

FULFILLING PSYCHOLOGICAL vs. FINANCIAL NEEDS

The effect of extrinsic rewards on motivation and attachment to internship opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) has posited that extrinsic rewards have the potential to undermine intrinsic motivation and thus diminish engagement, enjoyment and attachment to activities (Lepper, Green & Nisbett, 1973). A study of public relations students who have completed a recent internship (n=141) indicates that need satisfaction trumps extrinsic rewards in predicting both supervisor and overall internship experience approval. Implications for educators are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades, scholars and professionals from all disciplines have positively endorsed the value of internships (Keenan, 1992; Meeske, 1988). The value of internships in public relations has become especially important as students in an exceptionally competitive field attempt to distinguish themselves while simultaneously garnering important job skills. Berger reported that "Most public relations degree programs either require or strongly encourage and internship." (Berger, 1991, p. 30), while three iterations of the Commission on Public Relations Education, including the 2006 report, listed a "supervised experience" as one of the core courses in their recommended undergraduate curricula (Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006).

While the report also examined issues related to pay, or the lack thereof, the greatest concern in the field is to what degree the student benefits educationally from the internship experience. While financial gain is important, an improved skill set, advanced knowledge of the field and practical experience can benefit the student ten-fold beyond the pittance often doled out to these young workers. From a theoretical perspective, the issue becomes even murkier. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) has argued that psychological need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation can be undermined by extrinsic rewards. Researchers have also found that engagement, enjoyment and attachment to activities can be limited when tangible rewards are administered. (Lepper, Green & Nisbett, 1973).

To that end, we conducted a study of public relations students who have completed an internship to assess whether students who were paid for their time there were more or less likely to value the experience and sense that their psychological needs were met. This study matters because the results will allow us to better assess whether financial gain or need satisfaction will better predict positive outcomes for interns. Based on these results, we might be better able to inform public relations organizations and educators as to what truly leads to a satisfying internship experience for the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Determination Theory

The underlying assumption of self-determination theory (SDT) is that individuals possess an inherent need for psychological fulfillment in order to reach optimum levels of well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe & Ryan, 2000) and development (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Deci and Ryan (1985) set forth three basic psychological needs that have remained the core of this research and have been shown to predict positive outcomes in a variety of areas (see Deci & Ryan, 2000 for a full overview).

Autonomy, competence and relatedness are additive in nature, and thus as Ryan (1995) explained, they compliment one another as they aid in an individual's sense of enjoyment in and attachment to a particular activity. Ryan likened these needs to the way in which a plant needs soil, water and sunlight to survive: one item is good, two is better and three leads to thriving.

Taking each need in turn briefly, autonomy consists of a need to know that one is not being controlled by others or feeling as though one's opinion is considered valuable in decision-making processes. Thus, while working in an organization, interns can feel autonomy support when supervisors and coworkers provide them with choices when choices are possible and explain why choices might not be possible in certain situations.

Competence is met when individuals feel as though they are meeting and mastering important challenges. This need can be supported through offering continually challenging activities that are just outside of the range of the intern's level of comfort, thus pushing growth while minimizing risk of failure.

Relatedness pertains to a desire to make meaningful connections with important others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have referred to this as a sense of belonging and it often is viewed as the need for social inclusion as well. To what degree an intern feels that they "fit in" at an organization can be a measure of relatedness, as can the way in which supervisors and permanent coworkers react to them.

SDT has been applied to the fields of medicine (Williams, Frankel, Campbell & Deci, 2000), education (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman & Ryan, 1981), sports (Vallerand, Deci & Ryan, 1987) and professional organizations (Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick and Judge, 2003), but it is

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application to workplace roles and environments that is most germane to our work.

Baard, Deci and Ryan (2004) found in a study of investment-bank employees that performance evaluations, which were produced by the company independent of the research, could be predicted by the participants' self-reported data regarding their own level of need satisfaction. Deci, Connell & Ryan (1989) also found that self-determined behavior on the part of managers led to higher levels of satisfaction among employees. In a more recent study, Vansteenkiste et al, (2007) found in two studies that participants who were motivated by extrinsic motivation were less satisfied with their job and had higher levels of burnout and lower levels of goal attainment.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that need satisfaction within the workplace leads to more positive outcomes while extrinsic control, either through reward or punishment, is likely to lead to a diminished sense of quality motivation.

Extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation

Some of the earliest work in the area of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation is derived from Festinger's (1957) work on cognitive dissonance. In comparing participants across high pay/low pay conditions in an experiment involving a boring task, Festinger found the low-pay participants reported a greater interest in the activity. He posited that the high-pay participants rationalized their behavior based on the extrinsic reward, while the low-pay participants could not do so. Thus, they convinced themselves they enjoyed the activity.

Later work in the field of motivation attempted to more acutely assess the degree to which extrinsic rewards, such as financial gain or physical reward impacted an individual's intrinsic desire to persist in an activity. Lepper, Green and Nisbett (1973) found that extrinsic rewards can interfere with an otherwise intrinsic motivation. Erez, Gopher and Arzi (1990) found that monetary rewards can inhibit an individual's performance while attempting to complete a difficult task. Gagne and Deci (2005) argue that tangible rewards of any stripe, but especially that of the financial realm, can be detrimental to positive outcomes within an activity and limit a more internal motivation.

A meta-analysis by Deci and colleagues (1999), however, led to one of the key aspects of this study. In many of the studies in which a physical reward did not impede need satisfaction or motivation, the money was provided as a reward that was not directly attached to the individual's performance, such as in the case of a salary. Conversely, when rewards were provided in a pressurized situation or contingent upon specific outcomes, intrinsic motivation waned.

Public Relations Internships

Studies clearly show that internships are important to students, universities and potential employers within the field of public relations (e.g., Beard & Morton, 1999; Tilson, 1999; Brown & Fall, 2005, Fall 2006). In addition, a great many studies have been written about developing and managing internship programs (e.g., Hanson, 1984; Keenen, 1992; Moore, 1983; Somerick, 1993 and Maynard, 2000).

The question of paid versus unpaid internships really didn't rise as an issue in the literature until the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education report. While the report reaffirmed the "central importance" of supervised work experience to public relations education, it also called out as a major discrepancy nonpaying internships. The Commission seemed most dismayed that only 36 percent of for-credit internships, as reported by survey respondents, paid a stipend or salary. The report also noted that some educators threw up the red "ethics" flag, opining that public firms "using unpaid interns to acquire and maintain clients are contributing unethically to their bottom line." (Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006, p. 60)

Part of the Commission's case against non-paying internships was based on a 1998 employer survey quoted in a May 2006 New York Times Op-

Ed piece. The Op-Ed's author, and subsequently the Commission report, quoted the study as finding that "compared to unpaid internships, paid placements are strongest on all measures of internship quality. The quality measures are also higher for those firms who intend to hire their interns." (Kamenetz, 2006, as quoted in the Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006, p. 60).

Conversely, a study of employers within the field did not show a strong relationship between quality and whether the internship was paid. Rather, the data suggested that firms that take their interns more seriously (would expect to hire them once the internship is completed) provide higher quality internships. (Bailey, Hughes & Barr, 2000)

Based on this review of the literature, we posed the following hypotheses and research questions:

Hypothesis 1: Autonomy, competence and relatedness will independently predict overall internship approval, even when controlling for internship payment as a variable.

Hypothesis 2: Autonomy, competence and relatedness will independently predict supervisor approval, even when controlling for internship payment as a variable.

Research question 1: To what degrees will the issue of payment impact the need-satisfaction variables in this study?

Research question 2: To what degrees will the issue of payment impact the ratings participants gave regarding their experiences at their internship?

METHOD

We sent a link to an Internet study to the Public Relations Student Society of America's (PRSSA's) listserv, asking for advisers to have their student chapter members take this survey. A total of 157 public relations students at various institutions across the country completed our survey, which asked them to recall and rate their experience at their most recent internship. When we removed the participants who had failed to complete at least half of the survey, we were left with a data set containing 141 usable responses (n=141). Mean substitution was used to replace missing data in those cases, with no more than 5 percent of any one variable and no more than 5 percent of any one case being replaced in this manner.

Participants were first asked to provide some basic demographic information, whether they had partaken in an internship and whether it was a paid internship. We also asked the participants approximately how much were they paid per hour, if they were paid. If paid in a lump sum, they were asked to translate that into an hourly rate.

The participants responded to various items that measured their experience at their internship. The items were rated on Likert-like scales that ranged from 1 to 7 and from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The scales were used to create five main variables, which are outlined below.

We measured overall satisfaction with two specific variables: supervisor approval and internship approval. We drew two four-item scales from prior research (Filak & Sheldon, 2003), with linguistic adaptations and a secondary phase added to measure intent beyond the current internship. The supervisor approval variable measured the degree to which the participants enjoyed working with the person directly overseeing their work during the internship and their desire to work with that person again at a future date. Internship approval measured a similar concept but asked the participants to rate the overall enjoyment of their experiences with the organization and the degree to which they would like to return for a future engagement. Both variables (supervisor approval $\alpha = .95$; internship approval $\alpha = .80$) returned acceptable reliability scores and thus were combined and averaged for later use in the study. The measurement of the psychological needs was drawn from the Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work

(Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004), which contains 21 items and measures into the three self-determined needs. Autonomy contained seven items and addressed issues of control and freedom at the internship ($\alpha = .80$). Competence contained six items and addressed issues of knowledge gain and improvement (e.g. "I was able to learn interesting new skills at my internship;" $\alpha = .78$). Relatedness contained eight items and addressed issues of interpersonal connections between the participant and important others at the internship ("People at my internship cared about me;" $\alpha = .85$). Summing the scores from the items and then dividing the sum by the number of items that contributed to the variable created all the variables.

RESULTS

Descriptive and Demographic Data

The participants in this study were by and large women (92 percent). The mean age was 22.4 years, with the median and mode both sitting at 21 years of age. The divide between paid and unpaid participants was almost equal (52.5 percent paid, 47.5 percent unpaid) and the pay rate for these participants was spread equally across our spectrum ($M = 3.48$, which translates roughly into a pay rate of between \$6.51 and \$9 per hour). The rate of pay did not correlate with any of the outcome variables (all p s $> .2$), and thus we continued to focus on the dichotomous variable of paid versus unpaid.

Participants' mean scores demonstrated that they agreed that they enjoyed interning at their respective organizations ($M = 5.56$) and that they enjoyed working for their supervisors ($M = 5.74$). As far as the need-satisfaction variables, they rated relatedness as the need they felt was most satisfied ($M = 5.63$) followed by competence ($M=5.54$) and autonomy ($M= 4.96$).

Data analyses

Prior to analyzing our data, we examined the demographic data for possible covariates. Finding none (no $p < .05$), we proceeded with the analysis.

Hypothesis 1 stated that autonomy, competence and relatedness would independently predict overall internship approval, even when controlling for internship payment as a variable. To test this hypothesis, we used a two-step, linear regression in which we entered the payment variable in the first block and all three needs in the second block.

The full regression was significant and predictive (adj. R-square = .28, $p < .0001$) and the change between block one and block two was also significant (F change = 19.17, $p < .0001$). In the full model, payment was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.08$, $p > .2$). Of the three needs, competence ($\beta = .37$, $p < .01$) and relatedness ($\beta = .28$, $p < .05$) were both significant predictors, while autonomy was not ($\beta = -.05$, $p > .2$). Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that autonomy, competence and relatedness would independently predict supervisor approval, even when controlling for internship payment as a variable. We again ran a two-step regression, in which we placed the payment variable in the first block and the three needs in the second. Again, the full regression was significant (adj. R-square = .25, $p < .0001$) with a significant change between blocks one and two (F change = 16.95, $p < .0001$). In this case, autonomy was a significant predictor ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$) and competence was a marginal predictor ($\beta = .23$, $p = .065$). However, neither relatedness ($\beta = .04$, $p > .2$) nor payment ($\beta = -.01$, $p > .2$) was a significant predictor. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Our first research question assessed the degrees to which the issue of payment would impact the need-satisfaction variables in this study. To answer that question, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), which did not return significant outcomes (Wilks' Lambda = 2.49, $p > .05$), indicating no significant differences existed between the two groups.

Our second research question assessed the degrees to which the issue of payment would impact the ratings participants gave regarding their

experiences at their internship. We again conducted a MANCOVA to examine this, with the payment variable serving as the independent variable and the supervisor approval and internship approval variables serving as the dependent variables. As was the case in the previous MANCOVA, the results were not significant ($F = 0.245$, $p > .05$), indicating no significant differences between the groups.

CONCLUSION

This study offers several valuable conclusions for educators and employers alike. On the whole, the participants in this study seemed to enjoy their experience and feel as though their psychological needs were being met. Furthermore, no statistical difference existed in any of our study variables between the participants who were and were not paid. Thus, while the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education report recommends and many internship coordinators are likely to push students toward paid internships, our data suggests that students are not harmed in terms of need satisfaction or in terms of overall internship experience if they work for no pay. Conversely, it would appear that paying students in no way has undermined their motivation to learn and engage in the work provided for them.

The data here demonstrates that competence and relatedness predict the overall approval of the internship experience while autonomy and competence both predict, at some level, the participant's approval of their internship supervisor. While all three needs did not independently predict, the data does fit the pattern outlined in SDT. Competence (a more measurable need) attached itself most directly and strongly to the view of the experience while autonomy (an interpersonal need) attached itself to a relationship with the supervisor. Interestingly, relatedness (also an interpersonal need) attached itself more toward the overall internship experience as opposed to the variable that dealt with the supervisor. Perhaps relatedness at the internship level happens more with fellow interns or organizational colleagues near the intern's own pay grade, as opposed to with the direct supervisor. While relatedness can be undermined by a hierarchical or authoritarian structure within an organization, it is more about attaching one's self to important others. Those others need not be bosses or supervisors.

These results, taken as a whole, suggest that the most important aspects of an internship do not necessarily attach themselves to things often thought to be important while filling out a resume. While a paid internship, as opposed to an unpaid internship, tends to hold some cache and alleviate obvious financial concerns, money didn't seem to matter to these participants when it came to the enjoyment of their experience. To that end, assessing to what degree students leave the internship feeling sated in their needs might help determine better and worse places to send interns, as opposed to things such as financial gain or company prestige.

This initial foray into the area of internships and SDT could be helpful to educators and internship coordinators as well. Internships are often vetted to make sure students won't be fetching coffee or making copies instead of learning from professionals. As suggested by Bailey, Hughes & Barr (2000) and the results of this study, an addition to the vetting process could be an evaluation of how well supervisors at these companies satisfy these basic needs.

This study can also help strengthen several other recommendations contained in the 2006 Commission report with regard to the quality of the internship experience. Understanding relatedness, competence and autonomy as key factors in the quality internship can help educators to more fully communicate the needs and expectations of public relations interns to practitioners. In terms of quality control (another of the Commission's recommendations), a firm grasp of the interaction of psychological needs and motivation, as explained by Self-Determination Theory, can strengthen the administration of public relations internships.

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