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Hints to Improve Motivation in Construction Companies

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Abstract

Motivation in work teams has a key role to play for the survival and competitiveness of businesses in the harsh environment of economic recession. This paper characterizes motivation in small and medium-sized construction companies in Portugal. It draws on data collected from in-person surveys which were carried out to employees of 32 companies. Results reveal the presence of some motivating factors specific to the profession such as the fact that the work requires a wide range of skills and is not very routine. Also, although employees in general feel a sense of equity and recognize that managers provide constant feedback, results show the need for improvement in motivation's management, particularly in regard to more autonomy and participation in setting goals.

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1. Introduction

The context of European economic recession has aggravated the decline of the construction sector of southern European countries. In Portugal, between 2005 and 2010, construction accumulated successive losses of over 24%. In 2012, the civil engineering sector was the most affected with a production fall, measured in constant prices, of around 7.5%¹. The civil construction industry relies on a business structure with predominantly unspecialized micro, small

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and medium companies, often using subcontractors or being subcontracted². In 2012, the Civil Construction and Public Works sector (CCOP) was constituted by 88,787 firms employing 344,185 workers. 93.8% of the companies were micro-businesses (under 10 employees) and small companies with fewer than 50 employees represented 5,7%³ of total companies. In most of the companies, labor is intensive and the workforce is characterized by a high proportion of young males (who work in some cases illegally or without contracts). Over half of the employees have no or low qualifications, promoting high job insecurity. Wages are lower than the national average. The industry has a high manpower turnover: over 70% of employees have been employed in their company for less than 4 years².

If under normal circumstances the motivation of employees is a determining factor for companies' success and competitiveness⁴ during recession times, it is even more essential to seek the best way to motivate human resources in order to improve the organizational climate, maximize the performance of professionals, specially their productivity⁵. Adopting motivation and retention strategies may improve organizational efficiency, increase productivity and profitability as well as satisfy the individual needs of employees (reducing stress and job insecurity while boosting loyalty, commitment and job satisfaction)⁶, thus, helping to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive market⁷.

A brief overview of the research recently published on employees' motivation shows that it covers a large range of issues from diverse theoretical perspectives. Among them, the role played by intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, incentives, training and coaching, the effects of job-design, conflicts and leadership. Although the great majority of studies address these issues in general, some assess them from the perspective of a specific economic sector, for example the health service.

The present study makes a contribution in an area where the specific literature on motivation in the construction industry is scarce, particularly in Portugal. It is relevant since it sheds light on the aspects leading to increased motivation especially in small and medium sized companies. Thus this article seeks to answer the following question: what are the present characteristics/aspects of motivation management in construction companies, and more specifically in small and medium size ones? In which aspects is there room for improvement?

Although our original research gathered information from both perspectives (from the managers' point of view and from their respective employees), the first step of our study, presented here, is to answer to the above question from the employees' perspective.

Responding to this question will lead us to infer, in regard to the theoretical used framework, the actual limitations in motivation management and possible improvements.

In order to capture the most significant aspects and issues at play regarding employees' motivation and instead of narrowing our scope on one or another aspect of motivation, we made the decision to conduct our investigation using the comprehension that fundamental international theories on motivation can provide on this matter. We shall start outlining them since they will serve us to build our theoretical and methodological instrument of investigation. We will then present the instrument of investigation and the results of a questionnaire applied to employees of 32 micro, small and medium-sized construction companies of the municipality of Vila Real. This survey aimed to gather the opinions and feelings of the workers regarding motivation, their needs and the characteristics of their work. The results are discussed in light of the concepts outlined by the theories of motivation presented earlier. Some hints for improvements are then presented in the conclusion.

2. Brief Review of Theories on Motivation

According to authors such as Maslow, and later Alderfer and McClelland, motivation is associated with the idea of a purpose that an individual seeks to achieve. They consider it a need within a person which, if withheld, will have a mobilizing effect, and if satisfied, even partially, will trigger a new need. Maslow ranked human needs in a hierarchical way beginning with physiological needs and then proceeding respectively with the needs for safety, love and belonging, esteem, self-realization, knowledge and aesthetics⁸. McClelland also identified three levels of needs (power, achievement, affiliation), while arguing that individuals are strongly motivated by only one of these types, being possible to configure a psychological profile for each person⁹.

McGregor¹⁰ added an organizational variant, more specifically the influence of managers, showing that they create an environment that reflects their beliefs and values about employees¹¹. McGregor presents two theoretical models of opposing managers. Theory X assumes that managers believe that humans have an aversion to work and are irresponsible by nature. This type of manager is likely to use rewards and punishments as motivators as well as many

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