

Article

Motivation of Employees in an Agri-food Company

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Abstract: Employee motivation is crucial for a company's business success, as only motivated individuals enable its growth and development. The aim of the research was to determine the level of employee motivation in an agrifood company and propose improvements. A combined method was used: an electronic semi-structured survey and an interview with the HR manager. The results showed that motivation was at a high level, with an average rating of 3.99 on a scale of 1 to 5. The most important motivational factors were in the categories of work and work organization, relationships with colleagues, and compensation, while career development opportunities received slightly lower ratings. The research revealed a gap between employees' expectations of their jobs and their assessment of the current situation in the company, indicating room for improvement. Suggestions for enhancing the motivation system include a clearer reward system, support for employee development, and periodic surveys on satisfaction and motivation. Special attention should be paid to motivational factors that received lower ratings.

Keywords: *Motivation; employees; agrifood company; management.*

1. Introduction

Employee motivation is a key factor in the success of any company. Company management, regardless of its industry, size, or level of development, must address the motivation of individuals who contribute to achieving set goals. In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, a company's ability to inspire, motivate, and retain employees has become a strategic priority. It is essential to focus on motivation because a company can grow only if it has motivated people [1].

The foundation of an effective motivation system lies in understanding employee needs, as these can influence behavior. Salary, work environment, and working hours are external motivation factors, and their improvement reduces employee dissatisfaction. Opportunities for self-fulfillment, engaging work, and achievements affect intrinsic employee motivation and lead to increased overall motivation [2].

The agri-food industry is crucial for the economy of every country. It encompasses all stages of food production—from cultivation and harvesting, through processing and distribution, to final consumption. Given the specific challenges this industry faces, such as the seasonal nature of work, yield variability, and the need for high standards of food quality and safety, employee motivation in this sector holds particular importance [3].

Understanding and applying appropriate motivational techniques can not only improve work efficiency and productivity but also contribute to a better work environment and greater employee satisfaction [3, 4]. Ultimately, this leads to sustainable development and company success, which is of critical importance for the agrifood sector, playing a key role in ensuring food security and the economic well-being of society.

Employee motivation has long been a topic of interest for both managers and researchers, as it is considered a cornerstone of a company's success [5].

Dinibutun [6] defines motivation as a state of mind that drives individuals toward specific behaviors, while Deci and Ryan [5] emphasize that it is an individual's internal will to achieve specific goals. Professional motivation refers to an employee's willingness to apply their knowledge and skills to achieve organizational goals [7]. Ganta [8] highlights that motivated employees exhibit creativity and deliver high-quality work, whereas unmotivated employees tend to avoid responsibilities and leave the organization.

Motivation theories can be divided into content theories and process theories. Content theories focus on human motivational needs and their fulfillment, linking these needs to the environment. Among the most well-known content theories are Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's two-factor theory, and McClelland's achievement theory [7].

Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains that human needs progress hierarchically, from basic physiological needs to self-actualization [9]. Maslow believed that higher-level needs could not emerge until lower-level needs were satisfied. His theory is frequently used to understand employee motivation, particularly in the context of organizational behavior. However, critics have pointed out the rigidity of the model and its limited applicability across cultural contexts [10].

Herzberg's two-factor theory distinguishes between hygiene factors and motivational factors [11]. Hygiene factors, such as working conditions and relationships with colleagues, prevent dissatisfaction, while motivational factors, such as responsibility and recognition, enhance job satisfaction. Alshmemri et al. [12] emphasize the importance of continuously improving motivational factors to boost motivation. By understanding these factors, managers can design jobs that foster self-development, assign responsible tasks, and provide recognition [13].

McClelland's achievement theory identifies three primary human needs that shape employee behavior: the need for achievement, affiliation, and power [10].

Vroom's expectancy theory focuses on how employees assess the likelihood that their efforts will lead to desired outcomes [14]. According to this theory, motivation depends on three key factors: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence [15].

Motivation can be categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interests and satisfaction, significantly impacts productivity and reduces stress [16]. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, involves external rewards such as salaries, bonuses, and recognition. Research shows that intrinsic motivation is crucial for employees, as it makes work meaningful and helps maintain low-stress levels [8].

Despite their broad applicability, motivation theories are not without limitations. For instance, Herzberg's theory is criticized for relying too heavily on subjective employee evaluations, while Maslow's hierarchy does not account for cultural and individual differences [17]. Additionally, these theories often overlook the impact of modern technologies and flexible work arrangements on motivation.

Employee motivation in the agrifood industry is unique due to the nature of the work and the seasonal character of agricultural production. Studies indicate that key motivators in this sector include job stability, adequate working conditions, and opportunities for career development [18, 19]. Anuyah et al. [20] highlight the importance of recognition and self-actualization in this industry, while Touré-Tillery and Fishbach [21] stress the significance of the work environment and interpersonal relationships.

A review of the literature suggests that motivation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon requiring the integration of various theoretical approaches. Understanding the factors influencing employee motivation in the agrifood industry is essential for improving motivation systems, which can lead to increased productivity, satisfaction, and employee loyalty.

This paper focuses on researching employee motivation within the specific context of the agrifood industry, aiming to identify key motivational factors that influence employee efficiency, productivity, and satisfaction.

The primary aim of the research was to analyze the factors influencing employee motivation in a company operating in the agri-food sector. The secondary goal was to provide recommendations to management for improving the motivation system. To achieve this aim, the authors defined

several key research tasks, including conducting a survey among employees and analyzing the existing motivation system.

No prior research on employee motivation had been conducted in the company, and a comprehensive overview of their needs and expectations was unavailable. Although employee turnover is low, the HR manager emphasized that by the time employees start leaving the company, it is already too late to investigate their motivation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample

The research sample consisted of 114 employees from one organizational unit of the company, and 50 respondents completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 43.86%. This response rate can be considered quite good, given the short survey period and the voluntary nature of participation.

The majority of respondents were male (88%), while females accounted for 12%. Most respondents were aged 26–35 (36%), while the least represented age groups were under 25 and 56–65, with 12% each. There were four response options regarding job positions: office worker, plant worker, driver, and other. The majority of respondents were plant workers (40%). Almost half of the respondents (44%) had over 10 years of experience in the company, confirming the low turnover rate. The largest group of respondents held a secondary education level, comprising 34 individuals or 68%.

2.2. Methodology

To accomplish the research objectives, an electronic survey was conducted among employees, accompanied by an interview with the manager and an analysis of company documentation. The semi-structured questionnaire was designed based on a literature review, specifically Vroom's Expectancy Theory, and a 5-point Likert scale. The analysis of results was grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: socio-demographic data, employee expectations regarding work in general, and an assessment of current motivational factors at the company. The online survey link was sent to the company manager, who was asked to distribute it to employees.

The survey was conducted between May 25, 2024, and June 5, 2024. Data were analyzed using a mixed methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, with results visualized in MS Excel.

3. Results

This section provides an overview of the results of motivation research conducted in an agri-food company.

3.1. General company information

The company selected for the research was founded in 1998 and specializes in the production of fruit juices, alcoholic beverages, and jams. Its primary business goals are to increase productivity and profitability. The company employs approximately 1,000 workers and operates in both domestic and international markets.

The management's priorities include strengthening the distribution network, developing new products, and ensuring consistent quality control. The company holds ISO 9001, ISO 22000, and FSSC 22000 certifications. Employee turnover is low, with an annual variation of 30 to 50 individuals.

3.2. Employee expectations and motivation

In order to map the expectations and motivation of employees, 17 motivators were presented in 4 categories. The results obtained are analyzed according to the categories into which the motivational factors are divided:

1. *Work and Work Organization* – modern tools for work, stable employment, engaging jobs, and flexible working hours.
2. *Relationships with Colleagues and Management* – a friendly, supportive team, direct manager support, joint events, and recognition for work performed.
3. *Career and Development Opportunities* – decision-making power and responsibility, professional development opportunities, training options, career advancement, and job title.
4. *Compensation for Work*– performance-based pay, additional benefits and bonuses, base salary, gifts, and incentives.

In the second part of the questionnaire, employees were asked about the factors that generally motivate them and their expectations from work. Respondents rated the motivators on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 – does not motivate, 2 – rather does not motivate, 3 – neutral, 4 – fairly motivates, and 5 – highly motivates. Table 1 presents the arithmetic means (in descending order), standard deviations, and the minimum and maximum values of motivational factors. The arithmetic mean of all motivational factors in the study of employee expectations was 4.12 (Table 1).

Table 1. Employee ratings of factors that influence work motivation in general.

Motivator	M*	SD	Min	Max
Modern work tools	4.54	0.71	2	5
Stable job	4.50	0.59	3	5
Interesting job	4.50	0.65	2	5
Friendly and supportive team	4.45	0.77	3	5
Flexible working hours	4.29	1.02	1	5
Direct manager support	4.26	0.93	1	5
Performance-based salary	4.21	0.96	2	5
Team-building events	4.21	0.96	1	5
Decision-making power and responsibility	4.09	0.98	1	5
Additional benefits and bonuses	4.06	1.17	1	5
Recognition for completed work	4.06	0.93	1	5
Opportunities for professional development	3.98	1.01	1	5
Training opportunities	3.98	1.06	1	5
Base salary	3.90	0.94	2	5
Career advancement opportunities	3.83	1.05	1	5
Gifts and incentives	3.78	1.13	1	5
Job title	3.33	1.28	1	5
AVERAGE RATING	4.12			

*M - arithmetic mean, SD - standard deviation, Min - minimum value, Max - maximum value

In the third part of the survey, employees were asked how they assessed the previously set motivational factors while working in their company. The arithmetic mean of all motivational factors in the company, which is the subject of the research, is 3.99, which can be assessed as very good (Table 2).

Table 2. Employee assessment of motivational factors in the analyzed company.

Motivator	M	SD	Min	Max
Stable job	4.53	0.50	3	5
Modern work tools	4.45	0.77	2	5
Flexible working hours	4.38	0.95	1	5
Friendly and supportive team	4.38	0.76	1	5
Interesting job	4.30	0.75	2	5
Performance-based salary	4.02	0.98	1	5
Direct manager support	4.02	1.09	1	5
Team-building events	4.00	1.06	2	5
Decision-making power and responsibility	3.98	0.98	1	5
Opportunities for professional development	3.89	0.99	1	5
Base salary	3.85	0.98	2	5
Recognition for completed work	3.85	1.12	1	5
Training opportunities	3.78	1.00	1	5
Additional benefits and bonuses	3.75	1.13	1	5
Gifts and incentives	3.70	1.24	1	5
Career advancement opportunities	3.57	1.15	1	5
Job title	3.40	1.16	1	5
AVERAGE RATING	3.99			

3.2.1. Work and work organization

The arithmetic mean of motivational factors in this category is 4.46 regarding expectations and 4.42 within the company itself. The research indicates that employees enjoy their work and are satisfied with the working conditions, as the motivational factors in this category received the highest ratings. Employees rated job stability as the most motivating factor (M = 4.53), which was also highly valued in terms of expectations (M = 4.50). This is supported by the fact that employee turnover in the company is low, with 44% of respondents having worked in the organization for over 10 years. The manager emphasized that modern work tools are available at the workplace, a factor whose importance is reflected in the survey results. In the questionnaire (expectations), modern work tools were the most motivating factor (M = 4.54), and also highly rated within the company (M = 4.45). The expectation of an interesting job was also important (M = 4.50), though rated slightly lower in the analyzed company (M = 4.30). However, the current job provides employees with excitement. Flexible working hours were similarly considered important, both generally (M = 4.29) and within the company (M = 4.38). Surprisingly, even in a company where physical presence is required, there is room for offering employees flexibility. The study shows that flexible working hours are regarded as an even greater motivational factor within the company than indicated by the employees' expectations.

In this category, according to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were present [12, 17], and all factors were highly valued by employees working for the company. Extrinsic rewards include modern work tools, job stability, and flexible working hours, while an interesting job is classified as an intrinsic reward. Motivational factors in the category of work and work organization are well-provided in the analyzed company.

3.2.2. Relations with colleagues and manager

The arithmetic mean of motivational factors in this category is 4.24 regarding expectations and 4.06 within the analyzed company. Direct managerial support is generally considered important by employees (M = 4.26). At the workplace, managerial support was also significant (M = 4.02), though

slightly less so compared to expectations. This motivator shows greater variability than expected, suggesting the manager should consider ways to enhance employees' sense of support.

Employees also evaluated recognition for their work, which scored higher in terms of expectations ($M = 4.06$) than their experience within the company ($M = 3.85$). A friendly and mutually supportive team was one of the highest-rated motivational factors, both from the perspective of employee expectations ($M = 4.45$) and within the company ($M = 4.38$). Most employees believe that a friendly and supportive team exists in the company. Joint events, which employees rated highly in terms of expectations ($M = 4.21$) and also within the company ($M = 4.00$), further help maintain a friendly and supportive team atmosphere.

In this category, most of the listed motivational factors fall under hygiene factors according to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, i.e., external rewards. In Maslow's theory, these factors align with primary needs. The only factor in this category classified as a motivational factor or intrinsic reward under Herzberg's theory is "recognition for work performed." This was the lowest-rated factor in the company for this category.

To the company's benefit, it should focus on improving this motivational factor. According to Herzberg, intrinsic rewards are more significant than hygiene factors, as they generate greater job satisfaction and motivate employees over the long term, whereas hygiene factors have only a short-term effect [12, 17].

3.2.3. Career and development opportunities

The arithmetic mean of motivational factors in this category is 3.80 regarding expectations and 3.72 within the analyzed company. The results indicate that this category is important to respondents both in terms of expectations and actual workplace conditions, but it is not the most significant. The most highly valued factor in this group was the power of decision-making and responsibility, which ranked mid-level in expectations ($M = 4.09$) and similarly in the company ($M = 3.98$).

This factor was followed by opportunities for professional development, which employees rated slightly lower within the company ($M = 3.89$) compared to their expectations ($M = 3.98$). Similarly, training opportunities were rated lower within the company ($M = 3.78$) than in employee expectations ($M = 3.98$). Career advancement opportunities were also rated lower in the company ($M = 3.57$) compared to expectations ($M = 3.83$). Job title was considered the least motivating factor, both in terms of expectations ($M = 3.33$) and within the company ($M = 3.40$).

According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory [12, 17], all motivational factors in this category fall under intrinsic rewards or motivators. The majority of factors in this group were rated below average, both in terms of expectations and actual conditions. The largest gap was observed in the factors "training opportunities" and "career advancement opportunities." Improving these two motivational factors within the company would contribute to employees' personal development and, from the company's perspective, enhance overall employee motivation.

3.2.4. Compensation for work

The arithmetic mean of motivational factors in this category is 3.99 regarding expectations and 3.83 within the analyzed company. Examining expectations for basic salary, it was found that it is not the most important motivational factor ($M = 3.90$). In terms of expectations, performance-based pay was rated higher than basic salary ($M = 4.21$). In the analyzed company, responses were similar—performance-based pay ($M = 4.02$) was considered more important than basic salary ($M = 3.85$). For most employees, the salary is considered good, but two employees stated in an open-ended question that they do not understand the reward system and do not view it as efficient.

Gifts and benefits are important for employees in general ($M = 3.78$) and within the company ($M = 3.70$). Based on the standard deviations ($SD = 1.130$ for expectations and $SD = 1.238$ within the company), it can be concluded that there was not a very high level of consensus on this issue. In the open-ended question, two respondents mentioned that the company could offer sports support, and one employee noted that they are unsure if any discounts are currently offered to employees.

All motivational factors in this category fall under hygiene factors, or external rewards, in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory [12, 17]. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, these motivational factors belong to the second level of the pyramid, which is the need for safety [9]. The basic salary gap between expected and actual salaries within the company was low, indicating that employees are satisfied with their pay. Regarding performance-based compensation, the gap was larger than in the previous factor. Since performance-based pay was the most important factor in terms of employee expectations, management has an opportunity to increase employee satisfaction by improving this motivator.

The greatest difference between expectations and reality was in terms of additional benefits and bonuses. By improving this motivational factor, there is an opportunity to enhance employee satisfaction and motivation. Benefits and bonuses include, for example, sports support, which two employees mentioned in the open-ended question of the survey. The difference in gifts and benefits was very small, and it can be said that employees are currently satisfied with this motivator.

3.3. Comparison of job expectations in general with job expectations in the company by category

The arithmetic averages of the different categories are presented in Chart 1 for a better overview. Chart 1 shows that the highest result is in the category "work and work organization". In this category, the average expectation of employees was 4.46, and in the analyzed company 4.42, i.e. the gap between the two examined aspects was 0.04. This implies that the motivational factors from the category of work and work organization meet the expectations of employees in the company. In second place is the category "relations with colleagues and manager", where the average score of all motivational factors was 4.24 on the side of expectations, and in the company itself 4.06, i.e. the gap between them is 0.18. In this category, the gap is significantly larger than in the previous one, which means that the company can develop in the direction of employees' expectations. The third category of motivators is "compensation for work", where employees' expectations were higher (3.99) than the actual situation in the company (3.83). The difference in this category was 0.16, which is the second-largest difference.

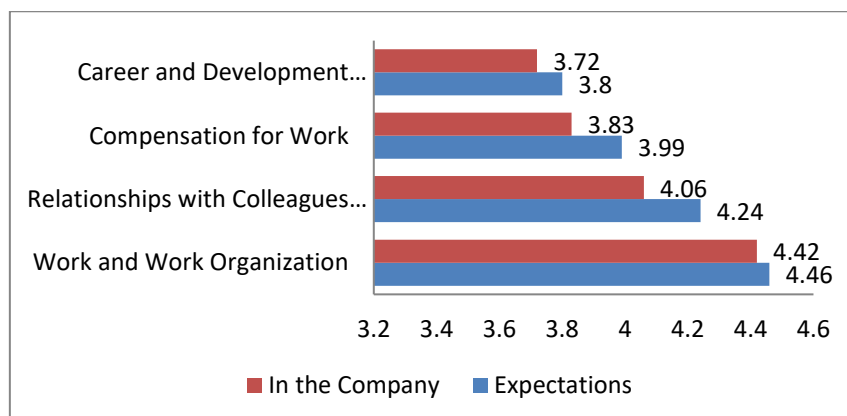


Figure 1. Comparison of expectations and reality based on averages by categories.

The category "career and development opportunities" received the lowest rating, both in terms of expectations and actual situation. On average, expectations in this category were rated at 3.80, while the actual situation was 3.72, resulting in a gap of 0.08 between the two categories.

4. Discussion

The results showed that employees consider all the motivational factors studied to be important, as their arithmetic mean in the company was 3.99. The average ratings of the categories in the employees' expectations survey ranged from 3.80 to 4.46, while in the analyzed company, the

average ratings ranged from 3.72 to 4.42. Employees rated motivational factors in the category of work and organization of work as the most significant, followed by relationships with colleagues and managers, and then compensation for work. Compared to the others, career and development opportunities were rated somewhat lower.

In the category of work and organization of work, according to Herzberg's two-factor theory [12], there were three hygiene factors and one motivational factor, namely internal rewards. Stable employment was the highest-rated motivator in the company, both in terms of expectations, which aligns with the findings of Brnad et al. [19]. According to the theory, it is important to pay attention to both categories of factors in the company, as a low score in hygiene factors causes employee dissatisfaction, while the lack of internal rewards can prevent the improvement of work motivation [12]. The presence of motivational factors in the category of work and organization of work is well established in the company, as these factors were highly rated in the survey results. When comparing expectations and reality, the gap in the relevant categories was very low.

The lowest-rated category was career and development opportunities, which only contained intrinsic rewards or motivational factors based on Herzberg's two-factor theory [12]. Since employees rated the motivational factors of this category the lowest, the observed company should focus most on improving these factors. By improving internal rewards in the organization, long-term work motivation among employees increases, as they feel they can develop within their workplace, which is important according to Tambi and Azem [13]. This aspect is also crucial for the company to ensure a competent workforce.

Considering Vroom's Expectancy Theory, it can be observed that people's expectations of their jobs in general are higher than the actual state. Overall, the gap between the different categories is quite small, but there is room for the company to make improvements. The largest gap between expectations and reality, for example, existed in career opportunities, training opportunities, direct managerial support, and recognition for work done in terms of motivational factors.

5. Conclusions

The work motivation of employees in an agri-food company can be considered very good, i.e. employees are quite satisfied with their work. Employees were most motivated by a stable job, flexible working hours, modern work tools, and a friendly team. This suggests that external rewards, or hygiene factors, are the most motivating for employees, based on Herzberg's two-factor theory. According to the theory, extrinsic rewards have a short-term effect but do not significantly increase motivation. Therefore, it is important to pay more attention to increasing internal rewards.

The largest differences between the expected and actual situation are in the following areas: additional benefits and bonuses, support from a direct manager, interesting work and career opportunities. According to Herzberg's theory, the first mentioned motivation factor belongs to the hygiene factors, which lead to increased job satisfaction. Benefits can include, for example, sports support, which was mentioned by two employees. The remaining three factors belong to the motivation factors, or internal rewards, which are important for the level of employee motivation to be high.

To improve the motivation of employees in an agri-food company, management is recommended to offer various career opportunities, including training courses that contribute to personal development, to familiarize employees with the existing motivation system, and to clarify the current payment procedure for additional engagement. It is also recommended to identify more productive employees, provide sports support, if possible, and repeat motivation surveys every few years to monitor changes. Special attention should be paid to motivation factors that are rated lower.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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