

On a scale of one to 100, how effective are you when you are at your most motivated? And what does that drop to when you are at your least motivated?

It can be incredibly difficult to get stuff done when we are demotivated. Those often-dodged jobs – the ironing, emptying the dishwasher, watching paint dry – suddenly become much more compelling and interesting than whatever we’re supposed to be doing. When we are motivated, it is completely different: we are totally absorbed by the task in hand and time flies by; interruptions are painful as they disturb our train of thought and disrupt our stream of consciousness. This flow state is magical, like liquid motivation, and if we could capture it and bottle it we’d make a fortune.

So, what is it that motivates and demotivates us at work? I asked 40 people this question and their answers are represented in word clouds (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

At first glance, it looks like ‘politics’ (of the office variety) is the biggest demotivating factor. However, if we group together terms such as ‘micromanagement’, ‘lack of respect’, ‘bullying’, ‘unrecognised’, ‘lack of trust’, ‘undermined’, ‘lack of support’, ‘patronised’

FIGURE 1: What motivates you?



FIGURE 2: What demotivates you?



and ‘unfair’, we find that ‘boss’ is the outright winner (or loser). Most of us know this to be true from first-hand experience. When we change jobs, it is generally our boss that we are leaving, not the company.

Promoted for the wrong reason

The best bosses are like workplace parents – they look out for us, encourage us and want us to succeed. We remember them

throughout our careers, almost like we remember our favourite teachers at school. And their role is so important: they impact not only our motivation at work but also our overall happiness. A bad boss can have terrible repercussions for our mental health and general wellbeing.

How many bosses have you had? How many have been outstandingly good, and how many outstandingly bad? When I asked my research group this question, there were notably more bad bosses than good. Why is this, given that, for the most part, we are all good people trying to do our best?

Part of the problem is a lack of job security. It takes a brave, selfless, self-confident manager to hire, train and mentor a junior – and possibly brighter and more able – team member. When times get tough, who will the company cut? The sage, experienced, highly paid manager or their younger, more energetic, cheaper protégé?

Arguably a bigger problem is that people are promoted into management for the wrong reason: not because they will make great managers but as a reward for being great at their current technical job. And then they are not given time to manage, treated more like player-coaches – ‘carry on doing your day job and manage your team on the side’. They aren’t trained how to manage, there is no definition (let alone measurement) of what ‘good’ looks like, and there is no reward for doing it well. They are set up to fail.

Too often, a dispirited manager feels out of their depth and falls back on the one thing they know how to do well – their old job. They then commit the cardinal sin of micromanagement, telling other people to do it their way.

Actuaries might be particularly prone to this problem. We generally join the profession because we are great technicians: good at maths, at cool-headed logic, at

problem-solving. We may also have great people skills – but that is probably not what we were hired for. Is there a better way?

Taking the time

Imagine a business model where there is an alternative path to promotion: an executive subject-matter expert who has status, pay and recognition equivalent to someone who is managing a large team. A model in which management is reserved for those with the innate skills to do it well.

The Oxford Character Project recently published *Good Leadership in UK Business*, a paper based on its detailed research in the finance, legal and IT sectors. It found that more than half of the top 20 ‘features of good leaders’ relate not to competence or interpersonal skills but to character. Kindness, creativity and humility were widely considered to be crucial leadership characteristics, and yet businesses undervalue them.

It takes time to manage well. I spoke to one individual who had a 90% chargeable hours target. When she was promoted to managing a team of 20, her target was dropped to 80%. The business thought that 10% of her time would be sufficient for quality one-on-one coaching, feedback, task assignment and monitoring, annual appraisals and listening to the needs and worries of 20 people who were juggling work with young children, elderly parents, health issues, divorce and the other stuff of life. The business just hadn’t thought it through, or attached enough importance to it.

Personal motivators

Many businesses are struggling to devise appropriate, inclusive hybrid working policies in the wake of Covid. Tailored approaches provide the greatest success – managers working with

FIGURE 3: Cost-value matrix of various company benefits

Low		Employee of the week	Job title	Access to shower
		Friday drinks trolley	Free fruit	Early finish
High	Massive pension contributions		Monthly pizza	Present on joining
			Birthday off	Offsite
	Low	Perceived value to employee		High

KEY: ■ No way ■ Possibly ■ No-brainer

each team member to understand their preferences and optimise for the needs of the business and the individual. This takes time and effort; it cannot be rushed.

Understanding personal motivators can make a big difference to the way individuals perform at work. Think about a cost-value matrix, where each company benefit is considered in two dimensions: how cheap it is to provide versus how much employees value it (Figure 3).

Ask employees what is in their top right quadrant. It might be something as simple as getting a birthday card signed by their team, to flexing work on Friday afternoons, to having a desk by the window or a fancier job title. Or it might be something that has a negative cost to the company, such as wanting to take on an extra work project that they find particularly interesting.

Avoid benefits in the bottom left quadrant. The example of pension contributions is tongue-in-cheek: clearly, as actuaries, we understand their value even when retirement seems a long way off.

However, for less financially savvy employees, it is important to shift the perceived value from bottom left to bottom right.

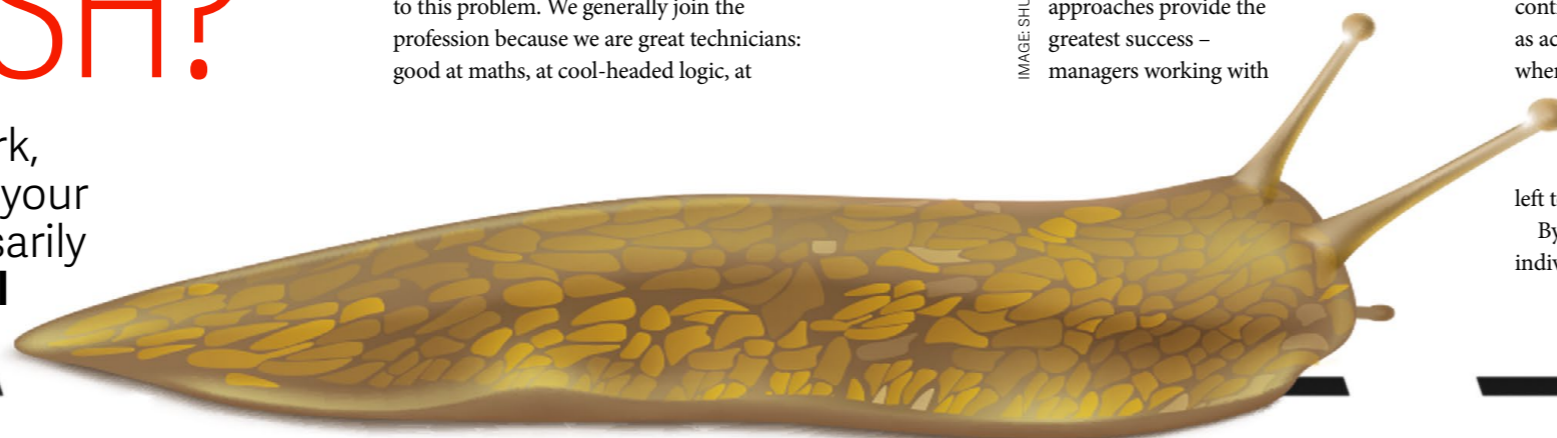
By identifying what motivates people individually and doing their best to deliver it,

managers can show that they care and are invested in employees’ wellbeing. If, instead of focusing on the outputs (building the best widgets, having satisfied clients), we focus on the inputs (cultivating happy employees), we will get the outputs we seek – because happy people are motivated people. And motivated people work more effectively, so they can build the best widgets and have highly satisfied clients.

All it takes is management time. And kindness, creativity and humility.

FEELING SLUGGISH?

If you’re demotivated at work, chances are it’s because of your boss... But that’s not necessarily their fault, says **Jenny Segal**



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