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EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION:
ADDRESSING A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN
YOUR ORGANIZATION'S
PERFORMANCE

Kenneth A. Kovach, Ph.D., is a consultant to numerous local and national firms in the areas of human resource management and labor relations. He has been doing research and

KHÍCH LỆ NHÂN VIÊN: XÁC ĐỊNH YẾU
TỐ QUYẾT ĐỊNH THÀNH TÍCH CỦA
TỔ CHỨC

Tiến sĩ Kenneth A. Kovach là nhà tư vấn cho nhiều doanh nghiệp địa phương và cấp quốc gia về lĩnh vực quản lý nhân sự và quan hệ lao động. Ông đã nghiên cứu và tư

consulting in the area of employee motivation for over 20 years, and has administered the survey described in this article in over 25 organizations ranging in size from 50 to 68,000 employees. He is also a full professor at George Mason University and has published 6 books, 65 articles, and over 150 cases.

In a study that asked 1,000 employees to rank ten possible rewards, "interesting work" was preferred in the majority of cases. One might assume then that all that is necessary is to make all work in industry interesting, and we will have happy, productive employees who come to work on time and do not leave. Unfortunately, not all jobs can be made interesting and, more important, what is interesting to one person might not be interesting to another person.

The direct supervisors of the employees might not be able to recognize the differences between their employees and make sure that all employees were in jobs that were interesting to them. However, when these supervisors were asked their opinions on what their employees wanted from their jobs, the supervisors claimed their workers' highest preference was not for interesting work but for good wages. If the immediate supervisors are to be believed, all a company has to do is make sure it pays good wages to all of its employees.

The second solution, good wages, is probably easier to implement than interesting work, but the employees say this is not extremely high on their list of preferences. Thus, there appear to be some differences in managers' and employees' perceptions.

This article compares results of three surveys concerning employee and supervisory rankings of ten motivational items, discusses individual differences between groups of employees and supervisors, and looks at the manipulation of reward systems. The information presented should shed some light

vấn việc khích lệ nhân viên trong hơn 20 năm qua, và đã điều hành cuộc khảo sát được mô tả trong bài viết này ở hơn 25 tổ chức khác nhau với số lượng nhân viên dao động từ 50 đến 68.000 người. Ông cũng là giáo sư giảng dạy toàn thời gian tại Đại học George Mason và đã xuất bản 6 cuốn sách, 65 bài báo, và hơn 150 tình huống.

Trong một nghiên cứu yêu cầu 1.000 nhân viên xếp hạng 10 yếu tố về chế độ chính sách, đa phần đều chọn "công việc thú vị". Từ đó sẽ có người mặc định rằng chỉ cần khiến công việc thú vị là đủ, giúp chúng ta có những nhân viên hạnh phúc, làm việc hiệu suất cao, luôn đi làm đúng giờ và không bao giờ rời bỏ công ty. Tuy nhiên, không phải công việc nào cũng có thể làm thú vị lên được, và quan trọng hơn là những yếu tố làm công việc trở nên thú vị với người này lại có thể không đủ thú vị với người khác.

Các giám sát trực tiếp có thể không đủ khả năng nhận ra sự khác biệt giữa các nhân viên của họ và đảm bảo rằng tất cả các nhân viên đều có công việc thú vị để làm. Tuy nhiên, khi được hỏi về các yếu tố nhân viên của họ mong muốn ở công việc, những người này lại không cho yếu tố công việc thú vị là ảnh hưởng nhất, mà theo họ là mức lương tốt. Nếu những gì người giám sát đánh giá là đúng, một công ty chỉ cần trả tiền lương tốt cho tất cả các nhân viên là đủ.



on the question of why workers work and what an employer or supervisor can do to attain full productivity.

EMPLOYEE SURVEY RESULTS

In 1946, surveyed employees ranked ten "job reward" factors in terms of personal preference as follows:

1. Full appreciation of work done
2. Feeling of being in on things
3. Sympathetic help with personal problems
4. Job security
5. Good wages
6. Interesting work
7. Promotion and growth in the organization
8. Personal loyalty to employees
9. Good working conditions
10. Tactful discipline

By 1981, there were changes in what workers wanted compared with what they wanted in 1946.

A similar questionnaire was given to industrial employees in 1981 and again in 1995. By 1981, there were changes in what workers wanted compared with what they wanted in 1946. Interesting work was positioned in the number-one slot and sympathetic help with personal problems was moved to the number-nine slot.¹ By 1995, the list looked like this:

1. Interesting work
2. Full appreciation of work done
3. Feeling of being in on things
4. Job security
5. Good wages
6. Promotion and growth in the organization
7. Good working conditions
8. Personal loyalty to employees
9. Tactful discipline
10. Sympathetic help with personal problems

The workers surveyed in 1946 came from an environment that is different from that of



today's workers. The United States had just come out of a depression and gone through a war. In 1995, after almost 35 years of relative prosperity and a rise in the standard of living beyond the imagination of the workers in 1946, it is not surprising that the list of what workers wanted from their work had changed.

If we consider the list of employee ratings as relating to Maslow's hierarchy of needs² or to Herzberg's hygiene theory,³ it becomes fairly obvious that in the United States, organizations have done a better job of satisfying the basic or "deficit" needs of the worker than they have in satisfying the ego or self-fulfillment needs.⁴

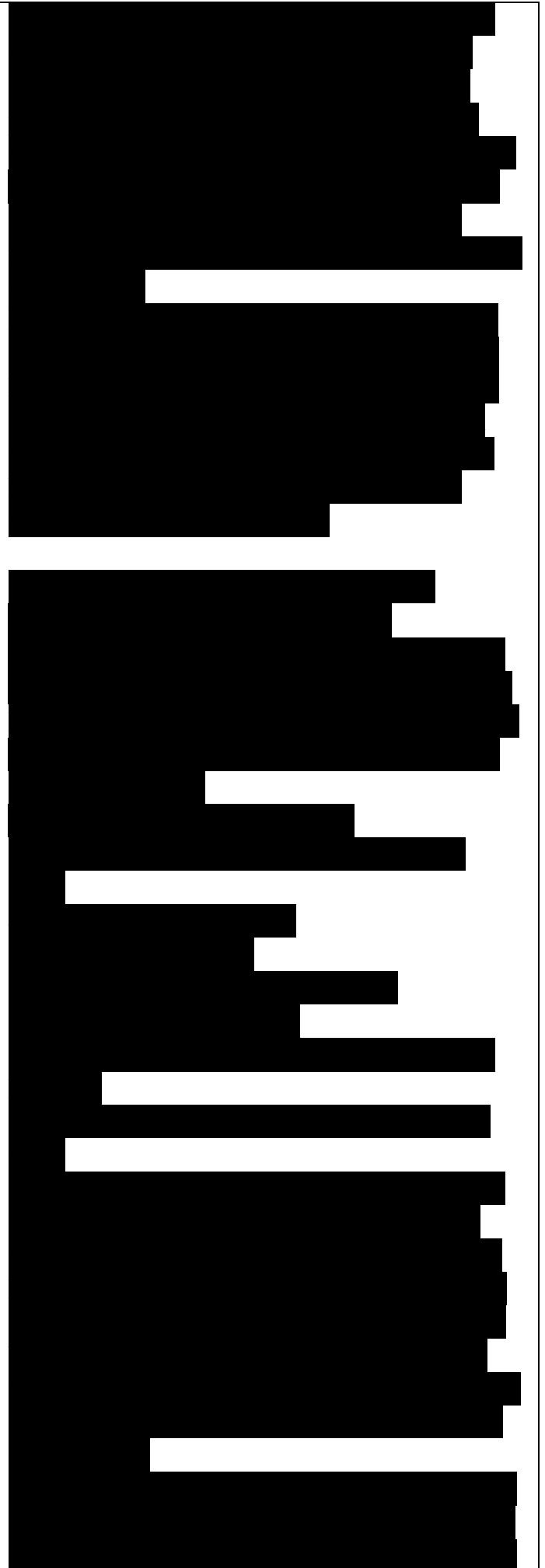
SUPERVISOR SURVEY RESULTS

In each of the 1946, 1981, and 1995 studies, supervisors were asked to rank the list of job rewards as they believed the employees had ranked it. Their rankings remained almost the same for each year:

1. Good wages
2. Job security
3. Promotion and growth in the organization
4. Good working conditions
5. Interesting work
6. Personal loyalty to employees
7. Tactful discipline
8. Full appreciation of work done
9. Sympathetic help with personal problems
10. Feeling of being in on things

The above rankings by the supervisors show that their collective perception of factors that motivate employees had not changed over the last 50 years. Most important, a comparison of employee and supervisor rankings shows that the latter group has a very inaccurate perception of what motivates the former.

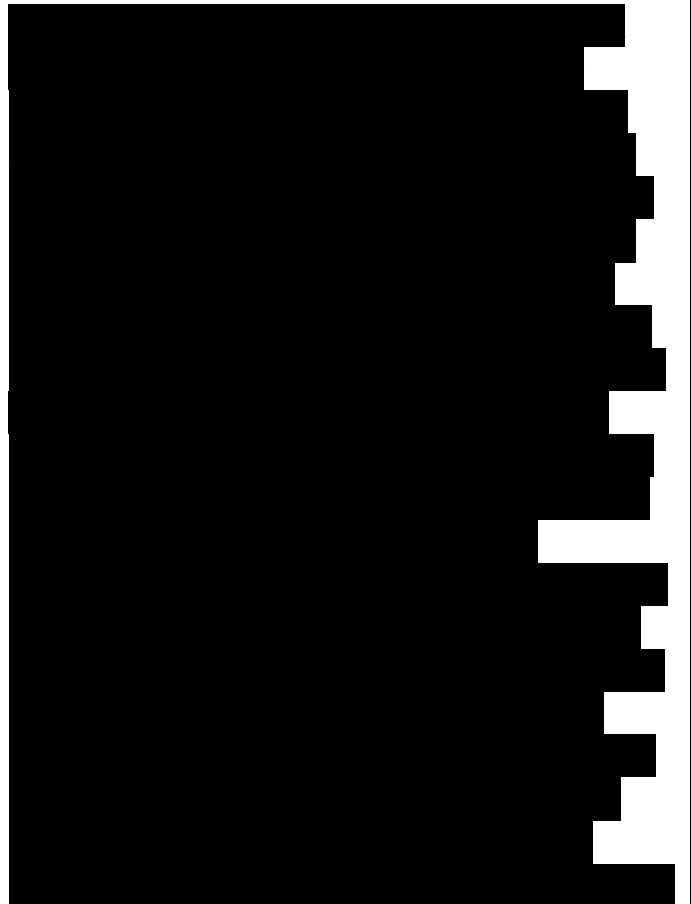
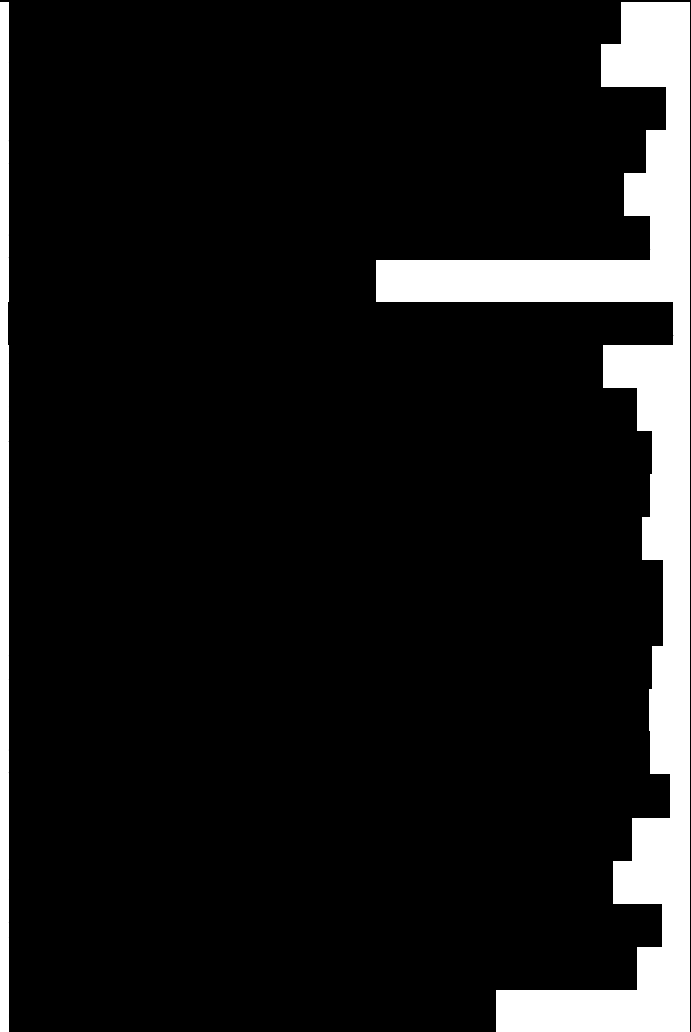
Why have managers, assuming they are aware of the almost five decades of research, chosen to ignore the theories of motivation?



Specifically, why do managers continually place wages at the top of their hierarchy and put the other motivators that are considered essential for job satisfaction at the bottom of their list? Several reasons are possible for the supervisors' apparent neglect of the conclusions drawn from behavioral scientists' research.

One reason could be that supervisors feel that employees do not believe it is socially desirable to be interested in money and other basic needs and pay lip service to more socially acceptable factors such as interesting work. Or, on the other hand, it might just be possible that employees are better witnesses to their own feelings than their supervisors. Another reason for this disparity might be that managers chose the rewards for which they have less responsibility, such as pay raises, which are usually determined by formalized organizational policies, as opposed to values that stem from the personal relationships between supervisors and employees, thus "passing the buck" when it comes time to fixing the blame for poor levels of employee motivation.

These explanations are largely intuitive and untested; however, one theory that I believe may explain this phenomenon is what I call "self-reference": Managers offer workers rewards that would motivate managers (i.e., themselves), but this may not necessarily be what will motivate their employees. David McClelland, in his studies, found that supervisors are usually high achievers who are interested in concrete measures that reflect how well they have done, namely, money.⁵ For them it is a quantifiable way to keep score. There is a significant difference between the supervisors' rankings of employee rewards in 1946 and employee rankings in 1946, and a significant difference between the two in 1981 and 1995. Thus, managers appear to remain out of tune with the wants of their employees. Despite a tremendous volume of behavioral research into what motivates employees, supervisors'



self-reference is still as much of a problem today as it was after the second World War. Perhaps female employees place greater importance on interpersonal relationships and communication than male employees.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SUBGROUPS

The survey taken in 1995 also divided employees into various categories, something the earlier surveys did not do. Just as there are differences between what employees want over time, there may also be differences between categories of employees based on sex, age, income level, job type, and organization level. (See Exhibit 1 for the subgroups studied in the 1995 survey.)

Males versus Females

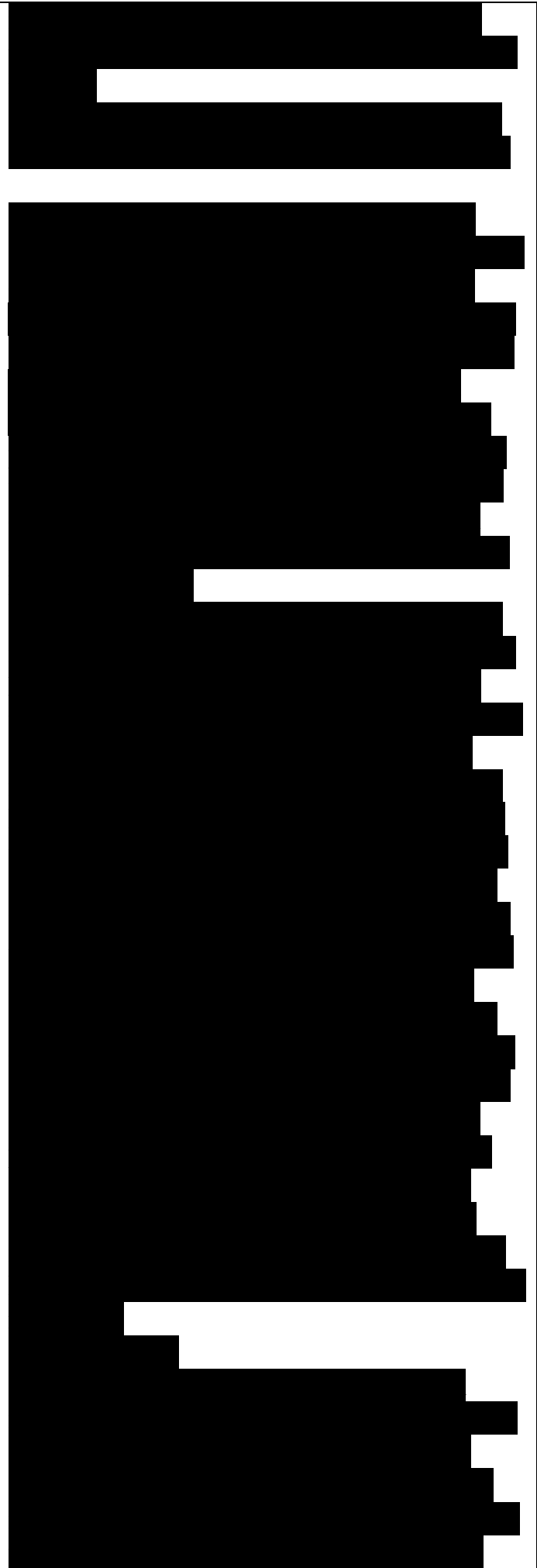
When one analyzes male versus female responses, no significant statistical difference in the distribution of rewards is found between the two; however, when one looks at the ranking of values, it is found that females rank "full appreciation of work" in first place, whereas males rank it in second place.

"Sympathetic help with personal problems" is ranked seventh by females as opposed to tenth by the males. This indicates that perhaps female employees place greater importance on interpersonal relationships and communication than male employees, a difference that should be noted by managers.

Women in the workplace today do have problems that are different from men's because many are still trying to cope with their traditional role of homemaker along with that of employee. This could cause them to seek more appreciation of work and more help with personal problems.

Age Groups

The age groups analyzed consisted of under 30, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, and over 50. As mentioned above, the under-30 group showed the greatest disparity in its distribution from the total responses of all groups, but showed the greatest similarity to the supervisors' estimate of how employees will respond. The



difference between how the under-30 group responded when compared with each of the other age groups is statistically significant. The under-30 group chose good wages, job security, and promotion and growth as its first three choices. This could indicate that, because they are new workers, they have not yet fulfilled their basic needs. When comparing the under-30 group with the 31 to 40 age group, it is noteworthy that the 31 to 40 group still places job security high on its hierarchy of values, but as one moves up through the age groups, the basic needs become less important to the respondents. Thus, industry seems to do well in taking care of the basic needs of the employees, at least for those who stay past their 40th birthday.

Exhibit 1

Note: Supervisors surveyed are directly connected with employees surveyed.

When the subset data are analyzed against the total employee response, responses for only two groups are significantly different from the entire sample. One of these groups is the under-30 age group, and the other is the group with income under \$25,000. (See Exhibit 2 for comparison of total employee response to each subset response.)

The over-50 workers have some anomalies in their ranking of rewards. They place "sympathetic help with personal problems," "good working conditions," and "personal loyalty to employees" as moderately high on their list of preferences. Again as one ages, personal problems become more of a factor.

Exhibit 2

Note: S = Total Supervisor Response, 1995; E = Total Employee Response, 1995.

When the subset data are analyzed against the supervisor rankings, responses for only three groups are significantly different from the entire sample. These groups are the under-30 age group, the under-\$25,000 income group, and the lower organizational level. (See

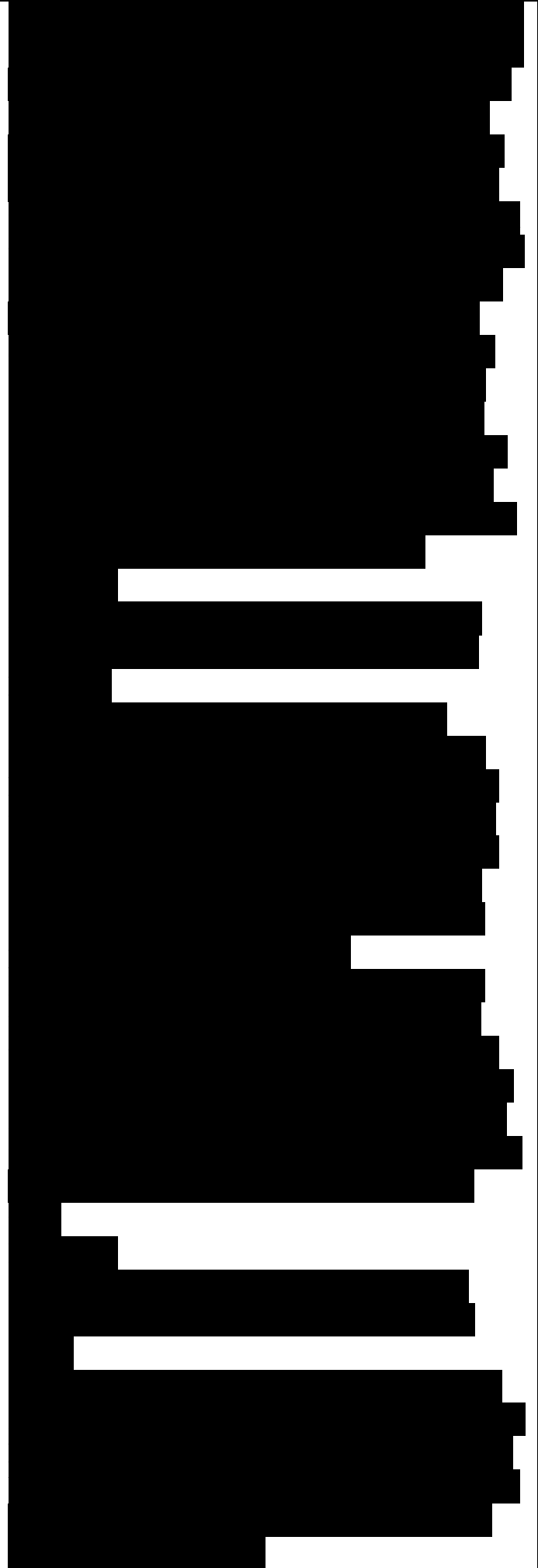


Exhibit 3.)

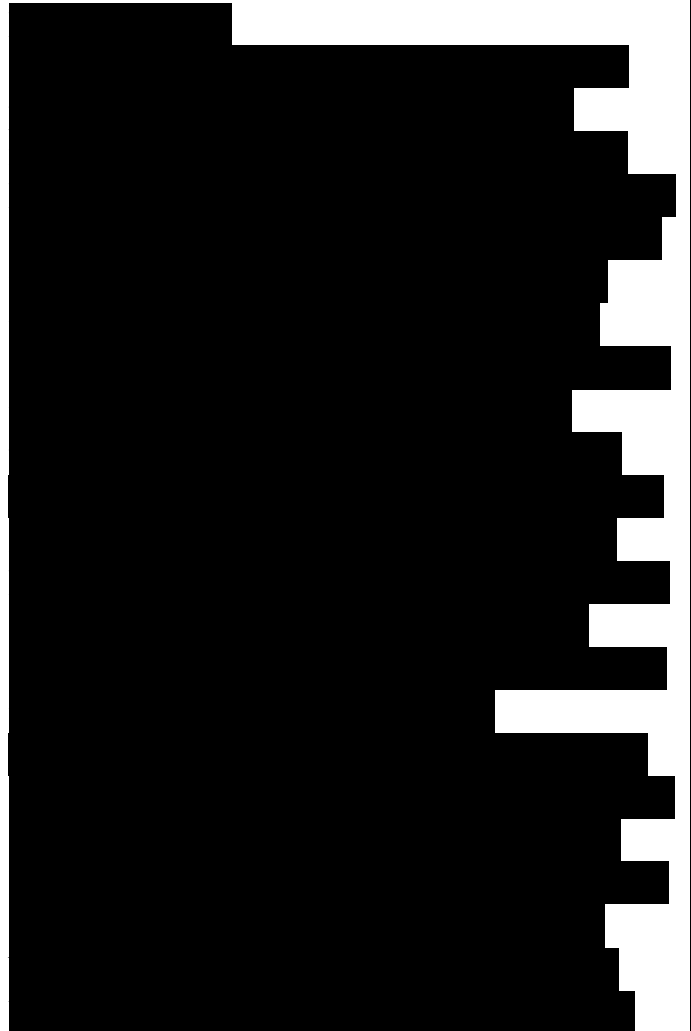
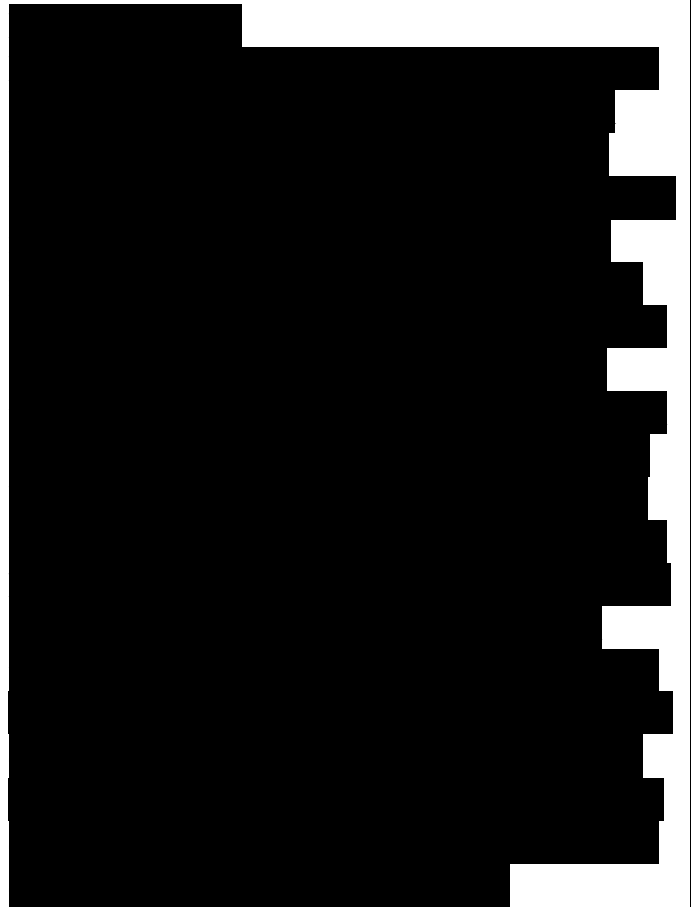
Income Group

The low income group (under \$25,000) also showed a response pattern that was quite different from the total employee responses and similar to the supervisors' expectations. The responses were also statistically different from the other income groups. As with the low-age group, the low-income group placed "good wages," "job security," and "promotion and growth in the organization" in the primary positions. The next two income levels (through \$50,000) showed little difference in their responses and differed from the low-income group only in that they placed "good wages," "job security," and "promotion and growth in the organization" in a moderate position in their list of preferences. Interestingly, the over-\$50,000 group placed "job security" as third in importance. Perhaps the increased largesse causes a desire to retain it, thereby increasing the importance of job security.

Job Types

The comparison of the blue-collar unskilled worker responses with those of the white-collar unskilled workers showed significant differences. The unskilled blue-collar group gave top ranking to "full appreciation of work done/" "interesting work," and "good wages," whereas the unskilled white-collar worker showed a greater interest in "interesting work," "good working conditions," and "appreciation of work done." The unskilled blue-collar worker was slightly more interested in "job security" than the unskilled white-collar worker, whereas the unskilled white-collar worker placed more value on "promotion and growth in the organization."

When one compares the skilled blue-collar worker with the skilled white-collar worker, fewer differences are found. The most significant difference is that the blue-collar skilled workers do not seem to place much value on full appreciation of work done. One could posit that they are intrinsically content



with their work, because in the majority of cases their tasks are well-defined and self-contained, whereas the tasks of white-collar workers tend to be more open-ended and the worker is more dependent on supervisory feedback for the definition and assessment of the job. "Job security" was of primary importance for the blue-collar skilled, whereas "promotion and growth in the organization" was of primary importance to the white-collar skilled.

Comparing blue-collar unskilled workers with blue-collar skilled workers, one finds the most significant difference between the two to be the placement of "full appreciation of work done." Blue-collar skilled workers rated this factor sixth out of ten, whereas blue-collar unskilled workers placed it as number one in importance. When one compares white-collar unskilled workers with the white-collar skilled workers, a significant difference is found between how the two groups rated "good working conditions." Unskilled white-collar workers placed working conditions as number two in importance, whereas skilled workers placed it as number seven.

Organization Level

The organization levels were divided into lower, middle, and higher nonsupervisory categories. The comparison of the lower with both the middle and the higher levels produced statistically significant differences. The largest difference between the lower organization level and both higher groups was that the lower- organization-level employee rated "good wages" as number one and "job security" as number two, whereas both the middle and higher levels rated "job security" and "full appreciation of work done" as numbers one and two. Again one must return to the satisfaction of the basic needs before the higher needs are expressed as an important and relevant concept when evaluating employee satisfaction.

REWARD SYSTEM MANIPULATION

All three surveys showed that supervisors



believe that money (i.e., high wages) is the major motivator of their employees, whereas only three of the employee subgroups rated money as the most important reward. These subgroups were the under-30 group representing 20.2 percent of the total survey, the under- \$25,000 income level representing 13.5 percent of the total, and the lower-organization-level employee representing 41.8 percent of the total survey.

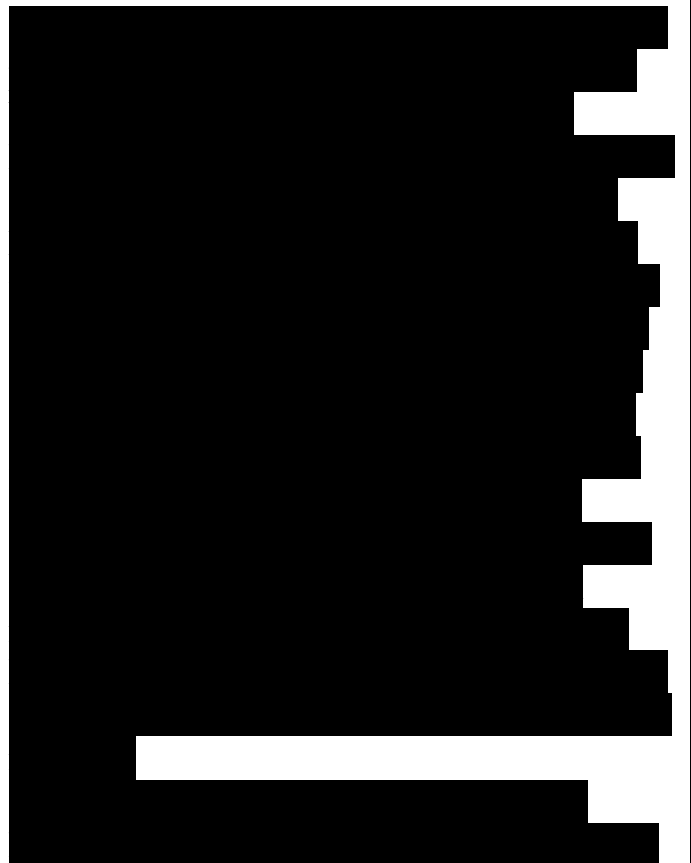
Why do managers choose to ignore the reward responses given by the majority of the workers under their supervision? This question was addressed earlier in the article, and it was suggested that managers operate under a self-reference system—i.e., they rank rewards as they would want them for themselves and assume their employees would subscribe to the same ranking. If this is true, and I would point to the survey results to show that it is, then how can management be encouraged to base its employee policies on more objective interpretations of employee motivations?

Supervisors believe that money (i.e., high wages) is the major motivator of their employees.

Reward practices should be designed to fit the needs of particular persons working under particular conditions.

One way to encourage more objectivity in structuring reward systems is to do attitude surveys such as this one. This survey revealed that supervisors do not know what their employees want and also revealed differences between employee subgroups that management should take into consideration when structuring reward systems. Managers need to be aware that reward practices should be designed to fit the needs of particular persons working under particular conditions. Using the present survey as an example, reward systems could be manipulated as follows for the various groupings:

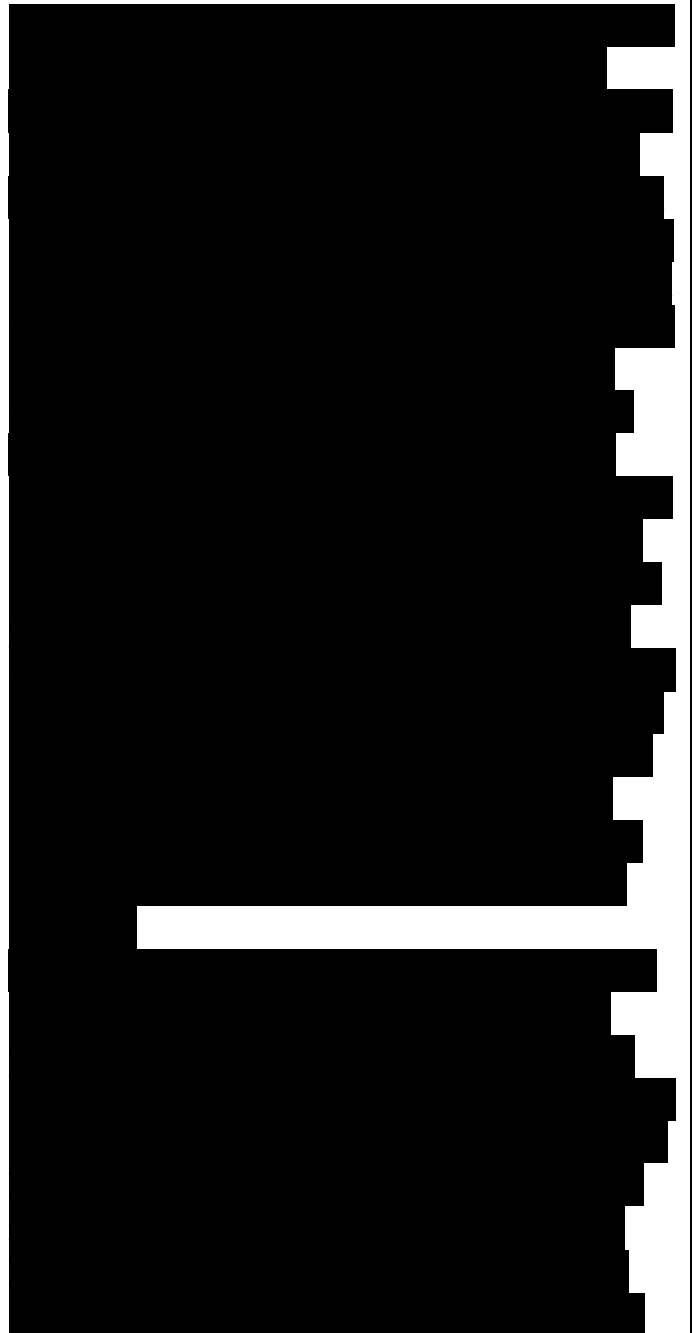
- Males versus females. Males were more inclined to prefer interesting work,



whereas females seemed to need more appreciation of work well done. Efforts should be made to design the job format to provide more interest to both groups, because both marked interesting work as one of the three primary rewards, but managers should take into account the fact that female workers have more need of appreciation and should, therefore, engage in more verbal communication intended to foster such a feeling. Also, managers should be more aware of the needs of women for sympathetic help with their personal problems and thus be willing to spend more time with them on such problems than they do with male subordinates.

□ Age groups. Flexible pay incentives might be used effectively with the under-30 workers because they seem to be concerned about their basic needs, whereas the higher age groups could be expected to respond more positively to job enrichment and job enlargement programs. One group, the 41 to 50 age group placed as number one "the feeling of being in on things." Systems of "top-down" vertical communication within the organization would appear to be particularly effective with this group. Perhaps supervisors dealing with the 41 to 50 group could make an effort to include this group in discussions of policy, even if their input and ideas are not always implemented. The over-50 group places as moderately important, "good working conditions," "personal loyalty to employees," and "sympathetic help with personal problems." An awareness of these needs by the manager could make these employees more productive.

□ Income groups. The lower income group is primarily concerned with "good wages" and would respond to pay incentive programs. They are moderately concerned with "interesting work," "full appreciation of work done," and "the feeling of being in on things." All of the other income groups are primarily concerned with "interesting work" and "full appreciation of work done." A job

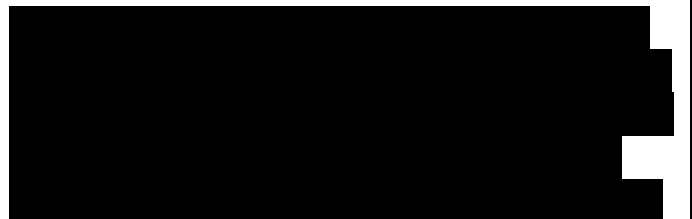
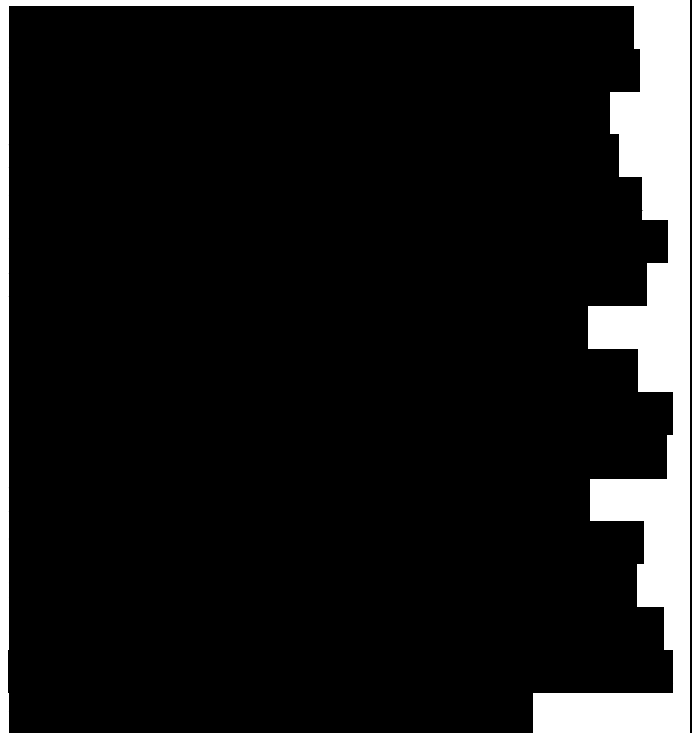
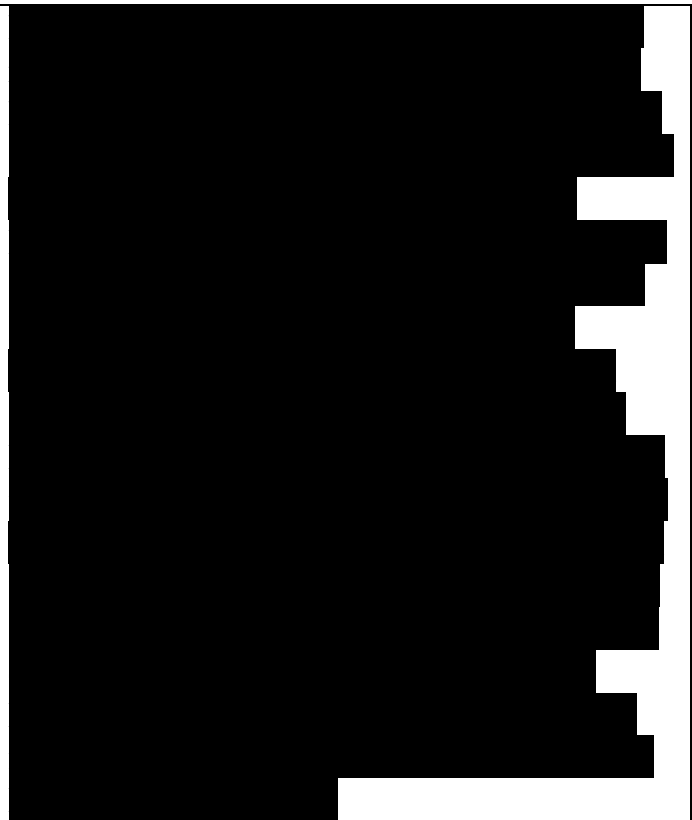


enrichment/ job enlargement program would probably work for all income groups except the lowest one, whereas an incentive pay program (piece-rate, Scanlon plan, etc.) might be a good investment in regard to motivating lower-income employees.

□ Job types. The most striking difference between unskilled blue-collar workers and unskilled white-collar workers is the difference in emphasis placed on "good working conditions." Unskilled white-collar workers judged this to be second in importance on their list of preferences and were the only group that rated this factor so high. The supervisors of this group should be able to address the physical working conditions for unskilled white-collar workers by simple environmental analysis and reap some motivational return.

The difference between blue-collar skilled workers and white-collar skilled workers is significant in the positioning of "full appreciation of work done." Blue-collar skilled workers evidently have a high self-awareness of their jobs and how well they do them, whereas white-collar skilled workers have little sense of self-awareness concerning their jobs and need outside confirmation of job worth. Blue-collar skilled workers should be included in more decisionmaking activities, as they seem to have a need for being in on things. Skilled white-collar workers would respond to the same stimuli as would skilled blue-collar workers but for a different reason. For skilled white-collar workers greater participation in decision-making activities gives them the feedback needed to define the job and better opportunities to receive the exposure needed for advancement.

□ Organization level. Employees at the lower organizational level would respond to pay incentives and greater job security, and in the middle and higher levels to job enrichment/job enlargement programs.



Respondents in the middle organizational level ranked job security in the number-four position, the same position as the total respondent ranking. Thus, the insecurity experienced by workers in the industrial sector is a factor that should be considered seriously by management. Evidently job security matters when you don't have it, as evidenced by the under-30 group ranking **it in the number-two position, and** the 31 to 40 group (a group with the most security) ranking it as seventh. The higher organization level group, probably those with the most security, ranked job security in the number-six position. Again, one finds evidence to support the contention⁶ that fulfilled needs no longer motivate.

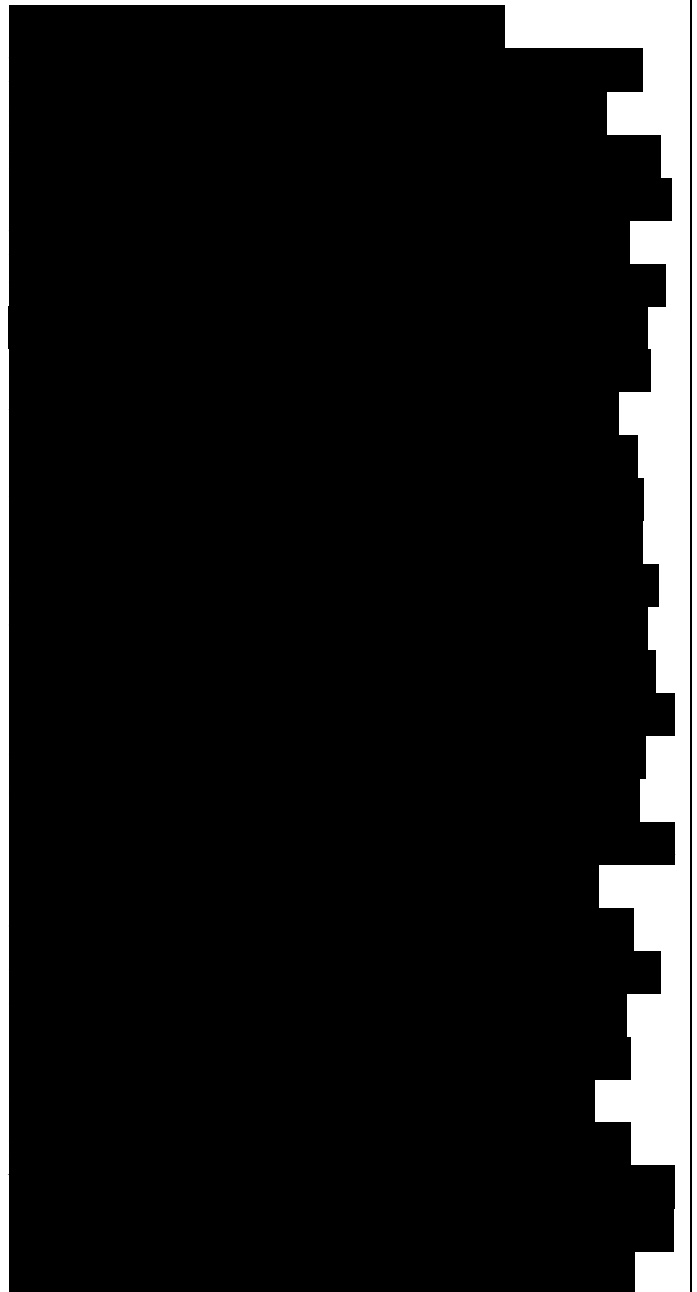
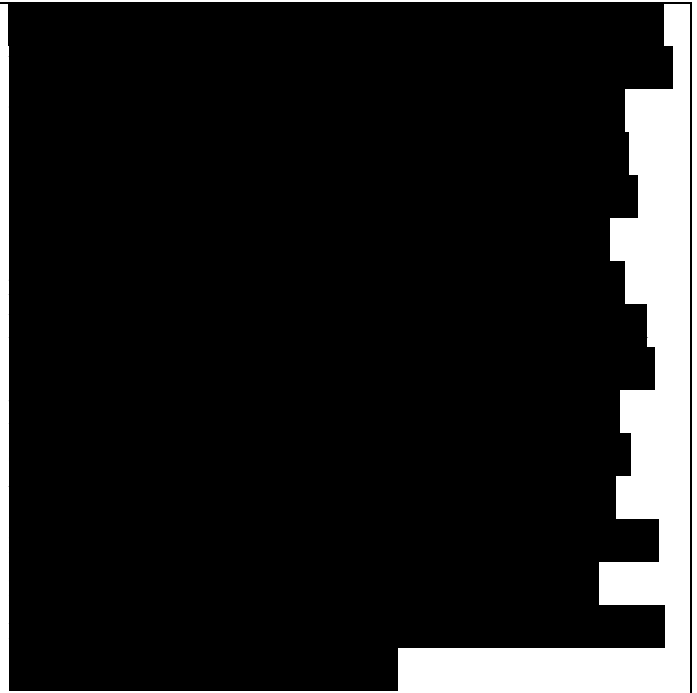
ATTITUDE SURVEYS

With the exception of two groups, the under-30 group and the under-\$25,000 a year group, all of the respondents ranked "inter-esting work" in one of the three top positions.

Jurgensen, in a study that drew on a 30-year practice in a large utility company of asking job applicants to rank ten job characteristics in terms of importance to the applicants, came up with a similar result.⁷ Over this period of time, job security declined in importance and "type of work" increased in importance.

Furthermore, Jurgensen sorted the respondents out by groups according to educational attainment and found that higher educated persons attached more importance to type of work, whereas those with only high school diplomas attached more importance to job security. The author would argue that, because our labor force contains a higher percentage of persons with postsecondary education each year, the increasing importance of interesting work is to be expected and will continue in the future.

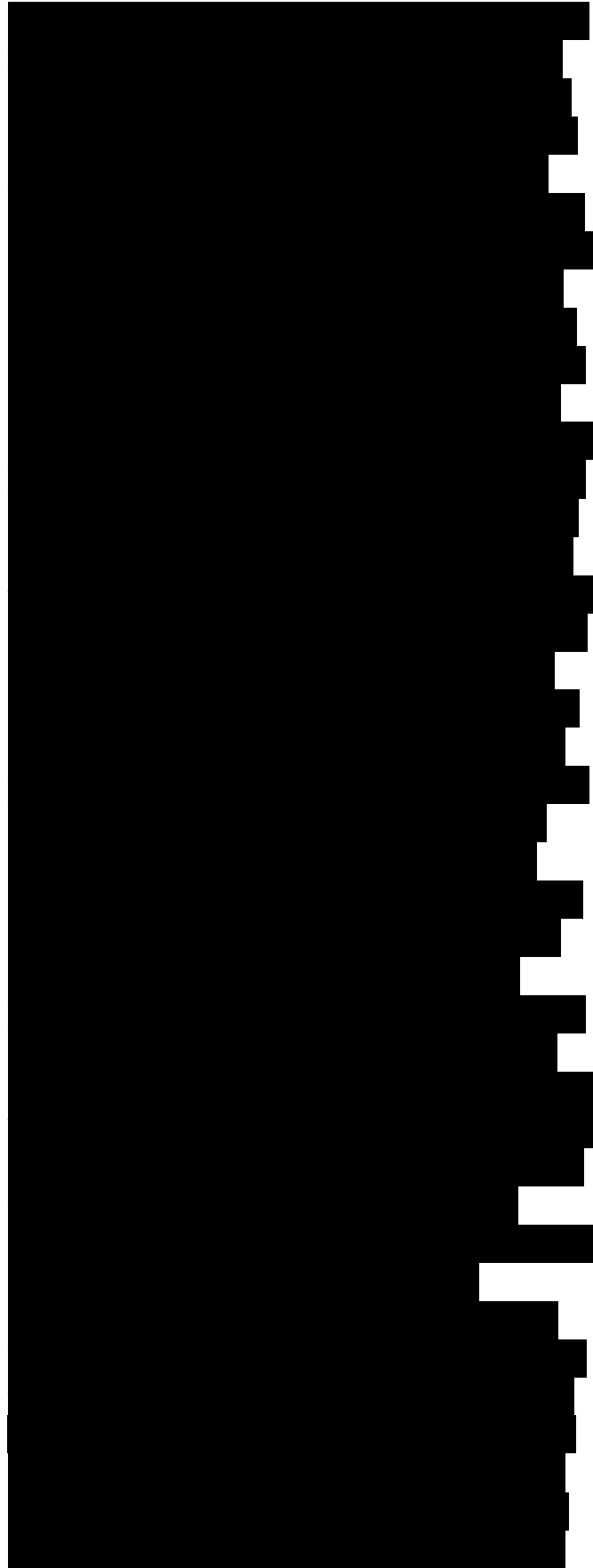
Making work interesting is not an easy task, however. It is much easier to pay more, to make work cleaner and safer, even to ensure reasonable job security, than it is to make some kinds of work interesting. As stated previously, perhaps job enlargement and



enrichment are ideas worth trying in the future on a far larger scale than has been done in the past. Organizations with considerable numbers of younger, lower-paid workers may well take a long look at these behavioral concepts.

This author would never argue that attitude surveys are the only answer needed to all motivation problems, for it goes without saying that job satisfaction is a difficult thing to measure. It is tied to the expectations of the worker who answers the questions and is difficult to evaluate against a fixed scale of intensity. At what point, for example, do the cumulative negative feelings of an individual add up to an overall assessment that he or she is dissatisfied with the job? Only the individual can make such an overall judgment. However, this doesn't mean that we can't generalize from these surveys. For example, we can say that based on these surveys, it appears that in most cases the basic needs of the worker are met by today's U.S. organizations. That is, wages are not a burning issue except with the under-30 age group, the under-\$25,000-a-year pay group, and the lower-organizational-level employees. What is important to the majority of employees surveyed is "interesting work," "appreciation of work," and the "feeling of being in on things." Obviously, then, supervisors should make every effort to be aware of the importance of these particular values and encourage upper-level management to become involved in job restructuring programs and constructing better communications within the organization. They should be aware that the employees want to be appreciated and should make an effort to give credit where credit is due, and whenever possible, include all levels of employees in some form of decision making so that the employee has a feeling of belonging and participation.

The more often surveys are taken, the more likely managers will heed them and take a personal interest in the progress of programs that they have initiated. It would also enable them to spot potential dissatisfaction factors that could arise because of changes in the makeup of the workforce and in the background of the

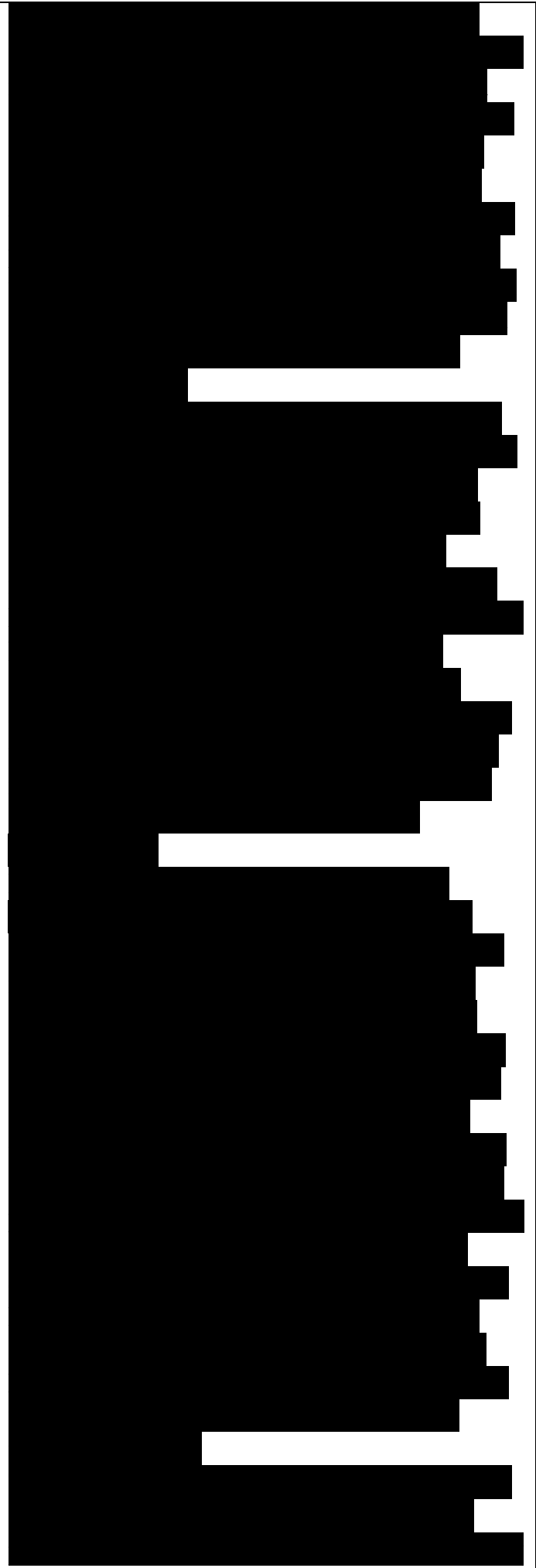


employees. But above all, frequent surveys would help to impress managers with the responsibility of taking the needs of employees into account. To know what the specific needs are, attitude surveys are necessary, and because of today's rapid changes in our society and organizations, these surveys need to be taken often. Self-reference, a *major* problem in employee motivation for at least 50 years, will not and cannot be eliminated or even minimized any other way.

The results of attitude surveys should also be disseminated to the supervisors directly in charge of the employees and not held in the hands of upper-level management. This may help to dispel the false notion held by supervisors that their employees are motivated by high wages above everything else. Gellerman, in 1963, stated that "myths die hard," and that, "it is quite clear that money's reputation as the ultimate motivator is going to be a long time a-dying."⁸ As the present survey shows, this myth is still alive and flourishing with most supervisors in the business sector.

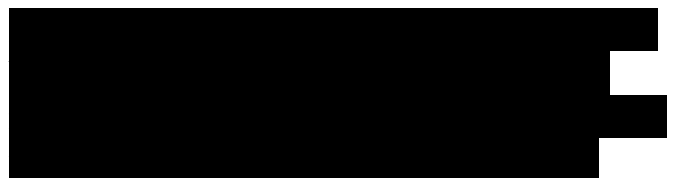
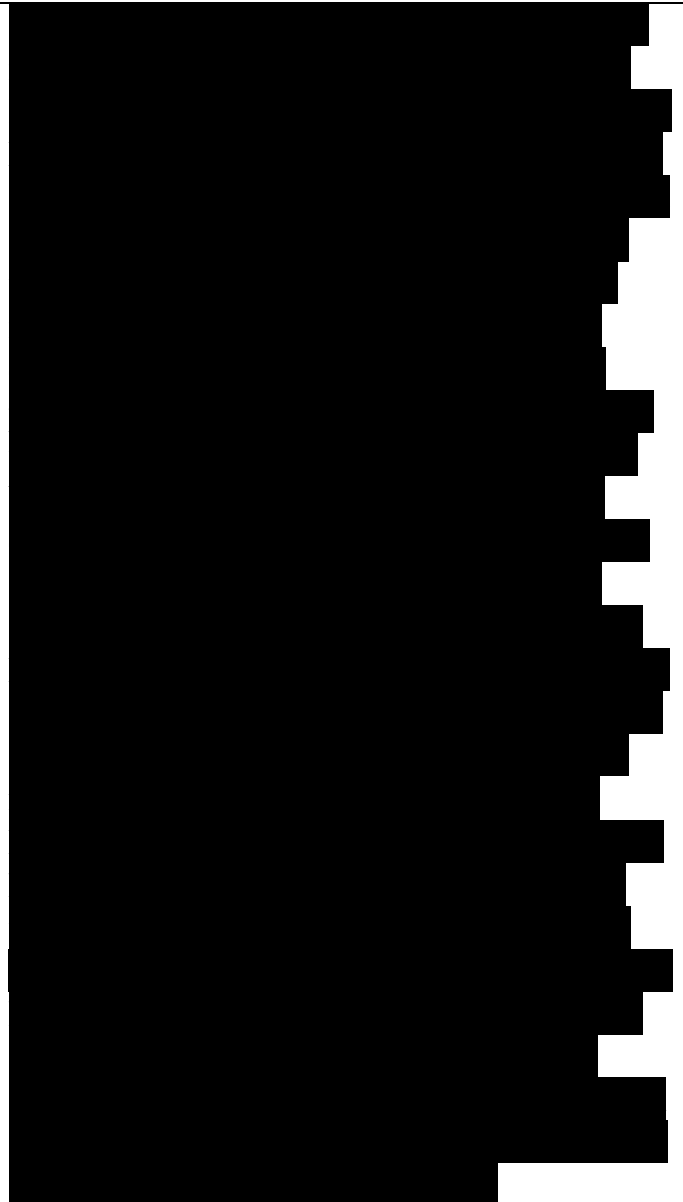
CONCLUSION

Maslow contended that under current business conditions most U.S. employees have lower-level or deficit needs substantially satisfied. Therefore, such management strategies as increasing employee incomes or strengthening job security will not accomplish as much as is often expected. The results of these surveys both bear out Maslow's contention and yet point out that there exists a degree to which various respondents' job circumstances are or are not providing sufficient rewards in each job area. The author believes this survey serves an important function in pointing out both the problem of self-reference in motivation and the differences between subgroups of employees in terms of motivational factors and their relative importance. It must be remembered, however, that each organization's labor force may well score differently when given the present survey.



The results discussed herein may be vastly different from those obtained from a particular employer. The resulting conclusions drawn would of course be different in such a case. Likewise, the results may well change over time within a particular organization. For example, a large service firm is a consulting client of this author. They are downsizing their nonmanagerial labor force by almost 10 percent. The union contract allows for "bumping" of union employees by those more senior in such a situation. Before the downsizing was announced, the survey discussed herein had continually shown that younger employees were more motivated by wages and working conditions, yet after the bumping began the factors ranked were drastically different, with job security and personal loyalty to employees at the top of the list. On the other hand, older employees used to rank interesting work as one of the least motivating factors, yet after the job shuffling this factor was ranked considerably higher by employees in the older age group. Obviously, when they had the higher-level, more senior jobs, the need for interesting work was being met to a greater extent than after they bumped into the lower-level, less-senior jobs.

Another client, a mid-size chemical firm, was acquired by a large national firm. Before the acquisition job security was ranked high by all groups. Shortly after the acquisition, the acquiring firm announced that there would be no job loss in the acquired firm and that some personnel would in fact be given additional responsibilities under the intended restructuring. The iteration of the survey administered after these announcements showed that job security returned to its preacquisition position and that factors of promotion and growth in the organization now possessed the most motivational value. These two examples are offered not because they are important in and of themselves, but because they illustrate the point that the results presented in the body of this article are



not universal. They may be drastically different both between organizations and within organizations over time. In both cases, the differences in the rankings will reflect conditions in the particular firm at the particular time. In addition, one must account for differences between subgroups within the organizations, as was done in the present survey. It can be seen then, that motivation of employees is a complex subject with no simple answers. This is emphatically not to say, however, that we should not make every attempt to understand what motivates our employees.

What this author has found after 20 years of research and consulting in the area of employee motivation is that it is crucial for the organization to address this area.

Employee motivation is a key factor in determining long-term employer success levels. Yet, ironically enough, it is an area overlooked by many organizations. Surveys such as the one discussed in this article must be properly structured before they are administered and must be properly analyzed after the fact. This is not an easy job, but given its importance it is one that should be undertaken with all deliberate speed. In most organizations, the time to address this issue was yesterday.

