

What IT experts want – A study on how different rewards affect employee engagement

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<https://doi.org/10.15170/MM.2024.58.04.06>

THE AIM OF THE PAPER

This study aims to explore the factors that influence employee engagement, with a particular focus on the impact of different types of incentives. The primary goal is to identify which rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic) have a more significant effect on engagement in the Hungarian IT sector.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was employed, beginning with a comprehensive literature review to examine existing research on factors influencing engagement. The literature revealed contradictions regarding the relative importance of intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards. Based on these insights, the research questions were formulated for the primary research. The study involved a quantitative survey of 226 IT professionals. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analyses were used to explore the survey results.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The study found that extrinsic incentives, especially salary, were the most important factors influencing employee engagement among IT professionals in Hungary's capital. This finding contrasts with some literature that emphasizes intrinsic rewards. However, certain intrinsic incentives also proved to be important, with some consciously valued by employees and others playing an unconscious yet significant role. A statistically significant relationship between rewards and engagement components was confirmed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance employee engagement, organizations should prioritize a tailored approach to incentives. While providing a competitive salary and bonuses with a diverse fringe benefit package is critical, other factors such as a secure and stable workplace, work-life balance, positive relationships with colleagues, and opportunities for home office should also be offered. These rewards should be customized based on the backgrounds and personalities of the employees to maximize engagement and satisfaction.

Kulcsszavak: employee engagement, information technology, employee motivation, rewards

INTRODUCTION

"Having a job you hate is worse than being unemployed" (Gallup 2023, p. 1.). Decades ago, people typically worked for the same company their entire career, with minimal expectations. Today, job-hopping is common as employees seek new challenges and better working conditions. This shift has heightened the significance of Organizational Behavior (OB), particularly in areas focused on attracting, retaining, and motivating employees for long-term engagement. Some managers believe employees are simply there to complete tasks and are easily replaceable, arguing it's not the organization's job to ensure employee satisfaction. However, dissatisfied employees perform poorly, and high turnover increases recruitment and onboarding costs, so dealing with these topics is a common interest.

The rapid changes of the 21st century, including global issues like the Covid-19 pandemic and technological advancements like artificial intelligence, affect both the external environment and internal company dynamics. These shifts influence employee behavior and expectations, requiring companies to adapt continually. Employees, a company's most valuable asset, also change, reflecting, for instance, the unique traits of different age cohorts. Recognizing that motivated, loyal, and engaged employees enhance organizational efficiency and effectiveness, companies now focus on factors that drive employee engagement.

Managers aim to incentivize team members to foster satisfaction and commitment, creating a positive work environment. Many organizations are working diligently to boost employee engagement through various rewards. The first part of this paper presents a comprehensive literature review on this topic. The second part details the primary research conducted to analyze the research question developed based on the literature review, namely how different extrinsic and intrinsic rewards impact employee engagement in Hungarian IT companies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee engagement is a positive psychological state when employees are dedicated to performing their tasks, they are emotionally present, generally satisfied and motivated, and typically do not intend to leave the company. This definition was formulated by the author after analyzing related academic literature. Various approaches exist (Byrne 2022), therefore, the most common and significant factors were synthesized to the definition.

The positive psychological state is highlighted by Maslach and Leiter (2008) who described it as the polar opposite of burnout. They also mention productivity, involvement, dedication, and energy as the signs of engagement (Maslach & Leiter 2008). A positive psychological state is a part of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) as well. One of their three main indicators of the state of engagement is vigor, which refers to resilience, energy, and zest (Schaufeli & Bakker 2004). Kahn (1990) also emphasized the significance of being physically, cognitively, and emotionally present. Brown (2021) refers to engagement as a psychological state characterized by enthusiastic and energetic dedication to work, sometimes even being identified with happiness (Brown 2021).

Dedication is also mentioned in UWES. Besides vigor, they also use dedication and absorption as indicators of engagement, which besides being committed and identified towards the work also refer to a flow-like experience when work carries away the employee (Schaufeli & Bakker 2004). As mentioned above, Maslach and Leiter (2008) also highlighted the role of dedication. It is a self-investment in the employees' role (Rich *et al.* 2017). Byrne (2022) suggests transforming work into a meaningful and purposeful accomplishment instead of seeing it just as work, and Liu *et al.* (2021) also highlight the importance of meaningfulness.

Job satisfaction is often mentioned together with employee engagement. Saks (2006) identifies job satisfaction as a mediating factor in creating engagement. Spector (2022) also confirms that it is a concept of many employee engagement definitions.

Several studies suggest a reverse relationship between employee engagement and the intention to quit, for instance, Putri & Setianan (2019) suggest that higher employee engagement decreases quitting intentions. Saurage-Altenloh *et al.* (2023) confirmed a positive relationship between engagement and intentions to stay. The lasting connection to the company is often referred to as loyalty (Randels 2001), which is often used together with employee engagement, and although they are slightly different concepts, there is a strong relationship between them (Suharti & Suliyanto 2012, Ibrahim & Al Falasi 2014, Nargotra & Sarangal 2021).

Motivation also affects the level of employee engagement (Byrne 2022, Bhuvanaiah and Raya 2015, Singh 2016). Lartey (2021) suggests that in return for an engaging workplace, employees present a positive and self-motivated attitude. Evangeline & Ragavan (2016) name it as the best tool in engagement.

"To be motivated means to be moved to do something" (Ryan & Deci 2000). Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs organizes human motivators into five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem needs, and self-actualization. While traditionally portrayed as a rigid pyramid, Maslow himself emphasized that needs are dynamic, often coexisting and influencing one another rather than being satisfied sequentially (Szűcs 2022). Contemporary research further critiques this rigidity, highlighting that individuals can pursue higher-order motivations, such as growth needs, even when basic needs remain unmet (Takács *et al.* 2012).

Herzberg's two-factor theory complements Maslow's model by differentiating between hygiene factors, preventing dissatisfaction, and motivators, actively enhancing motivation (Herzberg *et al.* 2011). Hygiene factors, such as salary, job security, and safe working conditions, align with the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy, while motivators, such as recognition, growth opportunities, and meaningful work, correspond to higher-level needs like esteem and self-actualization (Artaya *et al.* 2021). By framing motivation as a multidimensional and context-sensitive process, these theories remain central to understanding workplace dynamics.

In both theories, the basic needs, or hygiene factors, are typically met through external means, while the higher levels, or motivating factors, are usually driven by internal motivators (Victor & Hoole 2021). In their Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Ryan & Deci (2000) define extrinsic and intrinsic motivation based on the intention: intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity because it is interesting and enjoyable, while extrinsic motivation involves doing something to achieve a specific outcome (Ryan & Deci 2000, Vitai & Benke 2021).

Similarly, rewards – which are the tools to reinforce, sustain, and enhance individuals' behavior within an organization (Nazish *et al.* 2019 citing DeCenzo & Robbins 2013) – can be classified as intrinsic and extrinsic ones as well (Ryan & Deci 2000). In the intrinsic case, the activity itself is the reward (Ryan & Deci 2000), for instance, achievement, engaging work, recognition, and personal development (Evangeline & Ragavan 2016). Extrinsic rewards are external and include salary, bonuses, or various benefits (Emmanuel & Nwuzor 2021). The role of incentive management became even more important after the Covid-19 pandemic (Kőműves *et al.* 2022).

Based on their in-depth interviews, Victor & Hoole (2021) provided a practical approach to the classification of the different rewards by creating three groups with a comprehensive list of extrinsic-financial, extrinsic-non-financial, and intrinsic rewards. The author of this paper accepted the basics of these categorizations with some minor adjustments. Based on the aforementioned importance of security needs, a 'secure and stable workplace' element was added to the external-non-financial group together with an independent 'home office' element, which also has become a basic expectation lately (Vyas & Butakhieo 2020, Piac&Profit 2022, Bereczki 2022).

After the literature review, Victor & Hoole's (2021) original list was discussed with three IT professionals for comprehensiveness and clarity. The final reward list reflects both the literature and professional input. Intrinsic rewards, considered psychological rewards (Victor & Hoole 2021), include autonomy, meaningful work, and job passion. Extrinsic rewards are connected to the external environment (Victor & Hoole 2021). This group is divided into financial and non-financial categories, including salary, bonuses, fringe benefits, a secure workplace, working conditions, extra office equipment, health and well-being options, traveling opportunities, international environment, language use, learning and development opportunities, feedback, organizational culture fit, relationships, recognition, work-life balance, and home office opportunities.

The IT sector has faced significant changes, resulting in a shortage of professionals (Makrónom Intézet 2023). Understanding employee engagement is key to attracting and retaining talent. Other empirical research results also highlight the importance of incentive management (Ásványi *et al.* 2024, Nick & Balogh 2024).

Motivational and engagement theories emphasize internal and external factors in meeting employee needs, which are believed to influence engagement. A recent PwC Hungary survey of over 80,000 respondents found that while salary and financial rewards remain top priorities for employees and students, intrinsic factors like privacy, meaningful work, and supportive teams also matter (PwC 2023). The research question addressed how extrinsic and intrinsic rewards impact employee engagement in Hungarian IT companies. The primary research aimed to understand these dynamics and propose solutions to improve engagement.

RESEARCH METHOD

An online survey was created to analyze the relationship between rewards and employee engagement. IT professionals ranked the importance of 20 external and internal rewards from the literature review and rated their actual availability on a 1-10 Likert scale at their workplace with 1 meaning the incentive is not available at their current workplace and 10 meaning it is outstanding. They also scored their engagement level using its five main aspects. To compare the availability of rewards (independent variables) and engagement scores (dependent variables) and identify any statistical relationships, multiple regression was applied. The 20 rewards were compared to both the five engagement aspects and an employee engagement index (the mean score of the five elements), resulting in 120 (20 times 6) regression analyses.

Regression analysis, a statistical tool used to measure the relationship between independent and dependent variables, allows for prediction and explanation (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2011). After analysis, the coefficients, p-values, and R-values were evaluated to assess correlations. Coefficients estimate the change in the dependent variable for each unit change in the independent variable. A p-value below 0.05 indicates statistical significance. The Pearson correlation coefficient (R) measures the direction and strength of the relationship, while R² shows the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2011).

Over 1.5 months, 226 IT professionals responded to the survey. While not representative, it offers a broad view of the Hungarian IT industry, covering diverse IT companies. Respondents were 68.6% male and 31.4% female, with 86.7% holding tertiary degrees. Ages ranged from 21 to 67, analyzed in normally distributed bins below 30, above 50, and 5-year intervals in between. Most respondents (37%) had been with their current company for 2-5 years, followed by 0-2 years (29%), 6-12 years (20%), and 13+ years (14%). The demographic distribution aligns with industry norms but skews heavily toward Pest County (95.1%), primarily Budapest. This urban concentration, with its distinct salary levels, infrastructure, and working conditions, may influence perceptions of engagement and must be considered when interpreting the results.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the first part of the survey, participants were asked about how important the different intrinsic and extrinsic incentives were for them, so they created a ranking of the 20 rewards; then, they also provided scores based on to what extent these rewards are available at their current workplaces. Table 1 presents the summarized result of the rankings. Table 2 illustrates the availability of the different incentives at the respondents' current workplaces.

Table 1 shows the summarized ranking result of the 20 extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. The ranking is based on score means (1st rank means 20 scores, 2nd rank means 19 scores, etc.).

Survey respondents predominantly ranked salary and bonuses as their top priority, with the diverse fringe benefit package also ranking fifth. The second-highest priority was a secure and stable workplace. Following these were work-life balance, good relationships with colleagues, and home office opportunities. Good relationships, that fulfill social needs, confirmed their expected high importance based on the literature.

Table 2 illustrates the average scores for the availability of rewards. Respondents provided the extent to which the given incentives are available on a scale of 1-10. The average scores are shown in the column 'Mean'. However, significant differences among companies were observed, so standard deviations (around the mean) were also calculated. High standard deviation values indicate elements where significant differences were present among the various organizations.

When comparing the perceived importance of rewards with their actual availability, there is no direct alignment. Three rewards appear in the top six of both lists, though in different orders: a secure workplace, good relationships with colleagues, and home office opportunities. This shows these are highly valued by employees and commonly provided by IT companies. However, salary and fringe benefits, which employees prioritize, scored lower in availability. These, along with good working conditions like tools and technology, require financial investment and remain lower on the availability list.

Table 1. Perception of different rewards – Summarized ranking result (n=226).

#	Reward	Mean
1	Salary (with bonuses)	18.72
2	Secure and stable workplace	16.62
3	Work-life balance	13.13
4	Good relationship with colleagues	13.11
5	Diverse fringe benefit package	12.60
6	Home-office opportunities	12.55
7	Good relationship with superiors	11.54
8	Learning & development opportunities	11.50
9	Working conditions	11.42
10	Fit to organizational culture and company's goals	11.30
11	Enjoyable work, job passion	10.84
12	Performance feedback	9.62
13	Health and wellbeing related benefits	9.13
14	Autonomy in performing tasks	8.62
15	Meaningful work	7.84
16	Informal recognition	7.46
17	International environment, the opportunity for using languages	7.30
18	Extra office equipment	5.84
19	Traveling opportunities	5.74
20	Formal recognition	5.13

Source: created by the author

To explore the relationship between rewards and engagement, respondents also rated their current motivation, dedication, psychological state, satisfaction, and intention to stay on a scale of 1-10 - representing the five elements of the author's engagement definition. An employee engagement index, calculated as the mean of these five scores, was also compared to reward scores in the regression analysis. In total, 120 cases (20 rewards $\times$ 6 engagement aspects) of regression analysis were conducted.

Two statistical hypotheses were developed for every case:

- H_0 : There is no statistically significant correlation between the given reward and the related engagement component.
- H_1 : There is a statistically significant correlation between the given reward and the related engagement component.

The final regression results were developed in two steps: first, an initial multiple regression was conducted in PSPP software with all the variables, then, narrowing down to the statistically relevant

ones based on the initial p-values (where p-value < 0.05 , H_0 could be rejected), a second multiple regression was conducted to get the actual p-, R, and R^2 -values – without the possible modifying effects of the non-relevant rewards.

Table 3 summarizes the statistically correlating variables and the R results of the final regressions. Only statistically significant independent variables are presented in the final results. The corresponding R-numbers indicate the magnitude of their impact, as elaborated below.

Table 3 reveals that some variables, like salary and enjoyable work, impact nearly all engagement elements, while others, such as fringe benefits and stability, affect only one or two. The general employee engagement index is influenced by salary and bonuses, alignment with company goals and culture, good relationships with supervisors, meaningful work, and enjoyable tasks. These factors account for about 62% of the variability in employee engagement (R^2 value of 0.62) with a strong correlation ($R = 0.79$).

Table 2. Ranking of rewards based on their availability level at different companies n=226.

#	Reward	Mean	St. dev.
1	Good relationship with colleagues	8.09	1.88
2	Home-office opportunities	7.91	2.59
3	Autonomy in performing tasks	7.74	1.91
4	Secure and stable workplace	7.65	2.09
5	Good relationship with superiors	7.50	2.18
6	Work-life balance	7.10	2.34
7	Meaningful work	7.01	2.22
8	Working conditions	6.89	2.23
9	Salary (with bonuses)	6.77	2.04
10	Informal recognition	6.66	2.23
11	Enjoyable work, job passion	6.53	2.34
12	Fit to organizational culture and company's goals	6.10	2.28
13	Performance feedback	5.83	2.51
14	Diverse fringe benefit package	5.77	2.73
15	Learning & development opportunities	5.62	2.61
16	International environment, the opportunity for using languages	4.74	3.38
17	Formal recognition	4.44	2.63
18	Health and wellbeing related benefits	4.04	2.86
19	Extra office equipment	4.01	2.96
20	Traveling opportunities	2.94	2.47

Source: created by the author

Table 3. Summary of corrected regression results (n=226).

MOTIV	p-value	DEDICATED	p-value	PSYCH	p-value
SALARY	0.002	SALARY	0.004	GOOD_REL_SV	0.000
GOOD_REL_SV	0.001	W_L_BALANCE	0.015	W_L_BALANCE	0.000
MEANINGFUL	0.000	ENJOY	0.000	ENJOY	0.000
ENJOY	0.000				
R	R Square	R	R Square	R	R Square
0.76	0.58	0.54	0.29	0.63	0.4
SATISF	p-value	STAY	p-value	EE_Index	p-value
SALARY	0.000	SALARY	0.000	SALARY	0.000
FRINGE_BEN	0.002	GOALS	0.000	GOALS	0.002
STABILITY	0.005	GOOD_REL_SV	0.000	GOOD_REL_SV	0.000
GOALS	0.000			MEANINGFUL	0.007
ENJOY	0.000			ENJOY	0.000
R	R Square	R	R Square	R	R Square
0.76	0.58	0.65	0.42	0.79	0.62

Source: created by the author

Different variables affect specific engagement elements. Motivation is influenced by salary, good relationships with supervisors, meaningful work, and enjoyable tasks, explaining 58% of its variability. Dedication is impacted by salary, enjoyable work, and work-life balance, but with a weaker correlation, explaining only 29% of its variability. Here, an interesting result needs to be mentioned: work-life balance has a reversed role in dedication. A potential explanation could be that employees with a better balance between work and personal life prioritize their private time and well-being over finishing workplace tasks at any cost.

The psychological state is influenced by good relationships with supervisors, work-life balance, and enjoyable tasks, accounting for 40% of its variability. Satisfaction is driven by salary and bonuses, fringe benefits, job security, alignment with company goals, and enjoyable tasks, explaining 58% of its variability. The intention to stay is influenced by salary, alignment with company culture, and good relationships with supervisors, accounting for 42% of its variability.

Overall, the relationships between rewards and engagement range from moderate to strong, with R-squared values between 0.29 and 0.62. Dedication shows the lowest correlation, likely due to its personal nature. Psychological state and staying intentions are moderately influenced by rewards, while motivation and satisfaction are strongly affected. The psychological state, influenced by personal factors, may not fully improve with a supportive work environment alone, explaining why only 40% of its variability is linked to rewards. The moderate impact on staying intentions may stem from the 'job-hopping' trend, especially among younger employees seeking new opportunities. Rewards have the strongest impact on motivation, workplace satisfaction, and the overall engagement index. Satisfaction primarily arises from external factors, though personality also plays a role, while motivation – although typically seen as arising from internal feelings, attitudes, and state of mind – is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic workplace incentives.

The results largely align with the previous ranking of rewards: almost all of the top seven rewards also showed statistical significance for engagement. However, some incentives, such as alignment with organizational culture and goals, enjoyable tasks, and meaningful work, which were ranked lower by respondents, significantly affect engagement according to regression analysis. This implies that employees may not fully realize the impact of these factors on their workplace

evaluation. Notably, elements like home office opportunities and good relationships with colleagues, which were highly ranked and commonly available, do not influence engagement in the regression analysis. This suggests that these are basic needs, and have become hygiene factors; their presence does not enhance engagement, but their absence would decrease it.

IMPORTANCE OF THE RESULTS AND POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH IDEAS

The research findings contribute significantly to the academic literature on employee engagement, offering fresh insights and supplementing existing studies. They also provide valuable, sector-specific data about the Hungarian IT industry. Beyond theoretical contributions, practical observations from over 200 IT professionals from various companies offer HR professionals a foundation to refine their tools and practices. By leveraging these conclusions, HR experts and IT leaders can create more engaging work environments that enhance employee satisfaction and productivity.

Several new research avenues emerge from these findings and ongoing changes. The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) is a promising area for further study. Future research could explore AI's role in measuring employee engagement, comparing its effectiveness to traditional methods, or examining how AI adoption in job roles affects engagement and satisfaction. Additionally, the study mentioned job-hopping, an increasingly common phenomenon, as a topic worth further investigation within the context of employee engagement. Understanding how shorter-term engagement expectations of younger employees impact team dynamics, sense of belonging, and overall engagement is crucial. Finally, exploring innovative approaches to streamline onboarding processes could reduce learning periods and increase effective tenure within organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Employee engagement is a significant question in a company's life so managers and different HR professionals have been continuously working out new methods and improving the existing practices to increase it. This paper aimed to study the research question about the perception and impact of the different extrinsic and intrinsic rewards affecting employee engagement at Hungarian IT companies. The research design was conducting a literature

review first, based on traditional theoretical approaches and novel articles on the topic. Reviewing and further evolving these, employee engagement is defined by the author as a positive psychological state when employees are emotionally present, are committed and dedicated to their meaningful tasks and goals, are generally motivated; and are satisfied with their workplace, typically with a decreased intent to leave the company. After refining the research questions, an online questionnaire was conducted. This quantitative research collected the perceptions of 226 IT professionals on different extrinsic and intrinsic rewards and their availability at the respondents' current workplaces, and data about their engagement levels. When providing their preferences, respondents almost unanimously prioritized extrinsic rewards over intrinsic ones, ranking salary and bonuses as the most important incentive and other extrinsic factors were also significant, like workplace stability, good relationships, work-life balance, fringe benefits, and home office. The study also explored whether the presence of the rewards affects the employee engagement level. Multiple regression analysis confirmed a statistically significant correlation in more cases: salary and bonuses, a good relationship with supervisors, meaningful work, enjoyable tasks, work-life balance, various fringe benefits, workplace stability, and alignment with the organization's goals and culture were rewards that correlated with at least one component of employee engagement. As can be seen in the previous listings, these generally align with the ranking results, however, there were some surprising results: the significant impact of factors like fit to company culture, enjoyable tasks, and meaningful work are underrecognized by employees. Additionally, some highly ranked rewards like home office and good relationships with colleagues do not significantly impact engagement, possibly because they are seen as basic expectations. Improving these significant factors might be a key for IT companies in the future as well to create not only an efficient and effective, but also an engaging working environment.

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