

The ABCs of Work: Motivation

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today's topic is all about using **Motivation** to propel your career.

Last time we talked about why you should seek to Learn across your entire career. Today we discuss

the importance of motivation to your success and where you can find it.

My boss is supposed to provide the motivation, no?

You are lucky if you have strong, positive, external motivation. Sometimes this comes from an inspired boss, yes. For sure a good leader sets out a vision that people want to work towards.

The Stoic in me, however, says watch out when relying on external motivation. Such motivation is largely outside your control. Maybe you have an inspired boss or a good leader, but sometimes you will not.



Company goals by themselves pale alongside the ones you've arrived at yourself. Artwork by BNMK 0819 / *Shutterstock.com*

And many bosses think pressure is the same thing as motivation because it has the same effect, i.e., getting people to do work.

The motivation I want you to cultivate is self-motivation. It is the striving towards goals you have set for yourself for reasons that are intrinsic to you and your values. It is surely helpful if the goals you've set align with important company goals. But company goals by themselves pale alongside the ones you've arrived at yourself.

Here are some self-motivation examples to illustrate the point:

- **Hold yourself to your own high standard**. How well do you perform when no one is

watching you? When no one will see the result but you? If you do your best given the time and circumstances because you would not be satisfied with anything less, you are motivated to do good work. For more on this, see Career Path: Ask “If I Was Doing This for Myself …”

- **Feel part of something larger than you**. Perhaps you entered the legal profession because you wanted to address injustice and help make the world a better place. In helping uphold the rule of law, you are contributing to lawyers’ long tradition of improving the human condition. Yes, reviewing one or 10, or 100 more contracts is mind-numbing. But viewed through the lens of maintaining the rule of law, your motivation is easier to maintain.
- **Create something that will outlast you**. Sometimes it seems our work is fleeting. Creating something bigger than you, that will outlast you, can be quite motivating. Your team itself is a great opportunity, as is working on a project that has a long life, such as a knowledge management system. Stepping back, it’s easy to wonder if Priest Mansei’s question is apt:

  To what shall I compare this world? To the white wake behind a ship that has rowed away at dawn!

  Priest (Sami) Mansei

- **Providing for family**. It can be highly motivating to feel you are working towards a higher purpose, and there are few purposes more powerful than taking care of family members. Whether it is aging parents or your own children, the idea that you are contributing to their well-being is a great motive to keep working and doing well.

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Can motivation lead me astray?

As we have defined it here, I don’t think so. You may come into circumstances where your intrinsic motivation and your company’s or colleagues’ motivation diverge. In these cases, you should carefully consider whether your values are consistent with staying put. Sometimes your own motivation is all that keeps you from going astray following others.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as motivation. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we’ve kept things simple. Here, to finish, are some honorable mention tips to serve as food for thought:

Maybe — Clients want certainty and you will want to deliver it. It is vital to recognize when you’re operating in a gray area, which will happen often. It’s OK to say “I think this is the answer, but let me double-check.” It’s OK to leave open the possibility that you might be wrong. For more on this, see Career Path: Why You Should Doubt Yourself.

Money — Nothing will ruin your motivation more surely than looking to see what your peers are paid. The reason is that while you may be in the top decile, you’ll always find some fool earning more than you. That said, you don’t want your company to take advantage of you either. Tell your boss you just

want to be paid fairly using appropriate benchmarks and that you trust them to do right by you. Then give them a chance to do right by you.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.