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EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND THE ROLE OF MANAGERS: A CASE STUDY OF A CROATIAN FINANCIAL CONSULTING COMPANY

Josipa Pleša[1]
Renata Čupić[2]

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in technology and the challenges of economic science bring significant changes to the business environment. In this context, human resources play a crucial role in ensuring the competitiveness of a company. People management and resource development have become central topics, with a particular emphasis on various motivational theories that explain and encourage employee motivation from different professional perspectives. Motivation is a key element in promoting creativity, innovation, professional development, and employee retention within an organization. Therefore, employee motivation has become one of the most important tasks for managers, as it directly influences the success and competitive advantage of the company. Motivation is a complex process influenced by numerous factors, which is why managers must have a good understanding of their employees and various motivational theories to apply them effectively. A quality motivational system is essential for achieving organizational goals, with a satisfied and motivated employee becoming the driving force of the organization. Successful application of motivational theories ensures employee satisfaction and successful task performance, leading to the overall success of the organization.

KEYWORDS

motivation, motivational theories, employees, organization, success, satisfaction, managers

INTRODUCTION

The business environment is undergoing numerous changes due to technological advancements and the significant challenges faced by economic science. The adaptability, progress, and growth of a company, as well as its creativity in tackling these challenges, heavily depend on the qualifications, capabilities, and commitments of its employees, highlighting the need for their active involvement in the business. Human resources, specifically employees, represent the most crucial resource for any company and must be invested in to achieve increased business performance (Jambrek, Penić, 2008).

Motivating employees is one of the key tasks of management, as motivated and satisfied employees are essential for achieving desired results and organizational goals. Despite numerous studies on this topic,

[1] Sintel, Slavonski Brod, Croatia, PhD candidate, ured@sintel.hr, ORCID: 0009-0000-2831-6822
[2] Telemach Hrvatska, Corporate Communication Sector, Zagreb, Croatia, PhD candidate, renata.cupic@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0006-2785-4518.

it remains challenging to pinpoint exactly what motivates employees, primarily because motivation is defined as an internal feeling that varies from one individual to another (Brnad, Stilin, Tomljenović, 2016).

Motivation can be described as a process involving a series of interconnected reactions such as needs, desires, tensions, actions, and satisfactions. Numerous theories address the issue of motivation, aiming to answer questions such as: what is motivation, how to motivate people to better achieve goals, and how to enhance work performance (Bahtijarević Šiber, 1999). Despite extensive research and theories on motivation, it is difficult to definitively determine what motivates employees. This difficulty arises because motivation is defined as an internal feeling, making it immeasurable and unique to each individual. Therefore, different factors motivate different employees, often requiring various combinations of multiple elements to achieve satisfactory results (Brnad, Stilin, Tomljenović, 2016).

Satisfaction and motivation are closely related concepts. While motivation primarily refers to the desire and effort to fulfil wishes or goals, satisfaction pertains to the fulfilment felt when these desires are met. Motivation focuses on the desire for results, while satisfaction represents the consequence of achieving those results (Brnad, Stilin, Tomljenović, 2016). Satisfaction can also be explained as an individual's mental attitude toward their work environment and other factors such as family, health, and love, as these aspects also influence an individual's work and performance (Marušić, 2006).

If employees are satisfied, their satisfaction will impact the results achieved by the organization. According to a study conducted by Rutherford in 2009, key elements for achieving satisfaction include: satisfaction with the supervisor, job description, company policy, advancement opportunities, material conditions, interpersonal relationships, and customer satisfaction (Brnad, Stilin, Tomljenović, 2016). Motivation may mean different things to different individuals, as everyone reacts differently to the same situation. Management's task is to discover what motivates employees to guide them appropriately, ensuring they perform their tasks as effectively as possible. Management plays a crucial role in motivating employees; however, it is also important for employees to have a certain level of self-motivation.

EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND THEORIES OF MOTIVATION

Employee motivation represents one of the most important factors in human resource management. In the narrowest sense, motivation can be explained as encouraging an individual to achieve the goals of the company and personal goals, which are intertwined, and the achievement or realization of one can influence the achievement of the other – Figure 1.

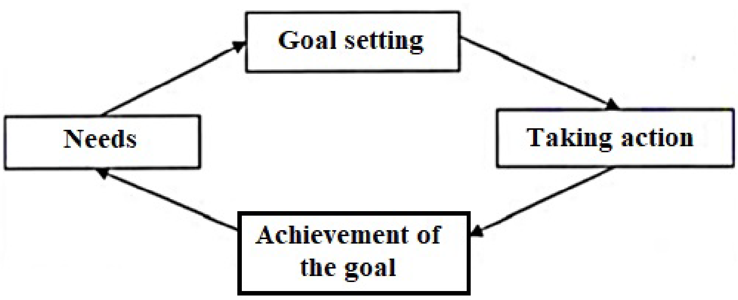

Figure 1. The process of motivation
Source: Bahtijarević–Šiber, 1999.

"The motives and motivation of employees are a psychological category that, from the very beginning of the affirmation of management as a theory and practice, profession and science, has become indispensable and as such an essential tool for human resource management" (Gutić, Martinčić Gutić, 2018) .

The motives that drive an individual can be intrinsic, coming from within the person, or extrinsic, coming from the environment. Intrinsic motives relate to desires such as the desire for achievement or the desire for a sense of satisfaction and are relatively stable, thus resulting in fewer negative outcomes. Extrinsic motives relate to success, rewards, money, and similar factors, and are short-term, which can lead to undesirable side effects. It can be concluded that people are motivated if certain actions lead to the achievement of a goal or a reward that will satisfy their needs. For this reason, it is important for organizations to provide a work environment where high levels of employee motivation can be achieved through various initiatives, rewards, and opportunities for learning and skill development. The manager plays a key role in this within the organization.

"Employee motivation and satisfaction have become the foundation of interest in contemporary human resources management because only by building a quality motivational system can the desired competitive advantage and overall value be achieved. Motivated people will invest more effort in their work than those who are not motivated. Improvements in productivity, efficiency, creativity, and the quality of work life will be achieved through motivation" (Bahtijarević-Šiber, 1999). To achieve the best possible employee efficiency, managers need to combine material and moral forms of stimulation to achieve full employee engagement. This will reflect on the efficiency, economy, and rationality of employees.

"The fundamental task of human resource management, after finding the right people, is to make them capable of working together successfully, dealing effectively with the problems they face, and ensuring their strengths are effective while their weaknesses are insignificant. A capable person should not be made to feel weak or insecure, as weakness and insecurity are a constant source of dissatisfaction and a direct threat to both the employees and the organization itself" (Jambrek, Penić, 2008). Managers must use motivators that will lead people to work successfully and create an environment that stimulates certain drives in people that they can utilize in their work. For example, an employee who has built a reputation for high quality and a good name in their work will be motivated by incentives aimed at further contributing to that reputation.

Considering the above, it is important to understand compensation. "Compensations are the total rewards that workers receive for their work in the company, linked to work results, and some are related to the mere belonging to the company. They consist of salary, salary compensation, and profit sharing" (Buble 2006). Material compensations can be direct and indirect. Direct compensations represent the system of salaries and other material financial gains related to work and constitute direct rewards for work. "Indirect material compensations are benefits that contribute to the material status but not in the form of money. These are benefits arising from work, not distributed based on performance, but received by an individual through employment with a particular company" (Bahtijarević-Šiber, 1999). Non-material compensations increase employee motivation by satisfying their needs that are not related to money. The more needs a person can satisfy, the higher their motivation for work will be. Therefore, it is crucial for management to accept workforce diversity and develop the ability to recognize the capabilities of their employees.

Numerous theories aim to define and analyze motivation and explain how it functions in individuals. These theories can be categorized into three types: content theories, process theories, and contemporary theories. Content theories, also known as need theories, propose that individuals have certain needs that drive their behavior. Among the most significant content theories are:

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory,

- Alderfer's Three-Stage Hierarchy Theory,
- the Achievement Motivation Theory,
- the Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, and
- the Role Motivation Theory.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, introduced by Abraham Maslow in the 1950s, suggests that individuals have five general needs arranged in a hierarchical pyramid: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Each need is dependent on the satisfaction of the previous one. Alderfer's Three-Stage Hierarchy Theory modifies Maslow's theory, dividing needs into existence, relatedness, and growth and development needs. The Achievement Motivation Theory, primarily focused on work motivation, identifies the need for achievement as a driving force, emphasizing the desire for success and the avoidance of failure. The Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, developed by Frederick Herzberg, distinguishes between hygiene factors (extrinsic) and motivator factors (intrinsic), suggesting that while hygiene factors prevent dissatisfaction, motivator factors lead to job satisfaction.

The Role Motivation Theory, proposed by John Miner, highlights different motivational structures for different organizational roles, such as managerial, professional, and entrepreneurial, underlining the importance of understanding the motives of key employees. Process theories of motivation focus on factors such as perception, expectations, and values, suggesting that people's needs alone are not sufficient to explain motivation. Significant process theories include:

- Vroom's cognitive model of motivation,
- Porter-Lawler's expectancy model,
- Lawler's expectancy model, and
- Adams' equity theory.

Vroom's cognitive model of motivation emphasizes individuals' choices between alternative behaviors based on their assessment of potential outcomes, introducing concepts such as valence, expectancy, and instrumentality. Porter-Lawler's expectancy model expands on Vroom's model, considering additional factors such as individual abilities, role perceptions, and satisfaction. Lawler's expectancy model further refines the concept of expectancy, considering factors such as objective situations, individual perceptions, and the attractiveness of expected outcomes. Adams' equity theory examines the relationship between individuals and organizations as an exchange relationship, exploring the conditions and consequences of perceived injustice and inequality in the workplace.

Contemporary theories of motivation include:

- McClelland's need theory,
- cognitive evaluation theory,
- goal-setting theory,
- self-efficacy theory,
- support theory,
- equity theory, and
- expectancy theory.

McClelland's need theory expands on the achievement motivation theory, focusing on the needs for achievement, power, and affiliation. Cognitive evaluation theory explains the impact of extrinsic motivation on intrinsic motivation, suggesting that introducing external rewards can decrease intrinsic motivation. Goal-setting theory emphasizes the importance of specific goals and feedback in enhancing task performance and individual commitment. Self-efficacy theory highlights the role of an individual's confidence in their ability to perform a task, identifying mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and arousal as key factors influencing self-efficacy. Support theory focuses on environmental events following an individual's activity, suggesting that behavior is solely influenced by the environment. Equity theory suggests that employees compare their inputs and outcomes with those of others, seeking fairness in the distribution of organizational rewards. Expectancy theory, developed by Victor Vroom, emphasizes that an individual's effort depends on their belief that it will lead to desired outcomes and the attractiveness of those outcomes. These theories provide valuable insights into the complex nature of motivation, offering frameworks for understanding and enhancing individual and organizational performance.

RESEARCH AND THE RESULTS

The company Sintel Ltd. was founded in 2011, headquartered in Slavonski Brod, Republic of Croatia. Its business focuses on auditing, accounting services, and financial consulting, fulfilling legal obligations regarding bookkeeping and improving economic processes, and providing information to clients' managements to enable timely decision-making. The company has offices in three locations (Slavonski Brod, Osijek, and Vinkovci) and is a leader in this industry in the Slavonia region. The company's clients are legal entities engaged in various activities including services, production, and retail. The organizational structure of the company consists of departments: management, audit and forensic accounting department, accounting department, legal department, and marketing and sales department. The company employs 22 employees, with a tendency for growth in the last two years.

For the purpose of a professional-scientific study, an empirical research was conducted to collect necessary data on the attitudes of employees in the company regarding the impact of motivation on employee satisfaction. The research is conducted in two phases: in the first phase by a quantitative method, i.e., a questionnaire, and then qualitatively by interviews in the second phase.

The questionnaire is anonymous, covering all 22 employees, and was conducted from February 1st to 9th, 2023. The questionnaire about motivation factors and their importance to employees consists of 16 questions, to which employees could respond with ratings from 1 to 5, with the following response options: 1 – does not motivate me, 2 – slightly motivates me, 3 – moderately motivates me, 4 – fairly motivates me, and 5 – strongly motivates me.

The interview involves one managerial person in the company and consists of nine questions with necessary sub-questions, conducted in June 2024, obtained in written form as Appendix 2. Appendix 1 displays the questionnaire. Employees were asked the following statements within the questionnaire: comfortable and modern office equipment, salary level, job security, good relationships with superiors, good relationships with colleagues, stimulation with monthly salary, encouragement and praise from superiors, interesting and creative work, demanding job responsibility, autonomy at work, co-decision-making at the company level, opportunity for advancement, achievement of company goals, opportunity for education or advancement, and achievement of personal goals.

After analyzing the questions posed, the following responses were obtained, from which conclusions regarding employee motivation in the surveyed company can be drawn. On the question regarding comfortable and modern office equipment, 5% of respondents answered that it does not motivate them, 9% that it slightly motivates them, 23% that it moderately motivates them. Equal percentages were for the statements it fairly motivates them and strongly motivates them, 32%.

Table 1. Responses to Questions from the Questionnaire

	Comfortable and modern office equipment	Salary level	Job security
1	5%	5%	0%
2	9%	0%	0%
3	32%	27%	14%
4	32%	59%	32%
5	32%	9%	55%

Source: Authors

From table 1, it is evident that employees are fairly motivated by salary at 59%. However, it is also noticeable that more than salary, job security motivates them, as the highest number of responses indicated that it fairly or strongly motivates them, a total of 85%.

Table 2. Answers II to the questionnaire questions

	Incentive with monthly salary	Good relationships with superiors	Good relationships with colleagues
1	5%	0%	0%
2	1%	5%	5%
3	32%	18%	0%
4	36%	14%	32%
5	27%	64%	64%

Source: Authors

From table 2, it is evident that incentive with monthly salary moderately motivates employees, unlike good relationships with superiors, where 78% of employees responded that it fairly or strongly motivates them, or in good relationships with colleagues, which fairly or strongly motivates 86% of them. Good relationships with colleagues are more motivating for them than good relationships with superiors.

Table 3. Answers III to the questionnaire questions

	Challenging job	Encouragement and praise from superiors	Interesting and creative work
1	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	0%	0%
3	18%	9%	18%
4	32%	36%	32%
5	50%	55%	50%

Source: Authors

From table 3, it is evident that job demand is a quite important aspect in the workplace for employees, which can also be associated with the responses for interesting and creative work, where the majority of respondents answered that it fairly or strongly motivates them. Encouragement and praise from superiors are of significant importance, with 91% of them indicating that it fairly or strongly motivates them.

Table 4. Answers IV to the questionnaire questions

	Job responsibility	Autonomy at work	Participation in company-level decision-making
1	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	0%	0%
3	27%	18%	41%
4	36%	41%	32%
5	36%	41%	27%

Source: Authors

From table 4, it is evident that employees are slightly less motivated by co-decision-making at the company level, where 41% of them responded with a rating of 3, indicating motivation. Autonomy in the workplace motivates them fairly or strongly, with 41% of responses each. Job responsibility motivates them slightly less than the previous statements, with 27% responding that it motivates them, while all others responded that it fairly or strongly motivates them. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents provided a rating of 1 or 2 for this group of questions, indicating that it does not motivate them or only slightly motivates them.

Table 5. Answers V to the questionnaire questions

	Opportunity for advancement	Achievement of company goals	Opportunity for education/training	Achievement of personal goals
1	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	5%	0%	0%	0%
3	5%	14%	9%	18%
4	36%	45%	45%	59%
5	55%	41%	45%	23%

Source: Authors

Table 5 provides results related to the possibility of advancement, achieving company goals, the opportunity for education or training in the workplace, and achieving personal goals. From the given responses, it can be seen that employees find the possibility of advancement in the workplace equally motivating, at 91%, as well as achieving personal goals, at 92%, which fairly or strongly motivates them. Additionally, the opportunity for education motivates them fairly or strongly, with 90% of them responding positively. It is evident that none of these offered workplace motivators were responded to by employees as not motivating them at all, nor did they respond that they were only slightly motivating. Only 5% of them mentioned that the possibility of advancement only slightly motivates them. Considering the provided responses, it can be concluded that employees are motivated in their workplaces, and that job security, praise from superiors, good relationships with colleagues, and the opportunity for advancement are the most motivating factors for them.

THE ROLE OF MANAGERS IN EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

Employee motivation represents a key factor in the success of any organization. Throughout history, managers have been recognized as key players in maintaining a high level of motivation among team members. Employee motivation directly impacts their productivity, engagement, and job satisfaction, all of which contribute to the organization's success. Research shows that motivated employees tend to achieve more, be more innovative, and demonstrate greater loyalty to the organization (Deci, Ryan, 2000; Amabile, 1996). Employee motivation is not just mere encouragement to perform tasks but a complex process involving psychological, social, and organizational factors. Accordingly, managers play a crucial role in understanding the needs and desires of their subordinates and in creating an environment that fosters their motivation, engagement, and commitment to the job.

Throughout history, managers have played a crucial role in employee motivation. Starting from the industrial revolution, when Frederick Taylor and Henri Fayol laid the foundation for modern management, the emphasis was on efficiency and productivity through employee motivation. Taylor introduced the principles of scientific management, where the focus was on optimizing work through precisely defined tasks and incentives for workers. On the other hand, Fayol emphasized the importance of managerial functions such as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, which are key components in employee motivation. Since the late 1970s, the concept of transformational leadership, developed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985), emphasizes the role of managers as inspirational leaders who motivate employees through vision, charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualized attention. This approach has been proven effective in various contexts, including corporate, educational, and non-profit organizations.

In this paper, we explore how managers, especially at Sintel company, use various strategies and methods to maintain a high level of motivation among their team members. A conducted interview in June 2024 with a managerial figure at Sintel provides a detailed insight into the approaches used by the company to motivate its employees, ensure their productivity, and maintain a high level of engagement. The aim of this research is to analyze specific methods that Sintel uses for employee motivation and to identify key factors contributing to their effectiveness. The research method includes a semi-structured interview with the director of Sintel, designed to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies and practices the company employs to motivate its employees. According to motivation theories, managers play a crucial role in motivating employees by recognizing their needs and desires and creating an environment that fosters their engagement and dedication to the job. At Sintel, managers regularly analyze what motivates their employees to ignite a desire for work and achieving high results.

The managerial figure at Sintel emphasizes the importance of continuous participation in workshops and seminars to further strengthen their skills and competencies in the field of people management. These educations include:

- sales manager coaching,
- transactional analysis psychotherapy,
- organizational transactional analysis, and
- HR management.

Strategies and methods for motivating teams – To ensure better efficiency and motivation of teams, Sintel involves team members in the process of setting short-term and long-term goals. This way, the belonging of each individual to the team is ensured and defined. Simple and concrete motivational models that Sintel uses have proven to be very effective.

Communication of goals and vision – Regular weekly meetings and internal monthly seminars serve as platforms for exchanging information and adopting a culture of feedback. This practice is crucial for the success of employees, their motivation, productivity, and the growth and development of Sintel. Sintel ensures that employees understand the company's goals and vision through regular communication channels.

Monitoring and improving motivation – Sintel uses anonymous annual surveys to track employee satisfaction. Employees respond to questions on a Likert scale (from 1 to 5) and have the opportunity to express their opinion on what would contribute to their motivation and better working atmosphere.

Concrete motivation initiatives – One of the successful employee motivation programs is the introduction of a free Friday each month for each employee, which has led to increased productivity and efficiency. This program rewards successfully completed weekly goals and monthly tasks, leading to improvements in work processes and employee motivation.

Dealing with demotivation and decreased productivity – To cope with demotivation or decreased productivity, managers at Sintel use an individual approach to each employee, using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. By recognizing the needs of employees, managers can proactively address the possibility of demotivation and further highlight the security and respect employees enjoy within the company. For example, Sintel has introduced one free Friday per month for each employee as a reward for successfully completed weekly goals and monthly tasks, leading to increased motivation and productivity. This allows for the recognition and proactive handling of potential individual demotivation. Engagement and productivity monitoring is conducted through regular evaluations and individual discussions with employees.

Employee professional development – Encouraging employee professional development is also a key motivation factor. Sintel pays for employees' education, seminars, tuition, and training, thereby increasing not only employee competencies but also their motivation for work.

Rewarding success – Sintel uses a strategy of both material and non-material rewards. In addition to the thirteenth salary and occasional joint lunches, the company rewards employees through gifts for birthdays, International Women's Day, Christmas presents, and team-building activities. Employee performance is measured through concrete numbers, and the results are used for rewarding and setting an example within the team.

The interview with the director of Sintel provided a detailed insight into the employee motivation strategies and practices used by this company. It is concluded that effective methods include: setting clear goals, providing support, promoting teamwork, maintaining fairness and transparency, and providing regular feedback. One of the key ways in which managers influence employee motivation is by setting clear goals and expectations. When organizational goals are transparent, and when employees clearly understand how their work contributes to those goals, they feel motivated to invest additional effort and energy into achieving those goals. At Sintel, managers ensure that employees understand the company's goals and vision through regular weekly meetings and internal monthly seminars. This practice allows for the exchange of information and the adoption of a feedback culture crucial for motivation and productivity.

Managers also play a role in providing support to employees by ensuring they have the necessary resources, tools, and training to perform their jobs successfully. When employees feel they have the support of their superiors, they feel valued and motivated to achieve their goals. For example, Sintel conducts annual anonymous surveys among employees to collect feedback and understand what would further contribute to their motivation and a better working atmosphere. Based on this feedback, managers can adjust their approaches and ensure necessary resources. In creating a motivating work environment, managers also have the task of promoting positive interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and open communication. When employees feel that their ideas and opinions are valued and that they have the opportunity to grow and develop within the organization, their motivation is higher, and their job engagement is stronger. Sintel nurtures a culture of feedback and teamwork through regular meetings and seminars, which further encourages employee motivation and productivity.

Furthermore, managers play a crucial role in maintaining fairness and transparency within the organization. When employees perceive that they are rewarded and recognized based on their contributions, they feel motivated to continue providing a high level of performance. Sintel uses a strategy of both material and non-material rewards, including the thirteenth salary, occasional joint lunches, birthday and International Women's Day gifts, and annual team-building activities. Moreover, managers are tasked with providing regular feedback to employees and recognizing them for a job well done. Regular feedback and recognition of achievements are crucial for employee motivation, encouraging them to remain engaged and motivated to achieve excellence. Sintel uses feedback through weekly meetings and monthly seminars to ensure that employees are informed about their performance and opportunities for improvement.

Research has shown that highly motivated employees have higher productivity. For example, a study conducted by Deci and Ryan (1985) on the self-determination theory showed that internal motivation, which is fostered through a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, significantly increases employee engagement and performance. Motivated employees are more prone to creative thinking and innovation. Amabile (1996) emphasized in her theory of creativity components that internal motivation plays a crucial role in the creative process. Companies with highly motivated teams often achieve a higher number of innovations and adaptations to the market. Employee motivation is also associated with a higher level of job satisfaction, which reduces the employee turnover rate and increases loyalty to the organization. A Gallup study (2017) showed that companies with highly engaged employees have a 21% higher profitability and 17% higher productivity.

CONCLUSION

The most important resource of any company is its employees. Investing in human potential is crucial today, and managers are faced with the challenge because each person is an individual, and different things motivate each person. Motivation for each employee represents something different and greatly influences their job satisfaction. Motivation is achieved through a chain of reactions such as needs, desires, tension, action, and satisfaction. Satisfaction and motivation are closely related concepts. While motivation relates to the desire and effort to satisfy wishes or goals, satisfaction relates to the fulfilment we feel from meeting those desires. Motivation is aimed at achieving results, while satisfaction represents the consequence of achieved results.

The motives that drive an individual can be intrinsic, coming from within, or extrinsic, coming from the environment. Intrinsic motives, such as the desire for success or the feeling of satisfaction, are relatively stable and result in fewer negative outcomes. Extrinsic motives, such as success, rewards, and money, are short-term and can have unwanted side effects. We conclude that people are motivated if certain actions lead to the achievement of a goal or reward that satisfies their needs. Motivating employees is one of the key tasks of management because motivated and satisfied employees are the foundation for achieving desired results and organizational goals. The role of managers in employee motivation is complex and multifaceted. By setting clear goals, providing support, promoting positive interpersonal relationships, maintaining fairness and transparency, and providing regular feedback and recognition, managers can significantly influence employee motivation and productivity. Examples from Sintel show how effective strategies can be applied in practice, ensuring a high level of engagement and success within the organization.

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