Roxana CIOCLOV,
Ion LALA-POPA
West University of Timisoara, Romania

THE DYNAMICS OF THE SPIRAL MODEL: MOTIVATION <> PERFORMANCE

Case Study

Keywords
Motivation;
Performance;
Inter-dependence;
Bidirectional model

JEL Classification
O15

Abstract

Management literature frequently refers to individual motivation and performance at the workplace as two interrelated concepts. The current paper takes this as its starting point. The aim of the paper is to briefly analyze how motivation can generate performance, how performance can generate motivation and how this relationship can explain both the theory and the practical consequences of the motivation <> performance dynamics. To this end, qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to investigate the perception of about 300 Romanian employees. The conclusive model which resulted from the research offers valuable insights into the factors that can influence and determine both motivation and performance at the workplace (in order of importance). It also looks at how management teams make better strategic decisions when they rely on what is most efficient for their employees in terms of the impact of motivation and performance.

INTRODUCTION

The current paper aims to analyze the organizational environment and the relation between motivation and performance at the workplace. Specialized literature dedicates ample space to the in-depth analysis of each of the two concepts but the relationship between the two concepts is less well-studied.

Although numerous sources in literature mention the impact that individual motivation can have on individual performance, references to the potential of performance to trigger motivation are not very often found. Therefore, in the following chapters, the paper will analyze the complete dynamics between the two phenomena (from a theoretical perspective), a practical case study and research methodology, conclusions and finally the model itself resulted from the research. The model can be useful for organizations, helping them rank the factors that generate motivation and performance, allowing them to better target their actions and make their decisions so that they will obtain the desired outcome in terms of employees' responses.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS. DYNAMICS BETWEEN MOTIVATION<>PERFORMANCE

The specialized literature has analyzed the type of factors that can contribute to employees' high performance. Daniel Pink (Pink, 2009) analyzed the evolution of motivation in generating high performances:

1.   Motivation 1.0 (a purely biological motivation, triggering high performance based on the survival instinct, performance as a means of survival)

2.   Motivation 2.0 (motivation to perform is based on the wish to benefit from promised rewards and correspondingly to avoid being punished, when the objective is not reached)

3.   Motivation 3.0 (the most recent type of motivation is considered to trigger performance due to the full involvement of the individual in his activities; it is based on his need to fulfill his own individual potential, to express his autonomy and to continuously learn).

The above-mentioned types of motivation can therefore easily explain how employees could become successful employees if they are correctly motivated and determined to achieve the desired result.

Additionally, Collins (Collins, 2010) highlights the impact that motivation can have on performance. It is considered that organizations can reach excellence when they have found the answers to three questions: 1) what is the organization passionate about? 2) what can the organization be the best in the world at? 3) what can keep the organization's economic engine going?. These are important questions a good organization has to answer; two of them have to do directly with the employees and the way the organizational culture glues all of them together: what are they passionate about and what can they be extremely good at? Passion, enthusiasm and the potential to deliver good results are the ingredients necessary to make an organization excellent in everything it does.

It can be concluded from the above that motivation is acknowledged as an important factor in triggering individual performance. On the other hand, the paper aims to analyze the reverse relationship, demonstrating that performance itself can generate motivation.

Examining employees' performance in medium and large companies, practice shows that the evaluation of performance is a complex phenomenon that has the potential to generate motivation in itself. It is what the paper labeled as "instrumentalized performance". Performance, once evaluated on a yearly or half-yearly basis, can be used as an instrument to motivate employees to perform better from one activity to another. Companies use evaluation as a method to trigger the determination they want to see in their employees who will be at their best if promised good evaluation results or other potential rewards. This is close to the concept of Motivation 2.0 referenced by Daniel Pink, where performance is triggered by a promise; in this case the promise can simply be the performance itself. Performance itself may become the aim as it relies on the exploration of the ludic side of the efforts that usually accompany hard work; challenges are addressed in such a way that they are more likely to be embraced.

When demonstrating that performance generates motivation, two important case studies analyzed by Daniel Pink in his book (Pink, 2009) are worth mentioning. The study performed by Harry Harlow in 1949 (Pink, 2009, p. 7) analyzes the behavior of primates when introducing a mechanical puzzle into their cages. Without any prior training or any indication, the animals started (out of curiosity) to analyze the recently introduced object and to try to solve it. In a short time, the primates were able to solve the puzzle and every time they received a new puzzle, they demonstrated more and more determination to solve it. This proves at a very basic level that the very fact of being motivated by a first performance will trigger the enthusiasm for the next performances. This is the essence of intrinsic motivation, which actually resides in the enthusiasm itself for the task or for the result. It has even been demonstrated that the primates, once they receive food as a reward for their performance, they start being distracted and their performance decreases.

This would be the correspondent of extrinsic motivation, which can diminish intrinsic motivation. A later study (1969) by Edward Deci analyzes the human behavior in the presence and absence of extrinsic motivation (Pink, 2009, pp. 7-9). The study discusses the behaviors of two groups (Group A and B), both being asked to solve a tridimensional puzzle (Soma cube) for three consequent days. On the first day, both groups were given the task to replicate three images they received by using the given puzzle pieces. They all behaved approximately the same. On the second day, Group A received a reward for every model they were able to replicate, while Group B followed the same principles as on the first day (they did not receive any rewards). The result was that performance of Group A was slightly higher than the performance of Group B, confirming that Motivation 2.0 has short term benefits of stimulating better performances based on the promised rewards. On the third day, on the other hand, they received the same instructions as on the first day, being asked to replicate the images without being offered any reward. The result was that Group B slightly increased their performance based on the intrinsic interest that individuals started manifesting for the activity itself. On the other hand, Group A had a much lower performance based on the reward deprivation.

This last study therefore demonstrated that individuals developed a natural interest in their work and were capable of increasing their performance based on their pure interest and enthusiasm. However, once they faced potential extrinsic stimuli, their intrinsic motivation decreased, which would finally affect both their performance and natural interest in their job in the long term.

Moreover, bearing in mind Motivation 3.0 factor, individuals could feel motivated as long as they have the framework to fulfill their potential, to express their autonomy and decide on their work and self-development. All successful individuals are familiar with these three elements as their performance will be based on their own strengths, abilities and trust in their own contributions to the future.

PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

Theoretical model proposed

The above-mentioned concepts are the basis of an empirical study. It has been theoretically proven that individual Motivation and Performance are inter-dependent, determining each other as part of a bi-directional relationship which is established between them. At the same time when employees' motivation can trigger high performances, results and success itself (so performance itself) can be a significant trigger/incentive in motivating the individuals for future performances. Therefore, the relationship between the two can be a cycle, or even a spiral, where every new cycle can be an increment of the previous one, with higher levels of motivation and performance for every new cycle. Therefore, this has become one of the most important questions that the research aims to answer.

In order to propose a theoretical model, a couple of determinants of motivation and of performance have been defined, aiming at the validation of the role that each factor plays in motivation & performance. This has therefore become the other important objective of the research.

The proposed theoretical model can be consulted in Figure 1. This refers to the following issues:

1. Factors determining motivation (and their correspondent sub-factors)
   a. Organization & Management style
      i. Organizational culture
      ii. Benefits & perks
      iii. Managerial practices
      iv. Relationship with direct manager
      v. Inspirational attributes of management representatives
   b. Work environment characteristics
      i. Physical workspace
      ii. Work location
      iii. Work atmosphere
   c. Personal characteristics
      i. Self-directed learning
      ii. Career promotion determination
      iii. The achieved success

2. Factors determining performance (and their correspondent sub-factors)
   a. Enthusiasm for the task
      i. Personal level of motivation
      ii. Enthusiasm for the activity
      iii. Challenge of the activity
   b. Enthusiasm for the obtained result
      i. Self-contentment
      ii. Opportunity to prove oneself
   c. Enthusiasm for the obtained benefit
      i. Material benefits
      ii. Non-material benefits

The above-mentioned determinants aim to encompass the various sub-factors that are considered to influence motivation and performance in specialized literature. Motivation for the job: firstly the employee's activity can be triggered by the organization through its culture and management representatives & practices, or through the characteristics of the work environment (from both a physical and social perspective); secondly, motivation can predominantly be generated by the individual himself and his own determination to learn, get involved, be active and proactive and show enthusiasm for every new learning opportunity and challenge. Thus, motivation may be determined predominantly by one of these factors, but it could also depend on the field of activity; these three factors influence each other to different degrees.

The same is true for performance: some individuals are more inclined to perform well if they have an intrinsic inclination for the activities and tasks they do; others can perform well thanks to the enthusiasm they have for the results of their work, while others can perform better when they are promised to benefit from certain rewards depending on their performance.

These factors are considered to generate either motivation or performance; they are based on the assumption that they will maintain an ongoing cycle repetition, which opens a variety of opportunities to be analyzed in regards to the similarity of the consequent cycles:

1. The cycles can be identical, in which case the cycles will repeat in the same way, successively;

2. The cycles can be different; the model is a spiral in which every new iteration (or cycle) will be the increment of the previous one.

In the hypothesis of a spiral model with incremental cycles, the initial motivation (Motivation 0) would be the baseline upon which all the successive motivations will be developed as a minimum value. Similarly, Performance 0 (the performance of the initial cycle) will be the starting point, whereas all next performances will be higher than the initial one. Such a discovery, once validated, would be of significant value for the academics and practitioners: it demonstrates the capacity of the two forces (Motivation & Performance) to self-sustain and boost the dynamics between them while generating each other in a natural way. This would, therefore, help organizations better understand the specific behaviors and needs of their employees and eventually even predict their potential responses to various stimuli.

Research methodology

The research is based on an empirical approach, as this implies direct observation of phenomena which occur in practice; the conclusions and observations resulted from the study can contribute to the development and enrichment of the theories defining motivation and performance at the workplace.

The research started from a series of qualitative observations related to the potential of the two variables (motivation and performance) to self-determine and influence each other. The two possible theoretical models have been developed based on this primary hypothesis: the spiral model with identical cycles, or the spiral model with incremental cycles.

However, in order for the study to bring as much added value as possible, a quantitative element has been added to the research, by submitting the theoretical model to the validation of a significant target group. The model has therefore been analyzed piece by piece, as part of a questionnaire created in order to validate its various subdimensions.

The questionnaire contained four main sections: Section I (general information about the respondent so that they can identify the correct group they belong to), Section II (perception of the respondent related to motivation; it contains one question corresponding to each of the subfactors identified in the research as being able to determine motivation; they all were grouped under the three main factors: Organization & Management style, Work environment characteristics, Personal characteristics), Section III (perception of the respondent related to performance –it contains one question corresponding to each of the subfactors identified in the research as being able to determine performance, all grouped under the three main factors: Enthusiasm for the task, Enthusiasm for the obtained result, Enthusiasm for the benefit), Section IV (it analyzes correlations between motivation and performance and consists of statements that would help validate the entire model and understand the type of cycles the spiral model contains).

As it is described above, the first and last section would help interpret the responses and would support the understanding of the overall context. However, the two sections that bring immediate and significant results are the intermediate sections (II and III), where respondents quantified the importance they considered each sub-factor had in generating motivation and performance. To this end, the respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they considered each given sub-factor would positively influence their level of motivation at their workplace; the same procedure was applied for performance.

The answers referenced a simple four options scale: <25%, 25%-50%, 50%-75%, >75%. This was chosen in order to reduce any risk of neutral answers, and in order to simplify as much as possible the questionnaire itself and the time to apply it. The research was considered successful judging by the high rate of completion and positive feedback received from the targeted group.

The responses were grouped in three intervals:

- Low influence interval (cumulating the "<25%" and "25%-50%" responses)
- Medium influence interval (cumulating the "25%-50%" and "50%-75%" responses)
- High influence interval (cumulating the "50%-75%" and ">75%" responses).

This classification allows the interpretation of all responses in these intervals of influence that each motivation sub-factor can have on performance. Depending on the weight of each interval, the research will finally conclude which sub-factor and factor has the highest influence on each of the two issues (motivation and performance), and rank them.

Population. Target group

From the point of view of the target group, the questionnaire was planned to address Romanian employees only, considering that cultural specifics could influence the responses and perceptions on the subject. Therefore, the objective was to address employees from three different industries as this would potentially allow a comparison between these different sectors once the results were consolidated. The three industries selected were: IT & Telecommunications, Services sector and Public sector.

The questionnaire was distributed in the online media, and was sent to individuals that were active in the previously mentioned industries. It is estimated that approximately 5500 people were addressed, out of which approximately 22% (~1200 people) received the questionnaire. The response rate was of approximately 25%.

The distribution of the targeted group across the three targeted industries is as follows: 25% in the Public sector, 28% in the Services sector, 47% in the IT & Telecom sector. The three industries selected for the study are of extreme relevance for this research considering that: IT & Telecom industry records the highest salaries and benefits packages in Romania. Therefore, IT becomes an industry where employers have become more and more creative in finding ways to motivate their employees, retain them and support them perform. Internal procedures concerning the welfare of the employees can become easily complex: therefore, such research can bring light in regards to what people actually feel and need at their workplace. The Services sector is the sector where employees are in direct contact with their customers; therefore their level of motivation and performance can be easily perceived by their end customers and consequently can directly influence the overall perception about the respective organizations. Last but not least, the Public sector is estimated to concentrate around 30% of the entire Romanian population (Voinea, et al., 2010) being frequently compared with the private sector in terms of the quality of the workplace for the employees. This research attempts to identify potential gaps, differences and similarities between the fields of activity; it encourages organizations to target and define activities which take into consideration the specificity of their industry and their employees' needs.

Moreover, the population (employees) was categorized by the size of the company they were working for, showing a distribution of: 59% large companies (39% in IT & Telecom, 10% in Services, 10% in Public sector), 14% medium companies (2% in IT & Telecom, 6% in Services, 6% in Public sector) and 27% small companies (5% in IT & Telecom, 13% Services, 9% Public sector).

The target group had also managerial and executive roles, the distribution of responses registering 74% executive roles and 26% managerial roles. This validates that the responses reflected the perceptions of an environment that took into consideration a span of control of ~1:3.

From a demographic perspective, the responses reflected a distribution of 54% females and 46% male respondents, which was a proper distribution of the targeted group.

From an age perspective, 37% of the respondents were below 30 years old, 57% were aged between 30-50 years old and 6% were above 50 years old.

Finally, the target group was classified according to the number of years they worked in the same company (research based on employees' experience in the company): 14% worked for less than 1 year in the company, 42% worked between 1-3 years for the same company, 26% worked for 3-7 years in the current company, while 18% worked for more than 7 years in the respective organization. This again proves that employees' perceptions and opinions about their current workplace were based on experience, as 86% of the respondents had been in the same company for more than 1 year.

Research results

According to the proposed theoretical model, motivation and performance were considered to be determined by three main factors.

Each of the six factors was split into a series of sub-factors, as presented before.

The responses of the questionnaire led to the following results of the research:

- The interval of influence in which each of the factors and sub-factors were categorized;
- The differences between sectors, when there were any;
- Factors were ranked depending on their sub-factor average influence level, as they were classified by the majority of the targeted group.

1. Influences on Motivation

The results (Table 1) prove that almost all motivation sub-factors can have high influence on motivation; "The physical work space" is the only sub-factor which was classified as having a medium influence. This means that the physical working space does not necessarily have an impact on the motivation that people feel for their job.

The respondents classified each factor by the three intervals of influence; the interval that met the majority of responses was taken into consideration when calculating an average for each of the factors. The interval meeting majority was the high influence interval for most of the sub-factors (excepting the one mentioned above). The factors were calculated and ranked based on their associated averages, where the average itself can be considered as a degree of confidence.

Therefore, it was concluded that motivation can primarily be influenced by the Personal characteristics factor, which recorded an average of 72% of the responses. The second place was taken by the Organization and Management factor, with an average of 60%, all sub-factors being classified in the high influence interval. Last factor, but very close to the second one, was the Work environment factor with an average of 60%, where, however, one of the sub-factors was classified in the medium influence interval, which qualified this factor as less powerful.

This analysis is therefore extremely valuable as it proves that individual motivation resides primarily in intrinsic motivation: the individuals' personal characteristics can make them curious about every new opportunity and willing to learn and fight for every challenge; more importantly, they can self-motivate themselves based on their own success. This is already proof that motivation is much stronger when it stems from personal performance and success than when it comes from external stimuli; it acts as the "carrot" from the Motivation 2.0 approach.

In regards to the organization & management style, it is proven that the direct relationship with the manager is one of the most impactful sub-factors in generating motivation. This underlines the capacity of the manager to encourage his/her direct relationships which will make employees feel that their work is appreciated and they are supported to develop professionally and personally.

From the perspective of the work environment, an extremely relevant sub-factor that can generate motivation is the quality of the social environment. Factors such as work atmosphere, the relationships established in the teams, the trust and communication that are encouraged in the team can contribute significantly to the motivation of the individuals, offering them the feeling of belonging to a team they can identify themselves with.

From the point of view of the field of activity, there are some differences between the three sectors. If the Public & Services sector grouped all the sub-factors and factors in the high influence interval, the situation in IT & Telecom industry is different. This last industry sector placed the Personal characteristics factor in the high influence interval, with all its subfactors, whereas Organization & Management and Work environment had their sub-factors split across all the influence intervals (low, medium, high). There were sub-factors under these two factors which were considered as having high influence: benefits, managerial practices, direct relationships with manager, social environment at work. However, proving that these two factors have less influence than the Personal characteristics is worth investigating.

This can be interpreted in the context of an industry that has been "spoiling" its employees, offering them various instruments to trigger their motivation. Is this because the industry has reached a saturation level? Could the next step of the organization be to simplify and declutter their strategies, by focusing more on fostering intrinsic motivation? This can be a first step of the interpretation of results, given that employees were not much influenced by the inspiring attributes of the management, organizational culture, physical work space or work location.

On the other hand, the positive outcome for the Public & Services sector is that their employees' motivation can increase more easily, as they seem to respond positively to all the discussed sub-factors. This can be attributed to their job specificity, based on social interactions that can lead to more dynamical characters and flexibility.

2. Influences on Performance

The results (Table 2) prove that all performance sub-factors can have a high influence on performance. This means that performance itself can be improved in different ways, either by making use of the enthusiasm individuals have for the work they do, for the results they obtain or even for the benefits they foresee.

In order to be able to rank the sub-factors, the same procedure was applied to performance sub-factors as for the motivation sub-factors. Each sub-factor was placed in an influence interval depending on the majority of responses. The percentages of most responses resulted in an average per factor, in a so called degree of confidence per factor (based on the "popularity" of each sub-factor as having a positive influence on performance).

The obtained averages demonstrate that the most important factor that could influence performance was the enthusiasm for the task / activity, with an average of 71%. Enthusiasm for the result was the second most powerful factor that could influence performance with an average of 70% (so very close to first place average). The third place, so the least powerful factor was enthusiasm for the benefits, with an average of 61%.

This ranking can only confirm the importance of the intrinsic source of the stimuli. The true elements that can trigger employees' successful performance come from the intrinsic nature of the human being: people's natural need to like what they do and to be proud of their results and achievements. This will be the most important forces that can determine individuals to do their best at the work place: they meet all the criteria and obtain the targeted results (if not even over-achieve them).

Individuals, however, might perform well due to material and non-material benefits. The benefit factors influencing performance can be considered the "carrot" from the Motivation 2.0 theory. They can determine the individuals to perform well when they are promised to receive various benefits from

the exterior world, such as: recognition, future opportunities for professional growth and development, performance bonuses, salary increases, career advancement and promotion in terms of both role & income. Though they are considered less impactful than the other intrinsic factors, organizations may use them more easily.

The Public & Services sector is more flexible and all the factors were placed in the high influence interval. The IT & Telecom industry registers a slight difference: the dynamic character of the work sub-factor (as part of the enthusiasm for the task/activity factor) is the only sub-factor placed in the medium interval. This could be explained by the wide variety of work alternatives on the market for IT employees, which is why they do not necessarily find a trigger in the dynamics and complexity of their work; they can perform in other organizations where potentially the challenges are not necessarily at the same level of complexity.

3. Correlations between Motivation & Performance

The final section of the questionnaire approaches a final correlation between both concepts and the relationship between them. The section consists of six statements that the respondents were asked to evaluate and answer based on their level of agreement with each of them, on a scale of four answers: total disagreement, partial disagreement, partial agreement and total agreement.

The answers were grouped in intervals just as in the previous two sections of the questionnaire, the intervals being this time an indicator of agreement:
- High agreement interval (total and partial agreement)
- Medium agreement interval (partial agreement and partial disagreement)
- Low agreement interval (total and partial disagreement)

The aim of the statements that the respondents received was to validate certain correlations between motivation and performance, the cycle established between the two variables and the potential increases of the variables in time, which would help identify the character of the cycles (identical or incremental).

Statement 1: A motivated individual is more involved in the workplace, being highly probable to become a high-performer. This statement was placed in the high agreement interval by 96% of the respondents.

Statement 2: A high-performer individual is often motivated by his personal performance, being highly probable to continue to perform well in the future. It was placed in the high agreement interval by 94% of the respondents.

Statement 3: Motivation of a high-performer is stronger than the motivation of a low-performer. It

was placed in the high agreement interval by 78% of the respondents.

Statement 4: In the absence of performance, motivation experienced by individuals tends to decrease in time. It was placed in the high agreement interval by 88% of the respondents.

Statement 5: Motivation experienced after a successful performance is higher than motivation experienced before the performance. It was placed in the high agreement interval by 85% of the respondents.

Statement 6: Performance at the workplace tends to increase in time. It was placed in the high agreement interval by 71% of the respondents.

As shown above, all statements basically dissect the theoretical model proposed in order to receive validation on its various subcomponents, demonstrating that:
- Motivated individuals are more likely to be successful.
- Successful individuals are more likely to feel motivated by their own performance.
- Motivation and performance of consequent cycles tend to increase in time, based on incremental progression of individuals' level of motivation and performance.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research, the paper aims to offer a framework in which organizations can plan their employees' related actions. Managerial decisions could be validated by running them through the spiral model of Motivation & Performance, encouraging organizations to analyze the factors that the activity they plan to implement could impact the employees' motivation & performance.

Key takeaways from the current research are that intrinsic factors guarantee the success of an employee (in terms of performance) and the involvement, enthusiasm and contentment of the individuals (motivation). Therefore, the priority of organizations should be to invest more on proper recruiting and testing of the individuals before they can become part of their company, as their personal characteristics, instincts, preferred reactions, and behaviors can already be understood, or at least predicted so that the rate of success they could have in the company can be ensured to a higher degree.

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APPENDICES

Table 1. Matrix – Factors influencing motivation per industry

Factors	Sub-factors	IT & Telecom.			Public			Services		
		Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗	Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗	Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗
Organization & Management	Organizational culture	53%	55%	47%	34%	58%	66%	35%	53%	65%
	Package of benefits	42%	53%	58%	32%	58%	68%	43%	52%	57%
	Managerial practices	50%	46%	50%	36%	55%	64%	34%	47%	66%
	Relationship with direct manager	37%	43%	63%	24%	43%	76%	21%	41%	79%
	Inspirational attributes of management	58%	44%	42%	42%	51%	58%	36%	42%	64%
Work environment	Physical workspace	50%	60%	50%	45%	54%	55%	40%	55%	60%
	Work location	56%	50%	44%	45%	51%	55%	42%	45%	58%
	Work atmosphere	33%	48%	67%	16%	59%	84%	20%	41%	80%
Personal characteristics	Self-directed learning	33%	44%	67%	17%	42%	83%	13%	44%	87%
	Career promotion determination	38%	49%	62%	28%	55%	72%	26%	56%	74%
	Previously obtained success	36%	49%	64%	25%	49%	75%	15%	45%	85%

Note. As resulted from the research

Table2. Matrix - Factors influencing performance per industry

Factors	Sub-factors	IT & Telecom.			Public			Services		
		Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗	Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗	Influence ↘	Influence →	Influence ↗
Interest in the task	Level of motivation	37%	60%	63%	20%	53%	80%	19%	45%	81%
	Enthusiasm for the task	26%	39%	74%	20%	50%	80%	14%	35%	86%
	Dynamic character of work	45%	56%	55%	37%	55%	63%	26%	57%	74%
Interest in the result	Career promotion	40%	57%	60%	30%	41%	70%	26%	56%	74%
	Self-contentment related to results	35%	47%	65%	16%	45%	84%	17%	42%	83%
Interest in the benefit	Non-material stimuli	46%	49%	54%	34%	51%	66%	29%	47%	71%
	Material stimuli	40%	50%	60%	43%	54%	57%	38%	51%	62%

Note. As resulted from the research
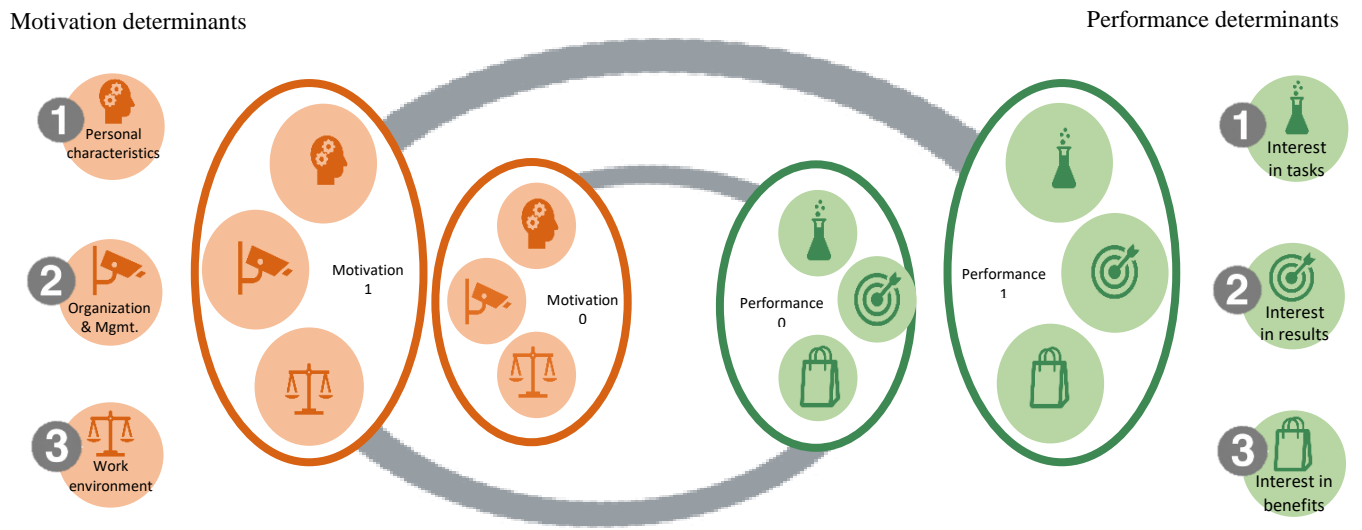
Motivation determinants

Performance determinants

Figure 1. Dynamics of the Spiral Model Motivation <> Performance
Note. Theoretical model proposed and validated by the research