**Effects of Intrinsic Motivation and Innovativeness on Performance of US Federal Employees**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper develops and tests a theoretical model that explores the effects of U.S. federal employees’ intrinsic motivation on innovativeness and innovativeness on performance. The study (*n* = 37,083 U.S. federal employees) was largely supported through structural equation modeling analyses. The results of this secondary data analysis demonstrate that there are significant positive relationships between intrinsic motivation and innovativeness, and innovativeness and performance in U.S. federal employees. Implications of these results for human resource management research and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:**

Intrinsic motivation; innovativeness; US federal employees

**Effects of Intrinsic Motivation and Innovativeness on Performance of US Federal Employees**

Intrinsic motivation has long been held to be a powerful source of fostering creativity and innovation (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). Daniel Pink’s popular book *Drive* synthesizes much of the academic research to argue that intrinsic motivation is a powerful tool for fostering innovativeness in employees, which leads to stronger performance. Building on the work of (Deci, 1971; Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989), Pink (2009) writes that intrinsic motivation is established through three things: a sense of purpose, the ability to develop mastery, and autonomy. Dermer (1975) corroborated Deci’s (1971) research using administrative settings with managers as his sample but nuanced Deci’s (1971) findings by saying that extrinsic rewards are still important as long as they are allocated equitably. Today, most of the research regarding intrinsic motivation and performance or employee outcomes uses intrinsic motivation as a mediating or moderating variable (Boxall, Hutchison & Wassenaar, 2015; Buch, Kuvaas, Dysvik & Schyns, 2013). Thus, one aspect of this study that makes it significant and original, is its focus on innovativeness as the moderator variable between measures of intrinsic motivation and performance.

If more could be understood about the relationships between intrinsic motivation, innovativeness, and performance in federal employees more could be done in human resource management (HRM) to increase intrinsic motivation development in the workplace in an effective way. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate and specify the effects of employees’ intrinsic motivation on innovativeness, and innovativeness on performance. The research question for this study asks to what extent employee intrinsic motivation leads to improved innovativeness leading to improved performance? Before addressing this paper’s hypotheses and conceptual framework of the research, it is important to review the existing literature on these constructs.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In selecting the articles for this review, several selection criteria were employed: the articles must (a) discuss intrinsic motivation, innovativeness or creativity (b) be published in a peer-reviewed journal, book, or dissertation; and, (c) be written in English. Sources cited include empirical studies, literature reviews, conceptual papers, and book chapters that were located using the George Washington University Gelman Library and Google Scholar. Electronic databases and online resources used include primarily The Summon Service, which is a comprehensive online search tool by ProQuest. Key search terms include intrinsic motivation, innovation, innovativeness, creativity, performance, task outcomes, and their combinations.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

The discovery of the power of intrinsic motivation is often attributed to psychologist Harry Harlow who did experiments with rhesus monkeys in the mid-20th century. Harlow (1950) tested what he thought were two different drives for completing complex tasks, i.e., survival on the one hand and rewards and punishments on the other hand. His hypothesis was in line with his contemporaries including Harvard University psychologist B.F. Skinner, the founding father of behaviorism. Skinner (1971) believed behavior could be controlled by thoughtfully organizing rewards and punishments. Skinner’s (1971) view of motivation ignored what Harlow (1950) began to discover was a new and more powerful type of motivation: intrinsic motivation. Harlow (1950) continued to conduct experiments with rhesus monkeys and saw that on tasks requiring cognitive skill, rhesus monkeys were more motivated to do them without extrinsic motivators of punishments and rewards. Even more so, he began to realize that these extrinsic motivators displaced the intrinsic motivation of the monkeys to complete the task for its own sake (Harlow, 1950). Other psychologists such as Deci (1971) began testing Harlow’s (1950) thesis.

Deci (1971) conducted experiments on motivation using two groups to complete a puzzle. Both groups were given an 8-minute session to play with the puzzle. One group was paid upon completion of the puzzle (Group A) while the other group was not paid (Group B). They were told to come back the next day for a second round. During the second day, the experimenters revealed that they would not be paying the participants in Group A after all. After another 8-minute session with the puzzle, Group B (having never been paid) continued to play with the puzzle and did so significantly longer than Group A. Deci (1971) concluded, “When money is used as an external reward for some activity, the subjects lose intrinsic interest for the activity” (As cited in Pink, 2011, p. 114). This supported Harlow’s (1950) thesis and added nuance: extrinsic rewards (such as carrots and sticks) for tasks that require cognitive skill actually hurt performance and creativity.

If Harlow (1950) and Deci (1969) are correct that there is another powerful drive beyond survival, rewards, and punishments, it is important to test if that drive, i.e. intrinsic motivation leads to innovativeness and thus higher levels of performance. Intrinsic motivation is when someone is motivated to do something as an end in itself and revolves around feelings of curiosity, challenge, and mastery (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). This idea has been expanded on thoroughly in Neal Chalofsky’s (2010) book about meaningful work. If people have a sense of meaning and purpose in their work, this promotes intrinsic motivation and ultimately improves performance.

In the management literature, this idea has been expounded upon as early as Arnold (1985) who found that there was a significant relationship between task performance and “perceived competence” which is an aspect of intrinsic motivation (p. 876). It is also known that intrinsic motivation serves as a mediator for turnover and that employees who foster environments that are supportive of intrinsic motivation tend to mitigate turnover intentions (Dyvik & Kuvaas, 2009). Analyzing intrinsic motivation along with HRM practices in the public sector has been done most recently by Giauque, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone (2013) who looked at Swiss public employees and found a significant positive relationship between HRM practices, intrinsic motivation, and organizational performance. This idea was further developed by Tymon Jr., Stumpf, and Doh (2010) who found that intrinsic rewards serve as a mediating variable for employee satisfaction and retention in a study of 28 Indian firms. While studies have shown the effects of intrinsic motivation on performance with other mediating roles such as commitment (Yousaf, Yang, & Sanders, 2014), no study was found that uses innovativeness as a moderating variable between intrinsic motivation and performance in U.S. federal employees.

**Innovativeness**

Innovativeness, or innovation more broadly, is a characteristic generally sought after among employers in both private and public sectors (Janseen, Can De Vliert, & West, 2004; Van de Ven, 1986). For a long time, scholars took for granted that intrinsic motivation played an important role in creativity and innovation (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). More recently, scholars such as Grant and Berry (2011) further investigated the link between intrinsic motivation and creativity and found that for intrinsic motivation to positively affect creativity, it is important for “other-focused psychological processes” to be present, which allow for perspective-taking and leads to creativity (p. 73).

It is difficult to specify exactly the causes of innovation but the work of Wang, Rodan, Fruin, and Xu (2014) highlight that “knowledge embeddedness” coupled with a “firm’s knowledge network” can influence innovation (p. 508). The effect of innovation on performance has been studied in a variety of contexts most recently in family firms by Duran, Kammerlander, Van Essen, and Zellweger (2016) who found in a metanalysis of 108 studies in 42 different countries that family firms have higher innovation output when compared to firms that are considered nonfamily, even though they were found to have invested less in innovation than nonfamily firms. Recent research by Yuan and Woodman (2010) demonstrate that innovative behavior at work is a complex topic that depends on many contextual factors including perceived organizational support for innovation. One of these factors is leadership, which was analyzed by Zhang and Bartol (2010) who found that Chinese professionals were more innovative in the presence of leaders who supported creative work.

Considering this literature review and what appears to be a lack of research on the effects of intrinsic motivation and innovativeness on performance, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

*Hypothesis 1*: Employees’ intrinsic motivation positively influences innovativeness.

*Hypothesis 2*: Employees’ innovativeness positively influences performance.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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**METHODS**

The data used in this study come from the 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), which is conducted by the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The FEVS was collected every two years from 2002-2010 and every year since 2011. While there is substantial research that exists that uses the FEVS, there is no secondary data analysis that looks at motivation, innovativeness, and productivity (Fernandez, Resh, Moldogaziev, & Oberfield, 2015).

**Population and Sampling**

The population of the FEVS is U.S. federal employees working at all types of government agencies throughout the country. The 2015 FEVS includes 421,748 respondents out of 848,237 total for a response rate was 49.7 percent. The survey was administered online from the period of April 27 – May 4, 2015. The main eligibility criterion was that respondents must be government employees currently working in a government agency. The sample data was weighted to produce sample estimates that reflected the population. Listwise deletion was utilized for missing data. The survey consists of 84 items, which use Likert type scales most of which are five items from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” While the FEVS has been used in a variety of studies as outlined by Fernandez et al. (2015) no psychometric properties for this instrument are available, which is a limitation of this research project discussed later.

To make the dataset more manageable considering the computing power of available technology, 10% of the available cases were randomly selected from each variable to be used in this study. After listwise deletion was used to eliminate cases with missing data, a total sample size of 37,083 was used for this study, which vastly succeeds recommended minimum sample sizes for comparable analyses. The justification for this sample falls in line with recent research that shows intrinsic motivation is important for public and nonprofit employees (Park & Word, 2012).

**Measures**

There are three latent variables in this study: intrinsic motivation, innovativeness, and performance, which are all measured using multiple observable measures. These measures were selected by the researcher based on the aforementioned theory in the field. See Appendix 1 for a list of the items used for each latent variable.

**Intrinsic Motivation.** As discussed above, intrinsic motivation is generally defined as a combination of purpose, mastery, and autonomy (Pink, 2009). Measuring intrinsic motivation in employees in the FEVS (2015) consisted of four measures: perceived opportunity to improve skills (V1), sense of autonomy in doing work (V2), feelings of personal accomplishment (V4), and a sense of enjoyment in the work one does (V5).

**Innovativeness.** The three measures used to operationalize innovativeness are feelings of encouragement to come up with creative ideas and practices (V3), working in an environment where creativity and innovativeness are rewarded (V6), and constantly looking for ways to improve one’s job tasks (V9). The first two are similar to how innovativeness is measured similarly to Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013).

**Performance.** Conceptually, performance relates to the ability of a unit or agency to accomplish its mission. Thus, it has primarily to do with outcomes. In this study, the latent variable of performance is operationalized through three measures on the FEVS: the ability of teams to complete tasks (V7), the perceived performance of an employee’s work unit (V8), and the performance of the agency as a whole (V10).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The software programs in this study were SPSS version 22 and LISREL Student 9.2. Before conducting Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted. In performing the CFA based on the correlation matrix, it was found that the model did not fit according to recommended cut-off fit statistics (See Table 2.) While the SRMR reflects good model fit, the CFI is below the recommended cut-off and the RMSEA does not reach the recommended cut off.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Thus, in looking towards the modification indices (MI), error covariances were identified that would make sense to add based on the theoretical model. The MI with the largest values that make theoretical sense is to allow the error covariance between V5 and V4 as well as between V7 and V8 to correlate. After respecifying the model, the SRMR and the CFI both represented good fit and the RMSEA was borderline acceptable (See Table 2). The model was identified with 25 degrees of freedom. Ideally, the RMSEA would be less or equal to .06, so moving forward risks Type 2 error; however, considering the large sample size, degrees of freedom, and other good fit statistics, it is acceptable to move forward. Using this respecified model (CFA 2), the percent of variance explained by each factor as well as the Coefficient H for each factor are shown below:

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Insert Table 2 about here

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As shown in the Table 3, variance extracted is about 50% for the first two factors but falls short of 50% with Factor 3. According to Fornell & Larker (1981), the proportion of variance explained by the factor should be higher than 50%, which means the variance is due to the factor and not to measurement error. All factors have Coefficient H values above the desired 70%. See Figure 2.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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**RESULTS**

In the structural model, the fit indices (See Table 2) suggest that the structural model fits well except for a borderline acceptable RMSEA value of 0.0795. Thus, since the measurement model fits and the structural model fits, we have tentative support for the model and we can interpret the parameter estimates. See Figure 3. Therefore, it appears there is tentative support for both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 that there is a significant positive relationship between measures of intrinsic motivation and innovativeness, and that there is a significant positive relationship between innovativeness and performance.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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**LIMITATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This project consists of several key limitations. Despite having an impressive sample size and having been used over a decade, the FEVS is limited in its usefulness because it has not been validated. As a whole, the 84-item survey questions lack a cohesive grounding in research and the results are used in largely superficial government reports. A second key limitation of this study is its focus on U.S. federal employees being lumped together as one cohesive group. There was no distinction between a high-level government employee with 20+ years of experience at the federal level and someone who just began working at that National Park Service doing trail maintenance. Thirdly, it is unclear if it is specifically HRM structures and practices that lead to intrinsic motivation and innovativeness or if federal employees tend to be those who join the U.S. government out of a sense of intrinsic motivation to begin with. Still, this study has several important implications for HRM research and practice.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The findings of this study reveal that there is a significant positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and innovativeness, and a significant positive relationship between innovativeness and performance of U.S. federal employees. Further research on this topic could build on the existing research that looks at intrinsic motivation as a mediator between high-involvement work processes and performance such as Boxall et al. (2015) by including intrinsic motivation as the mediator between innovativeness and performance in federal employees. Another interesting future research area could build on the work of Buch et al. (2013) who look at how social and economic leader-member exchange affects intrinsic motivation, which in turn affects work-related outcomes. Does leadership and/or supervisorial influences play a role in intrinsic motivation and innovativeness of these employees? Thus, further research could build on this study by seeing how social and economic leader-member exchange or other types of leadership practices affect intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, one implication for future research building on the limitation of having a mixed geographical sample of federal employees, would be to identify particular geographic locations and how those environments might affect innovativeness. This builds off the work of Funk (2014) who found looked at 454 U.S. technology companies and found that geography and proximity to one another influenced collaborative efforts and sustained diversity necessary for innovation. Also, it would be compelling to build on the work on Giauque et al. (2013) and analyze what specific HRM practices could lead to intrinsic motivation to see identify which practices most strongly affect innovativeness and performance.

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FIGURE 1

Path Diagram for Conceptual Model

H1

H2

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Mean* | *SD* | *1* | *2* | *3* | *4* | *5* | *6* | *7* | *8* | *9* | *10* |
| V1 | 3.59 | 1.158 | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| V2 | 3.72 | 1.022 | .618\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| V3 | 3.50 | 1.232 | .695\* | .606\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| V4 | 3.84 | 1.105 | .588\* | .545\* | .608\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| V5 | 4.15 | .910 | .408\* | .411\* | .406\* | .674\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |  |
| V6 | 4.37 | .735 | .294\* | .276\* | .342\* | .416\* | .441\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |  |
| V7 | 3.90 | 1.017 | .407\* | .392\* | .429\* | .383\* | .287\* | .201\* | 1.000 |  |  |  |
| V8 | 4.25 | .827 | .432\* | .419\* | .449\* | .440\* | .341\* | .249\* | .565\* | 1.000 |  |  |
| V9 | 3.06 | 1.191 | .605\* | .510\* | .685\* | .508\* | .346\* | .265\* | .430\* | .447\* | 1.000 |  |
| V10 | 3.84 | .955 | .506\* | .501\* | .515\* | .505\* | .377\* | .295\* | .412\* | .494\* | .552\* | 1.000 |

*Note:* n = 37083, listwise deletion.

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 2

Fit Statistics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Model* | *Absolute* | | *Parsimonious* | | | *Incremental* |
|  | Chi-Square | SRMR | RMSEA | LB | UB | CFI |
| Recommended Cut-Off | NA | Less or equal to .08 | Less or equal to .06 |  |  | Greater or equal to .95 |
| CFA 1 | 18234.484 | .0563 | .124 | .122 | .125 | .898 |
| CFA 2 | 7046.607 | .0431 | .0794 | .0779 | .0810 | .961 |
| Structural Model | 7301.913 | .0431 | .0795 | .0780 | .0811 | .959 |

TABLE 3

Variance Extracted and Coefficient H

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Factor* | *Mean* | *Standard Deviation* |
| F1 – Intrinsic Motivation | 51% | 83% |
| F2 – Innovativeness | 51% | 83% |
| F3 – Performance | 44% | 71% |

FIGURE 2

Path Diagram for CFA with Modifications

.88

.85

.95

.71

.53

.93

.93

.30

.48

.48

.81

.76

.95

V10

V8

V7

V9

V6

V3

V5

V4

V2

V1

.40

.40

.69

.56

.45

.37

.56

.60

.45

.47

.16

.29

FIGURE 3

Path Diagram with Parameter Estimates

.494\*

(.883)

1.073\*

(.967)

Appendix

Items used in study according to a 5-item Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

Intrinsic Motivation:

1. I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.
2. I have enough information to do my job well.
3. My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.
4. I like the kind of work I do.

Innovativeness:

1. I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.
2. Creativity and innovation are rewarded [in my agency].
3. I am constantly looking for ways to do my job better.

Performance:

1. How would you rate the overall quality of work done by your work unit? [Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor, Very Poor]
2. My agency is successful in accomplishing its mission.
3. The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.