For Love or Money:
Intrinsic Motivation in The Global Project Team

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ABSTRACT

Global project teams (GPTs) are forecast to continue their ascent as the primary construct for implementing business change on a global scale. There is a lack of research exploring the sources of motivation in GPTs. Research in the field of general project management has started to explore the role of intrinsic motivation and self-determination theory (SDT) in driving performance. This research paper extends that exploration into the field of global projects, testing prior research findings in the context of a field study of 79 GPT practitioners in 21 countries. 8 sources of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are validated as salient in the GPT. Intrinsic motivators are found to be more influential than extrinsic motivators. The study concludes with views on promoting intrinsic motivation in the GPT.

Keywords: Global Projects, Intrinsic, Motivation, Project Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives” (Pink, 2011, p.73).

When Daniel Pink turned the spotlight to intrinsic motivation as the purest form of motivation driving human performance (Pink, 2011), he inspired a new wave of academic interest in this domain. His work raised the profile of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the quest to understand and optimise the human motivation to perform work. How does this concept of intrinsic motivation as the holy grail of human performance apply to global project teams (GPTs)?

Today we live in a projectized and globalised world with the value of project-oriented activity estimated to reach $20 trillion US by 2027 (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2021). Increasingly, the performance of GPTs matters. A deeper understanding of the sources of motivation in GPTs and their respective roles in driving GPT performance can present practitioners with new ideas for attaining optimal outcomes. The domain of motivation in project teams has been only lightly researched, with the specific context of global projects even less so. Notably, both academics and project management bodies have progressively embraced the theme of intrinsic motivation in project teams (Schmid & Adams, 2008; PMI, 2021).

This paper examines the role of intrinsic motivation in the global project team. It draws on prior related studies, testing their findings in the global context, by way of a research exercise which collects expert knowledge from 79 experienced GPT practitioners across 21 countries.

Quantitative responses to views on GPT motivation are supplemented by qualitative commentaries from the field. Sources of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the GPT are examined through the lens of SDT. This article concludes with a synthesis of key outcomes and ideas intended to add value to the field of GPT practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Motivation in the GPT

Motivation is an imprecise concept. In an everyday sense, it can be described as our desire to act. “To be motivated means to be moved to do something” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.54). In the traditional business world, work motivation theories have explored how motivation, in concert with ability, can drive performance (Van Iddekinge et al., 2018). According to Dasi et al. (2021) motivation is a more potent factor than ability when the project context is complex, as one might expect in GPTs. In the sphere of project-based work, academics and practitioners have searched for a model of motivation theory and practice which fits the unique features of the transient project team construct. The unique constraints of time, scope and budget characterise project work. There is urgency, there is uncertainty and there is pressure for the rapid integration of project resources into a cohesive, high-performing team (Turner & Muller, 2003). Project practitioners may be working across multiple projects (Seiler et al., 2012) and reporting to multiple bosses (Dunn, 2001). The global aspect of GPTs adds the nuances of cultural diversity (Henderson et al., 2018; Robinson, in press) to this complex mix.

In 2008, Schmid and Adams conducted one of the first detailed examinations of motivation in project teams.
Through the lens of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), they identified sources of intrinsic motivation which connected team members to project goals. Their conclusion that intrinsic motivators were more potent than extrinsic ones in project teams (Schmid & Adams, 2008) challenged the earlier practice guides of bodies such as the Project Management Institute (PMI) which had focused primarily on extrinsic rewards and recognition as sources of motivation. Subsequent studies of project team performance endorsed this notion of intrinsic motivation superiority, citing factors such as empowerment, interesting tasks, autonomy, trust, and an enjoyable work environment (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010; Seiler et al., 2012). Over time, the PMI body itself has substantially revised its practice guidance on motivation, now specifically endorsing the research of Pink (2011), asserting that “intrinsic motivators are far longer lasting and effective” for complex and challenging work such as projects (PMI, 2021, pg. 159).

B. Sources of motivation in the Project Team

The categorization of motivation factors as intrinsic or extrinsic is strongly associated with the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2000). According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is driven by the enjoyment of the work itself while extrinsic motivation is driven by external reward (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Several studies have concluded that intrinsic motivation might be more influential in complex projects than in simple ones (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Locke & Schattke, 2018; Vroom, 2013). SDT is based on the premise of three innate psychological needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness – the pursuit of which leads us to towards intrinsic motivation and peak performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy implies freedom of choice. Competence refers to the opportunity to pursue mastery. Relatedness is a sense of affiliation and care.

1) Intrinsic Motivation - Autonomy

Within the category of autonomy, Schmid and Adams (2008) found participation in project goal setting and task scheduling to be leading motivators, consistent with Locke’s goal-setting theory (Locke & Schattke, 2018). “Empowerment” was identified as a leading motivator in a study of 282 project managers in Switzerland (Seiler et al., 2012, p.68). Dunn (2001) reminds us of the potential of the increasingly popular matrix team organization to constrain the autonomy of project managers. For example, project team selections may be made by line managers or an independent Project Management Office (PMO). PMI (2021, p.159) now recognizes the intrinsically motivating potential of flexible working, project team self-selection and self-management.

2) Intrinsic Motivation - Competence

SDT refers to competence as the need to succeed at challenging tasks and to achieve outcomes (Deci et al., 2001). This resonates with the “best I can be” thinking of Maslow’s self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Several studies have identified the opportunity to learn new skills and acquire knowledge as the primary source of project team motivation (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010; Patanakul et al., 2016). Seiler et al. (2012) identified the “interesting task” as project managers’ top motivation. Positive feedback is viewed as an intrinsic motivator in that it provides a sense of competence (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Schmid and Adams (2008) found that 93% of project managers viewed positive feedback as a source of intrinsic motivation.

3) Intrinsic Motivation - Relatedness

The relatedness motivation is the need for a sense of mutual respect, caring, and interdependence (Deci et al., 2001). Patanakul et al. (2016) observed that this need is accentuated by the dynamic and time-pressured nature of the project environment. The desire to work within a cohesive, enthusiastic, trustworthy team was identified as a primary motivator in all of the project team studies reviewed. Communications and trust featured strongly as facilitators of relatedness (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010; Schmid & Adams, 2008). Schmid and Adams (2008, p.69) identified a lack of “top management support” as a primary de-motivator. Patanakul et al. (2016) noted how management support loses its motivating potential when reporting to multiple “superiors” (Dunn, 2001) across multiple projects.

4) Extrinsic Motivation in the Project Team

Ryan and Deci (2000, p.60) define extrinsic motivators as relating to activity motivated by a “separable outcome” not related to the task itself. In traditional project management practice, we were incentivized towards project goals by financial rewards, recognition, feedback, and possibly status. The ability of project leaders to nurture intrinsic motivation is often constrained by time, transience, division of power (Dunn, 2001) and both physical and cultural distance (Henderson et al., 2018). Despite the PMI (2021) concession to intrinsic motivation ascendency, the intrinsic-extrinsic debate is ongoing with some studies asserting the importance of context (Cerasoli et al., 2014) and the baseline driver of money as an enabler of higher-level, intrinsic motivations (Locke & Schattke, 2018).

Of the project team studies reviewed, intrinsic sources of motivation emerged as dominant over extrinsic ones. Dwivedula and Bredillet (2010) discovered that project practitioners are motivated primarily by personal growth opportunities and a supportive work climate. Seiler et al. (2012) concluded that project managers are motivated primarily by task challenge, supportive social interaction and empowerment. Swiss project managers rated “financial compensation” as the least potent of the six motivators. Schmid and Adams (2008) did not attempt a comparison of intrinsic-extrinsic strength. They did assert that the “main theme emerging from this study is the early involvement of all stakeholders” and that the second most salient theme was “an understanding of team members” – implying connectedness as a leading motivator.

Motivation in the project team remains under-researched. The last twenty years has seen a strong shift towards intrinsic motivation in projects, both by the PM profession (PMI, 2021) and by emerging academic research. The current Covid-19 pandemic is likely to significantly impact intrinsic motivation in project teams (Camilleri, 2021). However, we remain in the very early days of researching this topic and, as such, the influence of Covid-19 is a specific exclusion from the current article. Drawing on the findings of prior studies reviewed, the remainder of this article extends the study to the global project domain, examining the question “How relevant are these sources of motivation to the GPT
practitioners of today.”

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this article is drawn from a larger research exercise which explored two research questions. This research article is focused solely on the first (R1) research question and associated data.

• R1 To what extent do intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence motivation within the GPT?
• R2 How does cultural diversity moderate motivation in the GPT?

The aim of this study was to identify and rank the influence of sources of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the GPT. The approach adopted was to extract a set of primary project team motivators from a detailed literature review of prior studies and then to test these items for salience in the field of GPT practice. The motivator items extracted were categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic sources for comparison. Objectives of simplicity, timeliness and global reach informed the choice of a positivist approach (Saunders et al., 2016) and data collection methods. A simple online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, was used to collect and store data from a diverse, global sample of experienced GPT practitioners known to the researcher as LinkedIn connections. A secondary method of online self-selection was deployed with support from the local PMI chapter. The literature review helped guide the survey design which aimed for simplicity and clarity. Multiple-choice questions with optional text commentaries were used for some items. A matrix-style question with a Likert-6 rating scale was used to measure, with more granularity (Liu & Cernat, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016), the strength of 8 leading GPT motivators drawn from prior studies – 6 classified as intrinsic motivators and 2 extrinsic. The data collection method and survey design were piloted with 3 GPT practitioners and feedback was incorporated.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Demographic Analysis

The study achieved the goal of a representative population from global project teams. 79 valid survey responses were received from GPT practitioners of 21 nations – United Kingdom (34%), Türkiye (19%), Australia (11%), USA (5%), Lebanon (4%), Other (27%) – Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Latvia, Mexico, Palestine, Spain, and Ukraine. 72% (n=57) of respondents self-reported as Project Managers, and the other 28% (n=22) as Project Team Members. 76% (n=60) of respondents were permanent employees whilst the remaining 24% (n=19) were contracted or temporary employees.

The quality of the data sample was enriched by the experience levels of respondents. 65% (n=51) of practitioners self-reported as having more than 10 years of GPT experience, 30% (n=24) as having 3-10 years of GPT experience, and only 5% (n=4) as having 1-3 years of GPT experience.

B. Significance Of Motivation as a Driver of Performance in the GPT

GPT practitioners were asked to indicate whether they viewed ability or motivation as a stronger influence on performance in the GPT. As depicted in Fig. 1, 55% (n=43) of practitioners felt that ability and motivation were of equal influence, in agreement with the research of Van Iddekinge et al. (2018). However, a significant 39% (n=31) of respondents viewed motivation as a superior factor to ability, in support of Dasi et al. (2021), as compared to only 6% (n=5) who viewed ability as more influential. As one Project Manager (PM) declared “Ability is wasted without motivation. A motivated individual will go beyond the call of duty in support of the project’s goals and deadlines.”

Another survey item examined practitioner views on motivation levels across the project life cycle, as shown in Fig. 2. In strong support of Schmid and Adams (2008), 73% (n=58) of practitioners declared that motivation is highest at the start of the project and progressively falls away to a low point at closure.

As one practitioner put it “Depends on the overall business function but primarily if you don’t have the motivation at the initiation stage you will struggle to pull that forward at later stages. It requires leadership and a cohesive vision.” This reiterates the great GPT challenge to establish a sense of shared purpose, trust and connectedness from day one, against a time-limited backdrop of transience, uncertainty, diversity and distance (Schmid & Adams, 2008; Henderson et al., 2018).

Which factor has a stronger influence on GPT Motivation?

Which factor has a stronger influence on GPT Motivation?

Ability and Motivation are equal 54.43%

Motivation 39.24%

Ability 6.33%

Fig. 1. Ability and Motivation in the GPT.

In which stage of the project life-cycle are motivation levels highest?

Start of the Intermediate Don't Know Finish of the project stages of the project Planning (Initiation, project Planning) (Execution)

73.42% 17.72% 5.06% 3.80%

Fig. 2. Motivation in the GPT Lifecycle.
C. Sources of Motivation in the GPT

A matrix-style question asked GPT practitioners the question “to what extent do each of the following factors influence your motivation in the global project team?” Eight sources of motivation, drawn from the findings of prior studies, were presented for measurement using a Likert-6 response scale. The results are presented in Table I.

There were two key outcomes from this item. Firstly, the affirmation that all eight motivators are valid as sources of GPT motivation, albeit to differing degrees. Secondly, the ascendancy of intrinsic motivational factors over extrinsic ones. As depicted in Table I, the top five ranked sources of motivation were all intrinsic in nature.

1) Intrinsic Motivation - Relatedness

Practitioners have rated “Enjoyable social interactions, trust and mutual support” as the most influential source of motivation in the GPT. At first look, this may appear surprising in a work construct that is transient, focused on a set piece of work, and culturally and geographically dispersed. As one PM with a preference for local teams asserted, “Team cohesion requires proximity”. On the contrary, as suggested by Patanakul et al. (2016), these unique constraints may actually heighten the motivating potential of trust and mutual support in the GPT environment, in which success is inherently based on task and practitioner interdependence. GPT practitioners concurred with the findings of prior studies (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010; Seiler et al., 2012; Patanakul et al., 2016) which noted the superior motivating power of a work climate in which project team members are friendly and intimately connected in planning, tasks and constant communications flows. One GPT practitioner from Mexico declared “The collaboration is the most important ingredient of the teams”. A PM from Australia noted “team performance is based on leadership culture and connectedness, regardless of whether the team is local or global”. Another from the UK asserted “performance is driven in the context of a team on the level of inter team trust”. Data for this research was collected just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – it would be reasonable to predict an even higher need for relatedness against this new landscape.

2) Intrinsic Motivation – Competence

GPT practitioners rated “opportunities to learn, grow and achieve” as the 2nd most potent source of motivation. This aligns closely with prior studies which also identified personal development as a leading motivator. As one global PM declared “Performance is higher when there is opportunity for growth, learning and diversity - global teams bring this opportunity which increases performance...also a chance to prove that you can work with the best and deliver complex global projects and programmes”. Practitioners may view the GPT as the ultimate forum for pursuing self-development on the path to mastery. Another insightful PM comment reminds us that the competence motivation may extend beyond the technical as “the latest technologies are rare and global projects bring opportunity for learning and growing as a professional. Also, one gets the opportunity to learn about people and process.”

“Interesting and challenging tasks” rated 4th as a source of GPT motivation. Project work, in contrast to operational work, is broadly characterised by challenge and complexity. Global projects tend to accentuate complexity.

In accordance with Seiler et al. (2012), it’s not surprising that GPT practitioners are likely to be motivated by a challenging task. Of the 79 GPT practitioners surveyed, 45 indicated a preference for working in GPTs.
Of this subset, as depicted in Fig. 3, 47% (n=21) indicated that their primary reason for preferring GPTs was “I enjoy the challenge and complexity of global project work”, a significant majority response. As one global PM shared “Granted there can be frustrations with differing work cultures and even time zone issues, but there is also a great opportunity to work with these situations which can add a degree of additional interest.”

An interesting outcome was the ranking of “Receiving positive feedback for my work” as 7th of 8 motivational factors. Schmid and Adams (2008) viewed positive feedback as a leading source of intrinsic motivation. Dwivedula and Bredillet (2010) have a more extrinsic view of feedback as a non-financial reward influencing perceived equity. Patanakul et al. (2016) did not find support for supervisor support, akin to feedback, as a source of motivation. They postulated that the multi-manager nature of self-directed project work may dilute the need for manager feedback. The findings of the present study are not inconsistent with these views. Feedback in the GPT is a positive, not primary, source of motivation.

3) Intrinsic Motivation - Autonomy

SDT identifies autonomy as the most dominant of the three intrinsic needs (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Prior studies concurred. The current study found the autonomy-related motivators to be the 3rd and 5th most powerful in the GPT. The freedom to act to with speed and agility (Seiler et al., 2012) would be even more relevant in GPTs dispersed across time zones. “Participation in decision-making and setting project goals” becomes even more critical when goal setting needs to incorporate nuances of cross-cultural, and global variations to avoid later conflict or rework. “Freedom to decide how work is performed” is accentuated where novel and creative methods are required to bridge complex cultural divides and build trust quickly. In a related item, 44% (n=35) of practitioners considered PM autonomy in GPT team selection as supportive of peak motivation, in contrast to PMO-imposed selections (11%).

One interesting aspect of this study’s findings is the potential for cultural variations in what motivates and by how much. Prior studies noted this (Seiler et al., 2012) and specifically excluded it from their research (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). In the current study, two outlier responses held a view that freedom to decide how work was performed was “not at all” motivating. One response was from India, the other from Italy – cultures with high and medium power-distance profiles respectively (Hofstede Insights, 2022). As with prior studies, this potential for cultural variation is noted and excluded as a research limitation.

4) Extrinsic Motivation in the GPT

In a significant finding, practitioners rated “financial compensation and incentives” as the least influential of the 8 sources of motivation in the GPT. This is consistent with the findings of prior studies in the general project environment (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010; Seiler et al., 2012). In a surprising observation, contract and temporary GPT practitioners (n=19), as well as their permanent colleagues (n=60), rated financial compensation as their least important motivator, contradicting an oft-held anecdotal view of contract worker motivations. Once again, findings provide a view into potential cultural and economic variations. GPT practitioners in Turkey (n=15), a developing nation (World Trade Organization, 2022), rated financial compensation as 4th of 8 motivators, much higher than the study average.

As Pink (2011, p.60) cautioned “Carrots and sticks aren’t all bad”. GPT practitioners did confirm extrinsic financial compensation as a valid, albeit secondary, source of motivation. In fact, 58% (n=46) of practitioners responded that they were motivated by financial compensation to either a “large extent” or a “quite large extent”. As the case of Turkey illustrates, motivation is context-sensitive and, as prior research has concluded (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Locke & Schattke, 2018), extrinsic motivators may be more potent than intrinsic motivators in particular contexts.

The factor of “worthiness of the project’s overall mission” was included to test for “pro-social” or value-based extrinsic motivation in the GPT (Grant, 2008; Hur et al., 2018). This factor was measured to be a positive, though not primary, source of GPT motivation, ranking as 6th of 8 motivators. The sample population of the current study is known to be “for profit” in nature. A sample including practitioners from the NGO, not-for-profit, and social enterprise sectors would likely result in a higher ranking for this motivator.

V. CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

“The science shows that the secret to high performance isn’t our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive - our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to live a life of purpose” (Pink, 2011, p.145). Many practitioners, this researcher included, have at some moment been startled by the self-reflective thought “I love this work and environment so much, I’d do it for free”. We sensed what really drives performance yet found ourselves constrained by traditional “carrot and stick” thinking and practice. In a broad sense, the greatest contribution of this study, for many GPT practitioners, will be the quiet but emphatic nod in the direction of intrinsic motivation over extrinsic motivation.

The strength of this study sits in the quality of its sample composition. 65% of the sample had more than 10 years of field experience in GPT practice. Respondents included elite GPT professionals and global thought leaders. The results of this study help to address the gap in research specifically
examining the sources of motivation in the GPT. Firstly, the 8 sources of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation drawn from studies in the field of general project management have been validated as relevant in the GPT. Secondly, practitioners have endorsed the notion that intrinsic motivators are usually, with context-based exceptions, more potent than extrinsic motivators in the GPT. GPT practice may take guidance from these findings by actively nurturing those sources of intrinsic motivation most valued by practitioners.

A. Relatedness

Put simply, GPT practitioners want to enjoy work. They want to have fun, have friendly colleagues, and feel safe and secure. They thrive on the challenges of GPT work but value a sense of camaraderie and trust which helps counter the inherent stressors of GPT life. Personal relationships and trust must transcend the GPT boundaries of geographic and cultural distance. Events such as the current Covid-19 pandemic can only serve to accentuate this need. Strategies such as regular face-to-face time, social events, one-to-one conversations, and cross-cultural education can support this goal.

B. Competence

This study confirms the potency of opportunities to learn, grow and achieve as leading motivators in the GPT. Insightful comments from the field highlight how GPT work is perceived by many as the ultimate forum for self-improvement, not just in terms of technical competence, but also in social or cultural terms. GPT assignments may elevate motivation by facilitating mastery of a second language, or a deeper understanding of cultural practices through work-related immersion. GPT practice should invest time and creative thought in matching practitioners’ personal interests and goals to the characteristics of project assignments.

C. Autonomy

Prior studies identified how creative autonomy might support strategies for building trust and camaraderie as early as possible in the project lifecycle. The current study validates that view in the GPT, noting the heightened need for agility and responsiveness on a global scale. The mutuality between autonomy and trust is highlighted both by GPT team members who are motivated by the freedom to plan and manage their own tasks and by PMs who are motivated by freedom in such tasks as team selection. The role of PMOs in GPT team selection is worthy of further research.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Motivation is an imprecise concept subject to unique interpretation by each individual. As a psychological state, it is known to vary over time. The data collection method for this study surveyed only single-point-in-time measurements from the sample population. A more temporal approach is recommended for future research. Motivation is known to be context sensitive. This study excluded any detailed consideration of contextual variables such as demography, personality, leadership style, national culture, environment, or major events such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. Findings did flag demographic variables worthy of further exploration such as national culture and employment type. The influence of cultural diversity, a defining characteristic of GPTs and a strong candidate for future research, was specifically excluded from the scope of this article. The global nature of GPTs lends itself to a larger and more diverse sample population than this study was resourced to manage. The Covid-19 pandemic, in which we are currently in the midst, is a current exclusion, worthy of substantial future research for its impacts on motivation.

The positivist approach and quantitative methods chosen for this study supported the goals of simplicity, timeliness, and global reach. Whilst optional text commentaries provided a degree of qualitative input, an interpretive approach utilizing interviews for qualitative analysis might provide even more insightful results for future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research article.

Project Management Institute (PMI). (2021). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK® guide).* (Seventh ed.).


