

E-ISSN: 3108-4176

APSSHS

Academic Publications of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies

2024, Volume 5, Page No: 211-218

Available online at: <https://apsshs.com/>

Annals of Organizational Culture, Leadership and External Engagement Journal

Enhancing Employee Work Effort in SMEs through Non-Financial Motivation Tools

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Abstract

This study examines the identification of non-financial motivational instruments applied in SMEs and their influence on employee work effort and productivity. The research involved 223 participants from small and medium-sized enterprises in the Czech Republic. Findings revealed that SME employees now demand non-financial motivational tools more intensively than in the previous year; however, enterprise management is largely unaware of this need. The results suggest that if SMEs recognized the importance of non-financial motivators and implemented them, employees would value a broader range of reward forms, which could positively affect their productivity and, consequently, the overall performance of the enterprise.

Keywords: Employee motivation, Motivation tools, Work effort, Work performance, SME

How to cite this article: Laine AK, Virtanen MJ. Enhancing employee work effort in SMEs through non-financial motivation tools. *Ann Organ Cult Leadersh Extern Engagem J.* 2024;5:211-8. <https://doi.org/10.51847/zNUcvJXUyh>

Received: 28 February 2024; **Revised:** 19 May 2024; **Accepted:** 23 May 2024

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Introduction

Managers frequently report that employees lack sufficient motivation. Yet, this is often not entirely the fault of the staff. Effective work motivation relies on three equally critical elements: the connection between performance and evaluation, the outcomes of the evaluation and associated rewards, and the type of reward employees find motivating. Properly applied motivation can enhance employee performance, thereby improving enterprise success. Neglecting or misunderstanding motivational tools can lead to reduced productivity. Employee productivity [1] is shaped by motivation; it is a complex process that involves creating a work environment and culture that meets employees' needs, aspirations, and interests while encouraging activity in a desired manner. Managers are thus responsible for motivating their workforce.

Appropriate and balanced use of motivational tools remains one of the most demanding managerial tasks, yet many organizations struggle with this. Employee motivation—or lack thereof—is often closely linked to the behavior of immediate supervisors. Crnila *et al.* [2] studied motivation factors and work effort among 72 employees (both family and non-family) from 22 SMEs in the Varazdin district. Their results indicate that existing non-financial motivational tools are not highly valued by employees in these enterprises. Ližbetinová *et al.* [3] emphasize the significance of a family-like organizational environment for employees, though companies frequently underestimate this aspect. Motivation and non-financial incentives continue to be a social challenge in many workplaces. Employee motivation [4] significantly affects performance and is critical for developing human resource potential, warranting greater attention.

This paper analyzes literature on effective non-financial motivational tools that enhance employee satisfaction and boost work effort, while also considering those that are ineffective and may lead to demotivation. The study relies on scientific articles indexed in WoS and Scopus. Research questions, hypotheses, and statistical analyses using MS Excel and R-Commander



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formed the basis for confirming or rejecting the hypotheses. The originality of this work lies in adapting insights from international studies—highlighting effective and ineffective motivation factors—to examine the situation in Czech SMEs.

Literature review

The quality dimension of motivation is particularly crucial in knowledge-intensive work, which demands cognitive effort and where output is measured more by quality than quantity [5]. Employees can be stimulated to achieve higher performance through a wide range of incentives. According to Ashkanani [6], both age and work experience actively influence employee performance. Motivation is generally expected to rise until it reaches a peak and then decline sharply prior to retirement. Štefko *et al.* [7] highlight that recognition from supervisors plays a significant role in enhancing work motivation. Forsten-Astikainen *et al.* [8] found generational differences in motivation, while Burton [9] notes that financial resources are not always sufficient to drive motivation, making alternative motivational factors necessary.

Most scholars categorize motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Becchetti *et al.* [10] report that intrinsically motivated employees may accept lower salaries and even contribute unpaid overtime. Vlacsekova and Mura [11] emphasize that work motivation is highly individualized. Cowley and Smith [12] observed that public-sector employees value intrinsic motivation more, whereas private-sector workers are inclined toward extrinsic incentives. Workplace factors such as environment, proper equipment, and ownership type (public or private) also shape employee motivation [13]. Li and Gu [14] compared motivational factors among knowledge workers in the USA and China, noting that Chinese employees' motivations are more complex and unpredictable.

Baule and Soost [15] identified three critical elements for SME success: social environment, non-financial benefits, and intrinsic motivation. Belas *et al.* [16] argue that management should continuously assess employee performance and incentivize innovations in workflows. Asad and Dainty [17] found that managers are more motivated by intrinsic rewards, whereas employees in lower positions prefer extrinsic rewards. Panait and Panait [18] add that poor management is a key source of dissatisfaction, stressing the need to balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Moon *et al.* [19] indicate that intrinsic motivation boosts creativity in tertiary-sector employees, while extrinsic motivation may slightly hinder it. Malinowska *et al.* [20] link employee autonomy and social support with work effort and intrinsic motivation.

State aid has been shown to influence enterprise performance [21]. Delfgaauw and Dur [22] found that high salaries attract workers quickly but may not ensure long-term quality. Hitka *et al.* [4] propose that uniform motivational programs can be applied across specific enterprises. Gavurova *et al.* [23] discuss factors affecting strategic planning to enhance the business environment. Borowski [24] differentiates between financial and non-financial motivational tools, noting that financial tools include base salary and bonuses. Yousaf *et al.* [25] observes that in developing countries like Pakistan, financial incentives dominate, whereas in developed nations, non-financial incentives are preferred. Chen and Wang [26] identify seven primary motivation tools for seasonal Arctic workers, including fair salary and professional development opportunities. Fen and Xia [27] stress career growth as a major driver for knowledge workers, corroborated by Stenius *et al.* [5]. Smesno and Diamantinis [28] highlight the growing preference for non-financial incentives. Millar *et al.* [29] report that both financial rewards and career growth influence healthcare workers in China. Bustasar *et al.* [30] found that knowledge sharing enhances corporate performance. Virglerova [31] emphasizes that a stable legislative framework supports a favorable business environment.

Bai [32] identifies salary, success, work environment, and professional growth as key motivators in high-tech firms. Koneru [33] highlights that strong workplace relationships can drive overall organizational performance. Li and Zhang [34] applied Maslow's hierarchy to motivate construction workers successfully. Employer attractiveness also affects retention and turnover intentions [35]. Motivation indirectly impacts business outcomes. Stehel *et al.* [36] suggest AI tools as valuable for business analysis and forecasting. The EVA indicator is useful for evaluating sectoral economic performance [37], while ecological considerations also play a role in business operations [38]. Lorincová *et al.* [1] observed notable differences in motivation perceptions across job positions, confirmed by Crnila *et al.* [2]. Fiaz *et al.* [39] examined leadership styles, showing that authoritarian leadership diminishes motivation, while democratic and laissez-faire approaches are preferable. Wulandari and Rahmi [40] found that competencies significantly influence motivation and performance.

Azmi *et al.* [41] studied Muslim female entrepreneurs, revealing that family support is a major motivator. Johar *et al.* [42] indicate that proper training enhances professional interest and loyalty. Lukasik [43] confirmed that combining motivation with training increases engagement. Kamasheva *et al.* [44] demonstrated that gamified training enhances attention and team integration. Fair evaluation by supervisors increases motivation [45, 46]. Sheikh *et al.* [47] highlight that stress, workload, and poor communication negatively affect performance and motivation. Rani and Desiana [48] note that work-life balance strongly impacts motivation, although Manor and Desiana [49] contest this in SMEs. Fujimoto and Nakata [50] observed a shift over time: in 1994, workers preferred financial incentives, whereas by 2005, non-financial motivators became more valued.

In general, it can be observed that there is a substantial distinction between influencing employees and fostering genuine work motivation. From the discussion above, it follows that non-financial motivational measures are likely to assume a more prominent role than monetary incentives over time.

Every organization is unique, and so is its hierarchy, which especially applies to employees who vary in age, experience, and perspectives. Because of this diversity, it is challenging to define motivation tools that would be universally effective across all companies. Nonetheless, based on the prior analysis, certain tools can be identified as generally effective. According to previous research, non-financial motivation tools include opportunities for career advancement, exposure to new experiences, direct supervision and recognition from leaders, the quality of workplace relationships, team atmosphere, as well as the work environment and available equipment. At the same time, negative elements that can impair motivation and productivity include inappropriate leadership styles (e.g., overly authoritarian management), excessive stress, heavy workloads, and ineffective communication within the organization.

This study examines how the type of enterprise influences the application of non-financial motivation tools. Based on the literature and previous findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Male employees are less likely to perceive non-financial motivational factors as highly effective.

H1b: Female employees evaluate non-financial motivational factors as more effective than their male counterparts.

H2a: Employee performance improves when enterprises provide training opportunities.

H2b: Employees in higher positions demand corporate training and professional development more than those in lower positions.

H3: Interest in non-financial motivational tools rises with employee age.

H4: Employees holding higher positions view non-financial motivators as more impactful than those in lower roles.

H5: Over time, employees tend to favor non-financial motivation over financial rewards.

Materials and Methods

The goal of this research is to explore non-financial motivation strategies in SMEs and analyze how these tools affect employee effort and engagement. To address this goal, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Do SME employees regard financial and non-financial motivation methods as equally important?

RQ2: Does participation in corporate training and education encourage employee development?

RQ3: Are non-financial motivation tools in SMEs updated regularly?

RQ4: Do employees perceive non-financial motivation tools as genuinely effective?

This paper applies statistical analysis to confirm or refute the hypotheses listed above.

Data collection methods

A structured questionnaire comprising 16 closed-ended and rating-scale questions was created based on the formulated hypotheses. The survey was conducted in January 2021, and data were gathered by the Division of External Relations at the Institute of Technology and Business in Ceske Budejovice.

Table 1. Research Sample Structure

Demographic Variable	Category	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Gender	Male	78	35%
	Female	145	65%
	Total	223	100%
Age Group	Male (under 30)	39	17.49%
	Male (over 30)	39	17.49%
	Female (under 30)	69	30.92%
	Female (over 30)	76	34.10%
	Total	223	100%
Job Position	Management/Leader	105	47.08%
	Operative	118	52.92%
	Total	223	100%

Source: Own

The final sample included 223 respondents (**Table 1**).

Data evaluation

The study focused on enterprises and employees across required roles and organizational structures. About 25% of responses were collected via face-to-face interviews conducted by a colleague, while the remaining 75% were collected online using Google Workspace, following a personal request from the interviewer.

Statistical analysis

Analysis methods included frequency distribution tables and graphs, contingency tables, descriptive statistics, boxplots, and asymptotic one- and two-sample tests for proportions and means. Calculations were performed using Excel and R.

Results and Discussion

H1a: Male employees are less likely to consider non-financial motivational factors effective.

Across the sample, 25% of respondents preferred non-financial motivators. Male employees reported non-financial factors as effective in 31.65% of cases, compared to 21.38% for female employees. Therefore, H1a is not supported within this sample and cannot be generalized to the overall population. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis H1b is supported in the sample. Its validity for the population was assessed with an asymptotic two-sample test. Let the proportions of men and women favoring non-financial motivators be π_m and π_z , respectively. Testing the null hypothesis $H_0: \pi_m = \pi_z$ against the right-tailed alternative $H_1: \pi_m > \pi_z$ yields a test statistic of $u = 1.70$ and a p-value of 0.045. At the 5% significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that the alternative hypothesis holds for the population.

H1b: Female employees consider non-financial motivators significantly more effective than male employees.

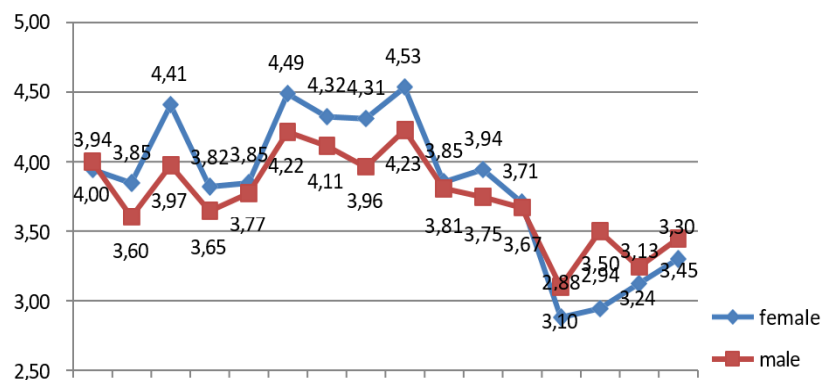


Figure 1. Assessment of Non-Financial Motivation by Gender (Source: Own)

Non-financial motivation was assessed using 16 distinct non-financial factors, whereas financial motivation was measured through 6 financial factors. Respondents rated all items on a 1–5 scale, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

The overall effectiveness of non-financial motivation by gender can be examined through the mean scores of the variable “Evaluation of Non-Financial Motivation by Gender” (3.827 for women and 3.752 for men). Within the sample, female employees tend to rate non-financial motivational factors slightly higher than males; however, the difference is modest. To determine whether this difference is significant across the population, an asymptotic test for population means was conducted. Let μ_z and μ_m denote the population means for non-financial motivation preferences among women and men, respectively. The null hypothesis $H_0: \mu_z = \mu_m$ was tested against the right-tailed alternative $H_1: \mu_z > \mu_m$. The resulting test statistic was $u = 0.838$ with a p-value of 0.202. At the 5% significance level, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, indicating that H1b cannot be confirmed as statistically significant for the entire population. This outcome may be attributed either to limited sample size or to the possibility that some non-financial factors are rated higher by men than by women (**Figure 1**).

H2a: Enterprise-funded employee training enhances performance

Among the 187 responses collected for this question, 82.51% answered “Yes,” confirming that enterprise-sponsored training motivates better performance within the sample. To assess generalizability to the population, an asymptotic one-sample test for proportions was conducted. Let π represent the population proportion responding “Yes.” Testing $H_0: \pi \leq 0$ against $H_1: \pi > 0$ yielded $u = 84.45$ with a p-value of 2.2×10^{-16} . At a 5% significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming H2a as valid for the broader population.

H2b: Higher-level employees have a greater demand for corporate training

Overall, 90.54% of respondents expressed interest in corporate education and training. Participation was higher among employees in management or leadership positions (93.27%) compared to operational staff (88.14%), confirming H2b within the sample. To test population-level validity, an asymptotic two-sample proportion test was applied. Let π_m denote management employees and π_o operational staff requesting training. Testing $H_0: \pi_m = \pi_o$ against $H_1: \pi_m > \pi_o$ yielded $u = 1.304$ and a p-value of 0.096. At a 5% significance level, the null hypothesis is not rejected. However, at 10%, the alternative hypothesis can be considered significant. The reduced reliability may be due to the small number of respondents in individual groups.

H3: Preference for non-financial motivation rises with employee age

Among the sample, 25% of respondents expressed a preference for non-financial motivators. The proportion of employees favoring non-financial motivation increases progressively with age, supporting H3 in the sample. Population-level

significance was tested using a chi-square test of independence. The null hypothesis stated that preference for non-financial motivation is independent of age, against the alternative that it depends on age. The test statistic $X^2 = 9.43$ with a p-value of 0.051. At the 5% significance level, the alternative hypothesis cannot be confirmed; however, at 6%, it is considered statistically significant (approximately 94% confidence), suggesting partial support for H3.

H4: Higher-ranking employees rate non-financial motivators as more effective

In the sample, management-level employees rated non-financial motivation as effective more often (28.85%) than operational staff (21.19%), supporting H4. To test generalizability, a two-sample asymptotic proportion test was conducted. Let π_m and π_o represent the population proportions of management and operational employees rating non-financial motivators as effective. Testing $H_0: \pi_m = \pi_o$ against $H_1: \pi_m > \pi_o$ yielded $u = 1.32$ and $p\text{-value} = 0.093$. At the 5% level, the hypothesis is not confirmed; however, it is supported at 10%, indicating moderate population-level validity (maximum reliability ~90%).

H5: Employees increasingly prefer non-financial over financial motivation over time

Among respondents, 46.1% rated non-financial motivation higher than financial incentives. Notably, positive responses rose with age—from 35.7% in younger employees to 63.6% in older groups—confirming H5 in the sample. Population-level significance was evaluated using a chi-square test. Testing the null hypothesis of independence against the alternative of age-dependence yielded $X^2 = 4.0$, $p\text{-value} = 0.136$. At a 5% significance level, the hypothesis is not confirmed for the overall population, likely due to small sample sizes in older age categories.

Summary of hypothesis testing

A total of nine hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3, H4, H5) were tested. H1a was entirely rejected, while the alternative hypothesis was supported. H1b and H5 were confirmed within the sample only. Hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H4 were supported in the sample, and at a 10% significance level, they are valid for the population. H2a achieved 5% population-level significance, confirming its general applicability to SMEs in the Czech Republic.

RQ1: Do SME employees consider non-financial and financial motivation tools equally important?

The first research question aimed to determine whether employees in SMEs perceive non-financial motivation tools as equally important and effective in enhancing performance compared to financial incentives. Considering the study results and the tested hypotheses (H1, H3, H4, H5), financial motivators are still more commonly preferred than non-financial ones. Among male respondents, the preference ratio between financial and non-financial factors was 32% versus 68%, while among female respondents, the gap was wider at 21% versus 79%. Nevertheless, a higher preference for financial motivators does not necessarily indicate they are more valued. Based on the second hypothesis (H1b) verification, non-financial motivators appear more significant for women than for men, with mean scores of 3.827 for women and 3.752 for men on a 1–5 scale. Additionally, analysis of historical and current data shows that positive perceptions of non-financial motivation increase with age.

RQ2: Do SME managers promote corporate training and education as a development tool?

The second research question investigated whether SME managers utilize enterprise-funded training and education as a development instrument for both employees and the organization. Hypothesis H2 testing revealed that corporate training, especially when financed by the company, is highly effective. Over 90% of respondents considered enterprise-supported training beneficial. Breaking it down by role, 88% of operational employees and 93% of managerial and leadership staff rated training positively. These findings suggest that SME management generally supports employee development through organized and funded training programs, contributing to overall enterprise growth.

RQ3: Are non-financial motivation tools regularly updated in SMEs?

The third research question explored the degree to which SMEs implement and periodically update non-financial motivation tools. Results indicated that senior and older employees consider non-financial motivators particularly important and often prefer them over financial incentives. However, the study confirmed that SMEs typically do not update non-financial motivation systems on a regular basis. This finding aligns with hypotheses H3 and H5, which relate to age-dependent demand and the increasing preference for non-financial motivators over time.

RQ4: Are non-financial motivation tools genuinely motivating for SME employees?

The fourth research question assessed whether the selected non-financial motivators are perceived as effective by employees. Respondents evaluated 16 non-financial motivational factors on a 1–5 scale. The analysis showed variation in perceived importance: lower-rated incentives included overseas business trips and company-provided equipment (e.g., car, phone, laptop), while higher-rated incentives included job security, workplace relationships and atmosphere, training opportunities, career development, leadership style, and communication quality. Overall, most non-financial factors received positive ratings, averaging around 4, confirming their motivating potential for SME employees. Hypotheses H1b and H2a are particularly related to these results.

Additional insights

The study confirmed that gender, age, and job position influence perceptions of non-financial motivators, consistent with findings from Ashkanani [6], Lorincová *et al.* [1], and Forsten-Astikainen *et al.* [8]. However, no significant differences were observed based on the sector (public vs. private), in contrast to Cowley and Smith [12]. Another notable result is that more than 90% of respondents value enterprise-funded training, with interest rising among employees in higher positions, supporting previous work by Lukasik [43] and Johar *et al.* [42]. The research also indicated that SMEs currently prioritize financial incentives over non-financial ones, echoing historical trends reported by Fujimoto *et al.* [51] and Saksvik *et al.* [52]. Over time, however, there is a gradual recognition of the importance of non-financial motivators, as outlined by Borowski [24]. Finally, the evaluation of employees by their supervisors emerged as a key driver of motivation, reinforcing findings from Lee [53] and Sheikh *et al.* [47].

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to identify non-financial motivation tools in SMEs and analyze their impact on employee engagement and work effort. The results indicate that non-financial motivators are particularly important for employees in higher-level positions, and interest in these tools increases with age. This trend may reflect the current structure of SME motivation systems, which are often designed to address managerial needs. The study also revealed that employees with higher work intensity value non-financial motivators as much as, or even more than, financial incentives.

Despite this, SMEs still tend to focus more on financial incentives, suggesting there is room for improvement. Awareness of the importance of non-financial motivational tools remains limited, highlighting the need for enterprises to update and optimize their non-financial incentive systems. These findings provide a foundation for future research aimed at enhancing motivation strategies in SMEs.

Acknowledgments: None

Conflict of interest: None

Financial support: None

Ethics statement: None

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