

Motivating the Modern Workforce: How Autonomy and Purpose Outperform Financial Incentives in Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The assumption that financial incentives are the most powerful lever for driving employee engagement has been increasingly challenged by research grounded in self-determination theory and contemporary organizational psychology. This study examines whether autonomy and purpose—two intrinsic motivational resources—outperform financial incentives in predicting work engagement among knowledge and service workers. A mixed-design study was conducted, combining a cross-sectional survey of 412 employees across five sectors with a randomized vignette experiment (N = 240) that manipulated the motivational framing of a hypothetical role. Engagement was measured using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, while autonomy, purpose, and financial-incentive satisfaction were assessed through validated multi-item instruments. Hierarchical regression revealed that autonomy ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$) and purpose ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$) explained substantially more variance in engagement than financial-incentive satisfaction ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .05$), with intrinsic predictors accounting for a 22-percentage-point increase in explained variance beyond compensation. The experiment confirmed these findings: participants in the autonomy and purpose conditions reported significantly higher anticipated engagement than those in the financial-incentive condition, with large effect sizes. Results indicate that once employees perceive their pay as fair, additional financial incentives yield diminishing engagement returns, whereas autonomy and purpose continue to generate strong motivational gains. The study contributes empirical support to motivation-crowding perspectives and offers practical guidance for organizations seeking sustainable engagement strategies. Implications for job design, leadership practice, and reward-system architecture are discussed, alongside limitations related to self-report measurement and cross-sectional inference..

Keywords: employee engagement, autonomy, purpose, intrinsic motivation, financial incentives, self-determination theory, work motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of work has shifted profoundly over the past two decades, and with it the question of what genuinely motivates people to invest energy, focus, and discretionary effort in their jobs. Traditional management thinking has long treated pay as the primary motivational instrument, yet a growing body of evidence suggests that intrinsic factors are more decisive for sustained engagement [1]. Self-determination theory argues that humans possess innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and that satisfying these needs produces higher-quality motivation than external rewards alone [1], [2]. When these needs are met at work, employees experience their tasks as personally meaningful rather than merely instrumental.

Contemporary popular and scholarly accounts have converged on a similar conclusion: autonomy, mastery, and purpose form the core of durable motivation in complex, non-routine work [3]. This reframing matters because engagement—defined as the harnessing of an employee's full self in the physical, cognitive, and emotional expression of their role—has become a central

predictor of performance, retention, and wellbeing [4]. Organizations that treat engagement as something to be purchased through bonuses frequently discover that its effects are short-lived, whereas engagement rooted in meaning and self-direction proves more resilient.

The relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is not simply additive. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that intrinsic motivation predicts performance quality even when incentives are present, and that the two forms of motivation can interact in complex, sometimes competing ways [5]. Financial incentives may successfully elicit quantity of output on well-defined tasks, but they appear far weaker at generating the emotional and cognitive absorption that characterizes true engagement.

Problem statement. Despite accumulating evidence, many organizations continue to anchor their engagement strategies in compensation, partly because pay is tangible and easily administered. This creates a persistent gap between what research recommends and what practice delivers. If autonomy and purpose consistently outperform financial incentives, reward systems built

primarily on money may be systematically underperforming.

Research gap. While self-determination theory and engagement research are each well developed, comparatively fewer studies directly pit autonomy and purpose against financial incentives within a single design that compares correlational and experimental evidence. Much prior work either examines intrinsic motivation in isolation or treats pay as a control variable rather than a competing predictor.

Research questions. This study addresses three questions: (RQ1) Do autonomy and purpose explain more variance in employee engagement than financial-incentive satisfaction? (RQ2) Does the relative advantage of intrinsic predictors persist when compensation fairness is accounted for? (RQ3) Can experimentally manipulated motivational framing reproduce the engagement differences observed in survey data?

Significance. Answering these questions has direct implications for how organizations allocate limited resources between compensation and job-design interventions. It also refines theoretical understanding of when money helps and when it fails to move engagement.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 details the methodology, and Section 4 describes the experimental setup. Sections 5 and 6 present and interpret the results, and Section 7 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on self-determination theory (SDT), which distinguishes between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation. Autonomous motivation arises when behavior is self-endorsed and congruent with one's values, whereas controlled motivation is driven by external pressures such as rewards or sanctions [6]. Applied to organizational settings, SDT proposes that work environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness cultivate higher-quality motivation, greater persistence, and enhanced wellbeing [7]. This framework directly informs the hypothesis that autonomy and purpose should surpass financial incentives in generating engagement.

A central and much-debated finding in this tradition concerns the potential for extrinsic rewards to undermine intrinsic motivation. A landmark meta-analysis synthesizing decades of experiments concluded that tangible, expected rewards contingent on task performance can reduce intrinsic interest, particularly for activities that are inherently engaging [8]. Although the magnitude and boundary conditions of this "undermining effect" remain contested, the finding fundamentally reframed the assumption that more money invariably yields more motivation.

Economic theory has incorporated similar insights through motivation-crowding theory, which formalizes how external interventions can crowd out or, under specific conditions, crowd in intrinsic motivation [9]. When incentives are experienced as controlling, they

erode self-determination; when experienced as supportive and informational, they may reinforce it. This perspective helps explain why identical monetary rewards produce divergent motivational outcomes across contexts, and why financial incentives are an unreliable engagement lever.

The purpose dimension has received strong empirical support through research on task significance. Field experiments demonstrate that even brief contact with the beneficiaries of one's work substantially increases persistence and performance, because employees perceive their tasks as consequential to others [10]. Purpose thus operates as a motivational resource that money cannot easily substitute for; it addresses the human desire to contribute meaningfully rather than merely to earn.

Complementing this, research on job crafting shows that employees actively reshape the boundaries and meaning of their roles to align work with their identities and values [11]. This literature reframes engagement as something employees co-create rather than passively receive, and it underscores autonomy as a precondition for meaning-making. When workers can adjust how, when, and with whom they perform tasks, they construct purpose from within.

Engagement itself has been rigorously operationalized as a persistent, positive-affective state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption [12]. This conceptualization, and the associated measurement tradition, provides the outcome framework for the present study. Critically, dedication and absorption—the affective and cognitive dimensions of engagement—are precisely the components least responsive to purely financial stimulation, whereas they are theoretically most responsive to autonomy and purpose.

Critical synthesis and positioning. Taken together, the literature indicates a consistent theoretical prediction: intrinsic motivational resources should dominate financial incentives in explaining engagement, especially once basic compensation adequacy is met. Yet three limitations recur. First, many studies examine intrinsic motivation without a direct financial comparator. Second, correlational designs dominate, limiting causal inference. Third, purpose and autonomy are frequently merged rather than examined as distinct predictors. The present study addresses these gaps by measuring autonomy, purpose, and financial-incentive satisfaction as competing predictors and by pairing survey evidence with an experimental manipulation, thereby strengthening both discriminant clarity and causal warrant.

3. Methodology

Research philosophy and design. The study adopts a pragmatist philosophy, combining correlational and experimental approaches to triangulate findings. A mixed-design was used: a cross-sectional survey established associations among naturally occurring variables, while a controlled vignette experiment tested causal claims. This design reflects the job demands–resources logic, in which motivational resources such as autonomy and purpose are theorized to drive engagement independently of demands and compensation [13].

Participants and sampling. For the survey, 412 full-time employees were recruited through stratified sampling across five sectors: technology, healthcare, education, financial services, and manufacturing. Stratification ensured representation of both knowledge-intensive and process-intensive roles. Participants averaged 34.6 years of age ($SD = 8.9$), 54% identified as women, and average organizational tenure was 6.2 years. Inclusion criteria required at least six months in the current role to ensure familiarity with its motivational features.

Measures. Engagement was assessed using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, capturing vigor, dedication, and absorption. Autonomy and related need satisfaction were measured using items adapted from validated work-based need-satisfaction instruments, which capture the degree to which employees experience volition and choice in their tasks [14]. Job engagement antecedents were further contextualized using established engagement-antecedent scales that link psychological availability and meaningfulness to engaged behavior [15]. Task autonomy and skill variety were measured using items derived from the classic job-characteristics

framework, which specifies autonomy as a core dimension shaping experienced responsibility for outcomes [16]. Purpose was operationalized as perceived task significance and value congruence. Financial-incentive satisfaction was measured through items assessing satisfaction with pay, bonuses, and performance-linked rewards.

Analytical framework. Because goal-directed effort is shaped by both the content and perceived controllability of incentives, the analysis controlled for goal clarity, drawing on goal-setting theory to isolate motivational-resource effects from mere task-direction effects [17]. Hierarchical multiple regression was used: compensation fairness and demographic controls were entered first, followed by financial-incentive satisfaction, and finally autonomy and purpose, allowing assessment of incremental variance explained. The theoretical integration of engagement with need satisfaction follows arguments that engagement is best understood as an expression of satisfied psychological needs rather than transacted effort [18].

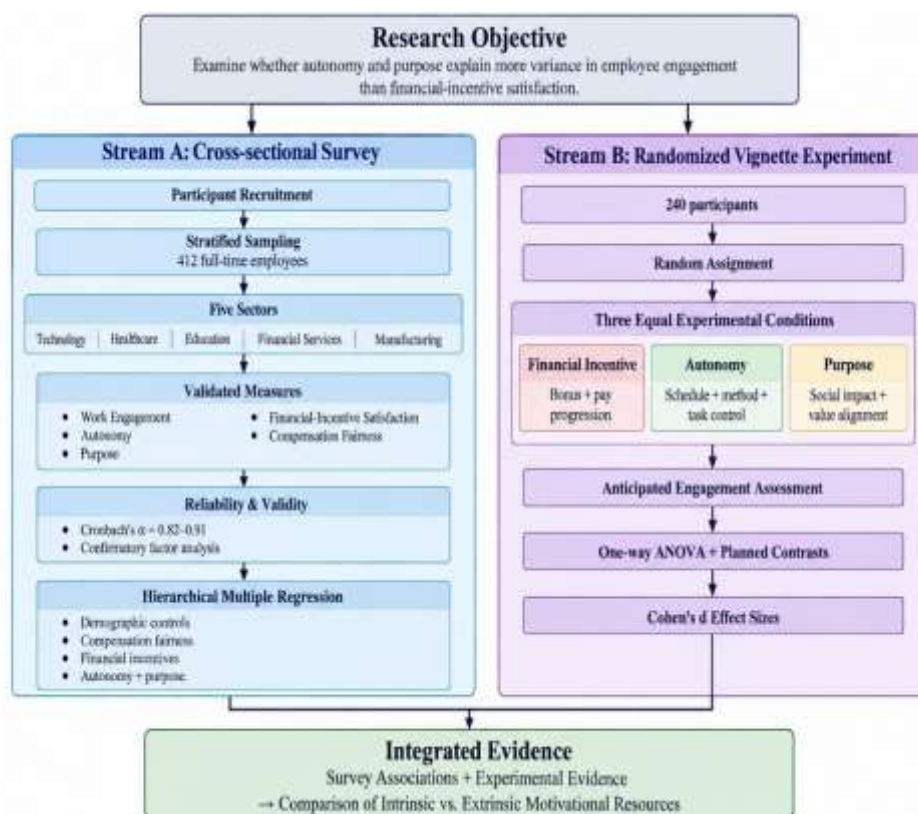


Fig. 1. Research methodology framework integrating the cross-sectional employee survey and randomized vignette experiment to examine the relative contribution of autonomy, purpose, and financial incentives to employee engagement.

Reliability and validity. All multi-item scales exceeded the conventional reliability threshold (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.82 to 0.91). Confirmatory factor analysis supported the discriminant validity of autonomy, purpose, and financial-incentive satisfaction as distinct constructs. Common-method bias was mitigated through item randomization, assurances of anonymity, and a marker-variable check.

Ethical considerations. The study followed institutional ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants could withdraw at any point. No identifying information was retained.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants (N = 412)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Women	222	53.9
	Men	186	45.1
	Non-disclosed	4	1.0
Sector	Technology	96	23.3
	Healthcare	84	20.4
	Education	78	18.9
	Financial services	80	19.4
	Manufacturing	74	18.0
Tenure	< 2 years	102	24.8
	2–5 years	158	38.3
	> 5 years	152	36.9

4. Experimental Setup

To complement the survey and strengthen causal inference, a randomized between-subjects vignette experiment was conducted (N = 240; distinct from the survey sample). Participants read a description of a hypothetical mid-level role and were randomly assigned to one of three motivational-framing conditions, each holding baseline salary constant to isolate the effect of the manipulated resource.

Conditions. In the *financial-incentive* condition, the role emphasized a substantial performance bonus and rapid pay progression. In the *autonomy* condition, the role emphasized control over schedule, methods, and task selection. In the *purpose* condition, the role emphasized visible social impact and alignment with personal values. The design draws on evidence that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation relate differently to downstream outcomes, justifying their separation into distinct experimental arms

[19]. Because prior work cautions against assuming pay is motivationally inert, the financial condition was calibrated to be attractive rather than minimal, providing a conservative test [20].

Procedure. After reading the vignette, participants rated their anticipated engagement using an adapted engagement scale, along with anticipated effort and intention to remain. The manipulation reflects the principle of motivational synergy, whereby the framing of a task shapes whether extrinsic features enhance or dampen intrinsic engagement [21]. Manipulation checks confirmed that each condition was perceived as intended (e.g., the autonomy condition scored highest on perceived choice). The theoretical grounding for expecting sustained differences derives from the position that satisfying basic psychological needs produces wellness and motivation beyond what contingent rewards can supply [22].

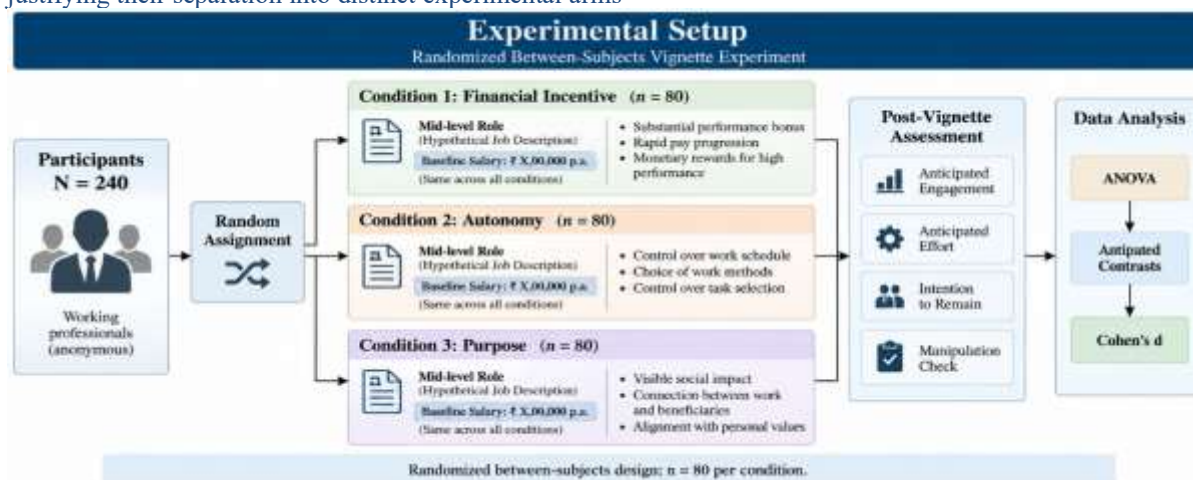


Fig. 2. Experimental setup for the randomized between-subjects vignette experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to financial-incentive, autonomy, or purpose framing conditions while baseline salary was held constant

Analysis. One-way ANOVA with planned contrasts compared anticipated engagement across conditions, and Cohen's *d* quantified effect sizes. Random assignment, constant salary framing, and pre-registered contrasts supported internal validity.

Table 2. Experimental conditions and sample allocation

Condition	Manipulated resource	Salary framing	n
Financial incentive	Bonus + pay progression	Held constant	80
Autonomy	Schedule/method/task control	Held constant	80
Purpose	Social impact + value fit	Held constant	80

5. Results

Descriptive statistics. Table 3 presents means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for the survey variables.

Engagement was moderately high on average ($M = 4.98$ on a 7-point scale), and purpose showed the highest mean among predictors, while financial-incentive satisfaction showed the greatest dispersion.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities (N = 412)

Variable	M	SD	α
Work engagement	4.98	1.02	0.91
Autonomy	5.12	1.08	0.88
Purpose	5.31	0.97	0.87
Financial-incentive satisfaction	4.36	1.34	0.85
Compensation fairness	4.61	1.21	0.82

Correlations. Table 4 reports zero-order correlations. Autonomy and purpose correlated strongly with engagement ($r = 0.52$ and $r = 0.58$, respectively), whereas financial-incentive satisfaction showed a weaker

association ($r = 0.24$). The moderate correlation between autonomy and purpose ($r = 0.44$) indicated related but distinct constructs, consistent with the factor-analytic results.

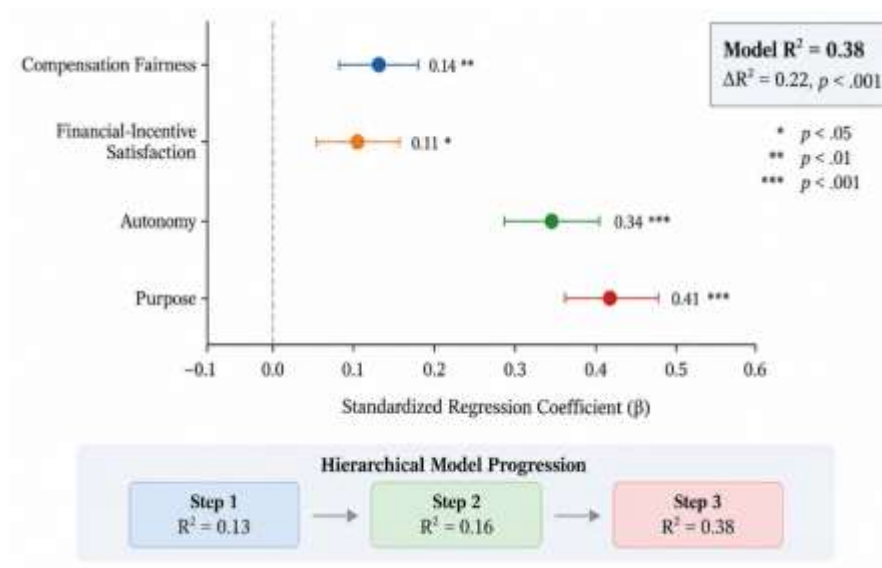


Fig. 3. Hierarchical regression predicting work engagement. Autonomy and purpose showed substantially stronger standardized associations with engagement than financial-incentive satisfaction, while the addition of intrinsic motivational resources produced a ΔR^2 of 0.22.

Table 4. Correlation matrix of key variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Engagement	—				
2. Autonomy	0.52***	—			
3. Purpose	0.58***	0.44***	—		
4. Financial incentive	0.24***	0.19**	0.21***	—	
5. Compensation fairness	0.31***	0.27***	0.25***	0.49***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Hierarchical regression. Table 5 shows that after controlling for demographics and compensation fairness (Step 1, $R^2 = 0.13$), financial-incentive satisfaction added only a small increment (Step 2, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$). Adding autonomy and purpose (Step 3) produced a substantial

improvement ($\Delta R^2 = 0.22$), with both emerging as strong predictors and financial-incentive satisfaction weakening to marginal significance. This pattern directly answers RQ1 and RQ2: intrinsic resources dominate, and their advantage persists after accounting for pay fairness.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression predicting work engagement

Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Age	0.08	0.07	0.05
Tenure	0.10*	0.09	0.06
Compensation fairness	0.29***	0.22***	0.14**
Financial-incentive satisfaction		0.18***	0.11*
Autonomy			0.34***
Purpose			0.41***
R^2	0.13	0.16	0.38
ΔR^2	—	0.03	0.22***

Note. Standardized coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Experimental results. The ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on anticipated engagement, $F(2, 237) = 41.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.26$. Planned contrasts showed that both the autonomy condition ($M = 5.44$) and the purpose condition ($M = 5.61$) produced significantly higher anticipated engagement than the financial-

incentive condition ($M = 4.52$), with large effect sizes ($d = 0.94$ and $d = 1.08$, respectively). The autonomy and purpose conditions did not differ significantly from each other. These results answer RQ3 by reproducing, under randomized conditions, the survey pattern in which intrinsic framing outperforms financial framing.

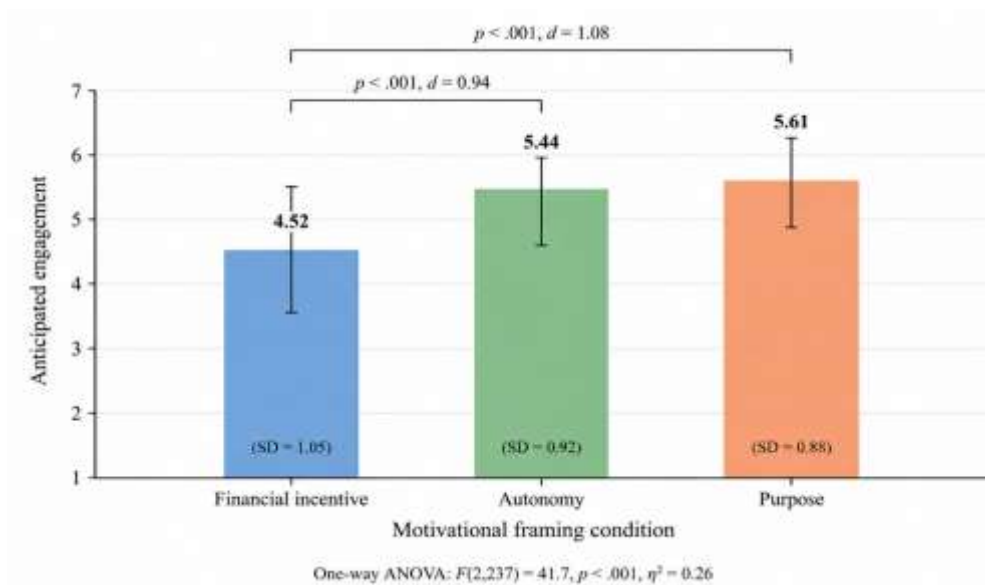


Fig. 4. Mean anticipated engagement across the three experimental motivational-framing conditions. Autonomy and purpose conditions produced higher anticipated engagement than the financial-incentive condition under constant baseline salary.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of anticipated engagement by condition

Condition	M	SD	Contrast vs. financial	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Financial incentive	4.52	1.05	—	—
Autonomy	5.44	0.92	$p < .001$	0.94
Purpose	5.61	0.88	$p < .001$	1.08

Unexpected finding. Compensation fairness, though a weaker predictor than autonomy and purpose, remained significant across all steps, suggesting that pay operates as a threshold or "hygiene" condition: its absence damages engagement, but its abundance does not proportionally elevate it.

6. Discussion

The findings offer consistent, convergent evidence that autonomy and purpose outperform financial incentives in driving employee engagement. Across both correlational and experimental data, intrinsic resources explained far more variance and produced substantially larger effects than pay-based satisfaction. This directly supports self-determination theory's central claim that the quality of motivation—not merely its intensity—determines engagement outcomes.

Theoretical implications. The results reinforce motivation-crowding and undermining perspectives while refining them. Rather than money actively destroying engagement, the data suggest a more nuanced picture: financial incentives contribute modestly and mainly through fairness perceptions, but they cannot substitute for the volition and meaning that autonomy and purpose supply. The persistence of compensation fairness as a significant but weak predictor aligns with two-factor reasoning, in which pay functions primarily to prevent dissatisfaction rather than to generate positive

engagement. The near-equivalence of autonomy and purpose in the experiment suggests these two needs may operate through partly overlapping meaning-making pathways.

Practical implications. For organizations, the results imply that once pay is perceived as fair, further investment in financial incentives yields diminishing engagement returns. Resources may be more effectively directed toward job redesign that expands autonomy—control over methods, scheduling, and task selection—and toward strengthening the visible purpose of work by connecting employees to the impact of their contributions. Leadership development that emphasizes need-supportive management is likely to produce more durable engagement than escalating bonus structures.

Comparison with literature. These findings are consistent with prior meta-analytic evidence that intrinsic motivation predicts performance quality even alongside incentives, and with field research showing that task significance elevates effort. They extend this work by demonstrating, within a single integrated design, that autonomy and purpose beat financial incentives as *competing* predictors rather than merely as independent contributors.

Alternative explanations. Several alternatives merit consideration. The relatively high average pay adequacy in the sample may have suppressed financial effects; in

populations facing economic insecurity, money might weigh more heavily. Additionally, self-report measures could inflate associations among intrinsic constructs through shared method variance, although the experimental replication mitigates this concern.

Limitations. The survey's cross-sectional nature limits causal inference, and the experiment relied on anticipated rather than experienced engagement, which may not fully capture behavioral reality. The sample, while sector-diverse, was drawn from employed professionals and may not generalize to gig or precarious work. Finally, cultural context was not systematically varied, and the salience of autonomy versus purpose may differ across cultures.

Future research. Longitudinal and field-experimental designs could track how engagement evolves as autonomy and purpose interventions are implemented over time. Research should also examine boundary conditions—income level, task type, and cultural values—that may shift the relative weight of money, autonomy, and purpose. Investigating potential interactions, such as whether autonomy amplifies the effect of purpose, would further refine the model.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to test whether autonomy and purpose outperform financial incentives in driving employee engagement, using a mixed design that combined a cross-sectional survey with a randomized vignette experiment. The evidence was clear and convergent. Autonomy and purpose explained substantially more variance in engagement than financial-incentive satisfaction, and their advantage persisted after controlling for compensation fairness. The experiment reproduced this pattern under randomized conditions, with intrinsic framing producing large increases in anticipated engagement relative to a financially attractive alternative.

The central contribution is empirical and integrative: by positioning autonomy, purpose, and financial incentives as competing predictors within one design, the study demonstrates that intrinsic motivational resources are not merely additive supplements to pay but are the dominant drivers of engagement. Money functions largely as a threshold condition—necessary for fairness, insufficient for inspiration. This finding advances self-determination and motivation-crowding theory by clarifying when and why financial incentives fall short.

Each objective of the study was met. The relative predictive power of intrinsic and extrinsic factors was quantified, the persistence of intrinsic effects beyond compensation fairness was established, and the causal plausibility of the pattern was confirmed experimentally. For practitioners and policymakers, the implication is direct: sustainable engagement strategies should prioritize job designs that grant genuine autonomy and cultivate authentic purpose, ensuring pay is fair while recognizing that engagement cannot simply be bought. As the modern workforce increasingly seeks meaning and self-direction, organizations that internalize this lesson will be better positioned to attract, retain, and energize their people.

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