | | | | |
| 2. Respect for me as a person | | | | |
| 4. Good pay | | | | |
| 6 Chance to turn out quality work | | | | |
| 7 Getting along well with others on the job | | | | |
| 9 Chance for promotion | | | | |
| 10 Opportunity to do interesting work | | | | |
| 14 Feeling my job is important | | | | |
| 21 Opportunity for self-development and improvement | | | | |
| 25 Large amount of freedom on the job - chance to work not under close supervision | | | | |

Columns:

A: 6000 Managers
 B: 500 Senior level executives
 C: 50 Recent college graduates
 D: 150 Current college students
 (Columns A-D from data provided by Montana and Charnov, 2000)

¹ Herzberg, F. “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1987

² Montana, Patrick J and Charnov, Bruce H. *Management Barrons Business Review Books*, 2000

Table 1: Factors that Motivate. Montana and Charnov.

If this data represents an accurate picture of what motivates the groups surveyed by Montana, Charnov and Lippitt, would surveying teachers and other employees at LTOs throw up similar results? If so, what bearing would this have for LTO managers as they strive to keep their staff (and to keep them motivated)? This research, then, set out to discover whether people in the language teaching field would show similar results to those surveyed by Montana and Charnov. Subsequently, I have attempted to explain similarities and differences between their results and those obtained from the language teaching world.

Survey findings and variance with original survey

Although Montana and Charnov's survey was aimed at the US corporate world, and had a number of omissions from an LTO perspective, for ease of analysis and comparison it was distributed in the original form. 105 useable responses from teachers, managers, and other employees of 91 different LTOs were received. Respondents worked in 12 different countries and represented 11 different nationalities. 71 were L1 speakers of English, 74 were working in their home country. Women outnumbered men by a ratio of 3:2.

Averaged as a whole the survey sample identified the following 6 factors as being the most important:

2. Respect for me as a person
4. Good pay
7. Getting along well with others on the job
10. Opportunity to do interesting work
14. Feeling my job is important
21. Opportunity for self-development and improvement

Three of these factors (respect, salary, and self-development) were also identified by all groups of the original respondents in Montana and Charnov's survey. Two (interesting work, and job importance) were mentioned by the senior level executives, but not by the younger respondents. The remaining one (getting along well with others) was not one of the top six factors mentioned by any of the four corporate groups. It should of course be noted that the results merely provide a general picture.

This last difference seems to tally with commonly held beliefs about those in our profession being "people oriented" as opposed to those in the corporate world who are typically assumed to be much more self-interested. To back this up, a number of respondents commented that they felt the survey did not really have any options that reflected their primary source of motivation, which was (in nearly all such cases) their students. This response and its prevalence would seem to reflect the unique nature of schools and the job of teaching.

On the other hand, the two junior samples of Montana and Charnov identified "Steady Employment" and "Chance for Promotion" as being important, but here those factors were barely touched on by the LTO respondents. Likewise, the corporate respondents identified "Large amount of freedom on the job" as being a major motivator, while this survey sample did not focus so heavily on that area.

Again, there are a number of possible interpretations of these differences, and one that springs to mind is that teachers in LTOs, especially those who are working outside their home country, are not particularly interested in steady employment, being to an extent an itinerant workforce. It should be noted that the one subgroup of the sample that did identify this area were the non-native speakers of English, who for the most part are people teaching English within their home countries. This is a finding which would appear to back up this theory. It should, however, also be noted that the entire subgroup of “people working within their home countries” (i.e. much of the above mentioned subgroup plus native speakers of English working at home in the UK, Australia, the US, etc) did not include this as one of the top six motivating factors.

Similarly, the lack of interest in promotion among LTO employees may reflect the typical structure of the LTO and the fact that in most cases there exists neither the opportunity nor the desire for promotion in the traditional hierarchical sense of the word. Most teachers I have talked to have no great interest in becoming managers or directors, the positions “above” them on the typical organigram. Again, this would seem to reflect the distinctive nature of the LTO compared to many other organisations.

The difference in the desire for freedom on the job is somewhat more surprising, but the explanation may be as simple as the fact that teachers, by the nature of their work, inherently have a large amount of freedom on the job compared with most other professions. In the classroom we are all autonomous.

Variance within the sample

One notable variance within the survey was the response to the motivating factor “Feeling my job is important”. This was chosen very strongly by the female respondents but not the male. Further analysis showed fairly conclusively that this was predominantly a male/female split as both male managers and male teachers did not select it but both female managers and female teachers did (See Table 2, below). It is not clear to me why this difference may exist. Perhaps men are societally conditioned to assume that the work they do is important, while women continue to feel undervalued and hence the importance of their work is of much more significance to them. It may also be related to the widely researched links between teaching and nurturing.

| Factors that motivate me: | M | F | F | F | M | M |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | T | M | T | M |
| 1. Steady employment | | | | | | |
| 2. Respect for me as a person | | | | | | |
| 4. Good pay | | | | | | |
| 6 Chance to turn out quality work | | | | | | |
| 7 Getting along well with others on the job | | | | | | |
| 9 Chance for promotion | | | | | | |
| 10 Opportunity to do interesting work | | | | | | |
| 14 Feeling my job is important | | | | | | |
| 21 Opportunity for self-development and improvement | | | | | | |
| 25 Large amount of freedom on the job - chance to work not under close supervision | | | | | | |

Columns:

M = Male; F = Female; FT = Female Teachers; FM= Female Managers;
 MT = Male Teachers; MM = Male Managers

Table 2: Factors that motivate – male/female differences

Another notable variance within the survey sample was that between native and non-native speaker teachers and between those working in their home countries and those working abroad, as alluded to previously. While L1 speakers of English identified the factors *Chance to turn out quality work*; *Feeling my job is important*, and *Large amount of freedom on the job*, those LTO employees (most of whom were teachers) whose first language is not English didn't select these factors and opted instead for *Steady employment*, *Good pay*, and *Getting along well with other on the job*. (See Table 3, below). Some of these differences may be explained by the fact that a majority of the non-native speaker respondents were from less wealthy nations (Eastern Europe, the former USSR, and Latin America), whereas L1 English nations are typically wealthier (with all the attendant feelings of economic security that this implies).

| Factors that motivate me: | N S | N N S | H o | A w |
|--|--------|-------------|--------|--------|
| 1. Steady employment | | | | |
| 2. Respect for me as a person | | | | |
| 4. Good pay | | | | |
| 6 Chance to turn out quality work | | | | |
| 7 Getting along well with others on the job | | | | |
| 9 Chance for promotion | | | | |
| 10 Opportunity to do interesting work | | | | |
| 14 Feeling my job is important | | | | |
| 21 Opportunity for self-development and improvement | | | | |
| 25 Large amount of freedom on the job - chance to work not under close supervision | | | | |

Columns:
NS = Native Speakers; NNS = Non-native speakers
Ho = Working in home country; Aw = Working in foreign country

Table 3: Factors that motivate – location and L1 differences

Fairly interesting differences existed also between employees working “at home” and those working abroad. People working overseas cited *Good pay*, and the *Chance to turn out quality work*, whereas people working in their own countries mentioned *Feeling my job is important* and *Large amount of freedom on the job* as being more significant motivating factors for them (See table 3, below). While this may apparently contradict the possible correlation made regarding country of origin and job security/salary in the previous paragraph, in fact I believe it reflects the fact that ¾ of the sample are in fact L1 English speakers, and that it is this large number that provides the reason for the difference between these two subgroups (native/non-native speakers of English vs. working home/abroad). In short, native English speakers working in their home country are not extremely interested in good pay (as evidenced by the fact that they have chosen a relatively low paying profession within their home countries). In contrast, travelling teachers, absent from the survey instrument some of their primary motivators (the students themselves and the opportunity to travel) are often relatively well paid within their host society, and this may help to keep them motivated to a greater extent.

Table 4, below, summarises all the findings and contrasts with the results found by Montana and Charnov:

| Factors that motivate me: | A | B | C | D | All | M | F | T | L | F | F | M | M | N | N | H | A |
|--|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | | T | T | M | T | M | S | S | o | w |
| 1. Steady employment | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Respect for me as a person | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Good pay | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 Chance to turn out quality work | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 Getting along well with others on the job | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 Chance for promotion | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10 Opportunity to do interesting work | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 14 Feeling my job is important | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 21 Opportunity for self-development and improvement | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 25 Large amount of freedom on the job - chance to work not under close supervision | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table: "Factors that motivate me"

Columns:
A: 6000 Managers
B: 500 Senior level executives
C: 50 Recent college graduates
D: 150 Current college students
(Columnns A-D from data provided by Montana and Charnov, 2000)

All: Survey of 105 language teaching professionals

M = Male; F = Female; T = Teachers; LTM = Managers; FT = Female Teachers; FM= Female Managers;
MT = Male Teachers; MM = Male Managers; NS = Native Speakers; NNS = Non-native speakers
Ho = Working in home country; Aw = Working in foreign country

Table 4: Factors that Motivate- all findings and comparison

Overall, it seems that there are a number of significant and interesting differences between the respondents from LTOs and those from the more corporate world. These differences can be looked at from both "above" and "below". Namely, to what extent are LTOs similar and dissimilar to other organisations, and to what extent are (language) teachers like/unlike other employees?

The structure of the typical LTO, particularly on the academic side of operations, is unlike many other organisations. It is frequently a fairly flat hierarchical structure. There is not usually a great deal of opportunity for promotion. Teachers work fairly autonomously and directly with clients. Many of these organisational elements of the LTO are not mirrored in the corporate world.

Furthermore, the teachers themselves are often motivated and driven by different factors than those which might motivate others. The constant and highly prized interaction with the students themselves is one such factor. Everyone working in an LTO will have anecdotal evidence of this proclivity from teachers coming to work while unwell in order "not to let the students down" to teachers working well above and beyond the call of duty to ensure their students' success. There is a strong sense of service, as with many such professions, and this also will differentiate teachers from the employees in the corporate world surveyed by Montana and Charnov. In the specific context of ELT, there is also, for many, the desire to travel and live and work in different cultures that is often a strong motivating force.

In conclusion, the motivations of teachers and other employers within our profession are something worthy of study and analysis. As managers of LTOs it is important to be aware of what it is that motivates and demotivates our staff, and to get a sense of what alterations could be made to roles and responsibilities to heighten that motivation and keep staff interested and involved in their work. Although we may tend to assume that teachers are motivated by the work of teaching itself, and often this is the case, it is essential that we keep our ears and eyes open and get constant feedback from our staff on their work and how it is fulfilling them.

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