

**Nudge Management as an Essential Behavioural Science Application to Improve
Performance Management for Higher Productivity: A PSU Perspective**

By

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Abstract

It is a well-known concept that organisations that incorporate proven techniques from Behavioural Economics into employee motivation programs and other aspects of their business models have a competitive edge and enjoy higher levels of productivity, engagement, and retention among employees than those relying solely on traditional monetary incentives. The topic of using behavioral nudges in diversified areas like health, environment etc has been widely debated by researchers. In this study, the theoretical frameworks for behavioral nudges are drawn upon, and the possibility of using nudge as a tool to improve employee performance in order to achieve enhanced organisational performance is discussed. Attention is also drawn to encourage prospective empirical studies in this area.

1. Introduction

Human resource is considered as a valuable asset contributing to the overall success of a business organisation in the contemporary world. Therefore, there is an innate need to increase employee satisfaction in order to improve their performance and positively impact the overall organisational performance.

A positive workplace culture is one that aligns employees' self-interest with the organisation's activities and objectives. When successful, the results are good relationships, high morale, trust and personal commitment as well as a profitable bottom line in both social and financial terms. The costs of poor workplace culture are spread across many diverse systems: sickness absence, worker's compensation, loss of employees' discretionary effort, healthcare costs, staff turnover, insurance and social security arrangements. Improving workplace organisational culture provides an unparalleled opportunity to improve the health of the workforce AND workplace productivity.

The World Health Organization describes the relationship between health and workplace productivity as a virtuous circle, stating "there is no trade-off between health and productivity at work, whereby improved conditions of work lead to a healthier work force, which in turn lead to improved productivity, creating an opportunity for a healthier and more productive workplace".

Underpinning a productive workplace is a healthy workplace culture. Employers' strongest motive in offering wellness incentives is to control healthcare costs that is associated with absenteeism and sick-leave. (Abraham, Feldman, Nyman & Barleen, 2011). According to Steven Aldana, (2017), employees feel happier when they have control over their health, feel appreciated at work, and are encouraged to reach personal goals. Aldana also argues that poor health leads to lower mental presence and lower productivity at work, which in turn leads to higher work absence and sick leave. Merrill and Aldana highlights that incentives "can influence employee health care costs, employee productivity, employee job satisfaction, absenteeism, a sense of community, and long-term health." (p.782). According to research, exercise and focusing on a healthy lifestyle leads to decrease in sick-leave and increased employee productivity. (Zwetsloot, Scheppingen, Dijkman, Henrich & Besten, 2010).

Organizations adopt various strategies to motivate their employees to lead healthier lifestyles in order to increase productivity. Wellness incentive is one such example of *nudge management*, used by firms today in order to influence or motivate employee behaviours. (Ebert & Freibichler, 2017). ‘Nudge management’ is a management approach where nudge theory is applied to an organisational setting, with a view to align the unconscious behavior of employees for achieving organisational objectives. (Ebert & Freibichler, 2017).

According to a study, employee wellness initiatives, if implemented effectively, can save India by nearly \$20 billion at the end of 2018. Further, for every rupee spent on employee wellness, employers get a saving of Rs.132.33 on absenteeism costs and recoup Rs. 6.62 due to reduced health care costs. The motivation to participate in wellness programs stems from a concern to lead a healthy life, and is further accentuated if the company offers incentives to participate in such programs.

Problem Background

The cost of organisational sick-leave has increased by manifold in 4 years, (Regeringen, 2015), which has resulted in loss of productivity. Studies by the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated direct financial losses owing to absenteeism as more than \$40 billion a year, and additional research suggested that if illness related absenteeism were a line item on a company’s profit and loss statement, the cost would probably exceed 15% of profits. Organizations across the world use various methods to bring about behavioral change in employees, which in turn can improve the organisational productivity. This includes set norms, effective communication and collaboration and involvement in the process of change. For large organisations, bringing about the desired change in behavior to achieve results is often a complex process because of the large size of the population. Research shows that nudge management, and application of nudges, can be a possible solution to organisations in motivating and influencing their employees’ choices. (Ebert & Freibichler, 2017). The relation between motivation to change, nudge management, and use of incentives therefore provide an interesting and relevant research topic.

1.1 Research Question

How can nudge management be applied by organisations to motivate employees towards enhanced and superior performance?

1.2 Research Objective

The current context narrates the case of an Indian Public Sector Unit, which experienced application of *nudge management* through the conceptual lens of Behavioural Economics. The responses were collected through qualitative interviews for the purpose of research. The purpose of this study is to explore how organisations can use nudge management to motivate its employees and facilitate achievement of enhanced performance. The result of this research shows key obstacles, and also explores various nudges the organisation used to promote productivity enhancement through incentivization.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of existing theories central to the theoretical framework as narrated below:

2.1 Behavioural Economics Theory

Behavioural Economics Theory emerges from traditional microeconomics which combines economics and psychology to understand how individuals actually behave as opposed to being perfectly rational (Thaler, 2016), and includes decision theory, prospect theory and nudge theory. Decision theory relates to the Game Theory studies - the underlying reasoning for making certain decisions and how to make better decisions. Prospect theory created by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky describes decision-making in the light of gains and losses. Nudge theory is a modern concept used in management to assist individuals to improve and change their thinking and decisions and is based on two systems developed by Daniel Kahneman.

Behavioural Economics assumes that humans are not always rational in decision making and that this “irrationality” can be explained by the influence of our feelings. Research reveals that this

perceived irrationality is actually predictable and by understanding which buttons to push, managers can nudge their employees towards achieving organisational goals without adopting any pricey restructuring program.

By including emotions as a factor in the decision making process, it is understood that financial incentives have limitations as motivators to perform a given task. In other words, people also give value to “psychic income” i.e. how the management or the organisation perceives them, which forms part of their decision processes on how much effort to exert on a task, whether to indulge in behavior that can impact the organisation, treatment with co-workers etc. If the workplace gives an employee positive feeling, or psychic income in terms of being valued or being included in important decisions, in addition to monetary compensation, the individual feels more motivated to work towards the organisational goals. For an organisation, this implies that managers need to value the emotional needs of employees, in addition to monetary incentives while structuring compensation, rewards and recognition strategies.

The problems of lower than expected results and higher than expected absenteeism tend to arise because managers assume that money is the main, and in some cases only, motivator for their employees. The fact that there are non-monetary motivators at work tends to get overlooked in the realities of doing business. The managers need to find out what these motivators are and how to use them to nudge employees in the desired direction.

2.2 Nudge Theory

In the book “*Nudge: Improving Decisions Wealth, health, and Happiness*” (2008), Thaler and Sunstein outlined 2 systems of human thinking – the Reflective and Automatic systems. They argued that conflicts between these two frequently lead people to select the wrong option. The theory made the case for ‘libertarian paternalism’, which brings together two oppositional political philosophies. People should still be free to make their own choices, ran the argument, but they could be given an invisible helping hand – a nudge – to steer them towards making the right ones. The trick in delivering the nudge lies in what the authors call ‘choice architecture’.

Organizations use different nudges in its management to change the choice architecture in the organisation. The management needs to decide which nudge to use and how subtle they should be (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), known as nudge management.

2.3 Constraints of Nudge Application

Liberal Neutrality is associated with ethics of choice. The term ‘Liberal Neutrality’ means “the view that the state should not reward or penalize particular conceptions of the good life but, rather, should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued” (Kymlicka, 1989, p.883), which means that every person has got the right to make their own choices based on their interest and understanding, and not be governed by policymaker decisions. However, generally human beings also tend to make bad choices which may have a negative impact on them as well as others, known as paternalism. In organisations, paternalism can become a problem when employees are controlled or nudged in unethical ways because of unethical motives of management, (Hove, 2012).

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the main theories, namely Nudge management, motivation, and productivity are discussed.

3.1 Nudge Management

Nudge management is a management approach where nudge theory is applied to an organisational setting in order to best use the unconscious behavior of employees in line with organisational objectives, (Ebert & Freibichler, 2017). The theory draws on recent developments in behavioral economics inspired by the so-called dual process theory of mind. The underlying idea made popular in (Kahneman 2011), is that humans have, broadly speaking, developed two thinking systems. The so-called system 1 is the more automated system, which contains much of our intuitive and affective thinking, while system 2 is usually characterized by our reflective and logical capacities. It attempts to alter staff behavior by making simple, seemingly unnoticeable changes to an environment that can have a large desired impact, due to which productivity can increase with little effort from the employee.

Ebert and Freibichler (2017), provide several examples of how nudge management can aid in solving common workplace problems and increase productivity by adjusting the basic choice architecture to improve an individual's decision-making (often the automated one) with regards to health, wealth, and happiness, while preserving the libertarian ideal of freedom of choice. Nudge management is born out of the idea that some of the basic insights of nudge theory can be adapted and implemented in an organisational setting under a different “social contract”, i.e. that of contributing to the organisational objectives.

3.2 Motivation

Motivation is defined as “the reason why somebody does something or behaves in a particular way”, (Oxford, 2010, p.998), and the “eagerness and willingness to do something without needing to be told or forced to do it”, (Longman, 2014, p.1138). Autonomous motivation and high performance result from work environments that satisfy the basic psychological needs, viz. autonomy, competence and relatedness. In order for an employee to utilize the incentives, the person first need to be motivated to exercise, eat healthy, or change other unhealthy behaviors. In order to understand how organisations apply nudge management in employee behavioral change, it is essential to understand employee motivation to utilize the incentives.

4. Proposed Research Method

This section highlights the different methodological assumptions viz. problem statement, theory, research design, literature review, theoretical framework, data collection, the case in question, operationalization and the analysis method adopted for the study.

4.1 Research Design

Methodology provides guidelines and the way to achieve the aim of a study, (Potter, 1996). The choice of method also affects the problem and the need for information. The main emphasis of qualitative research is on perceptions and interpretations of social reality, (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In this study, a qualitative method is chosen with a view to build a better understanding of the social phenomenon in specific situations; it also enables the researcher to ask supplementary

questions to the answers, and go broader into the reasons on why the respondents may respond as they do. Attempts were made to be as objective as possible while conducting this study. Interview questions were grounded on theoretical framework to limit biased expectations, judgement, and analyses.

4.2 Theoretical Reference

In order to prepare the research questions and analysis scientifically, a fitting theory was searched, where in extensive material was found on behavioral economics theory, which led further to a more specific and fitting theory, namely Nudge Theory by Richard Thaler. However, since nudge theory is a microeconomic theory, and this research being a business administrative research, it was analyzed as to how organisations can use nudges in workplace management. This drove the need to correlate nudge management with motivation, an essential tool for effective nudge management application.

4.3 Data Collection

The research made use of documentation, archival records, interviews and direct observation. For this qualitative research, in-person interviews were conducted for collection of empirical data. According to Robert Yin (2013), interviews provide rich details, ideas and explanations, and are an imperative source of information. Interviews also provide more personalized answers because of close involvement (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Further, in-person interviews can get quicker response than other modes and provide the opportunity to read the interviewees body language. Documentary analysis was based primarily on publicly available texts, such as annual reports, employee newsletters, bulletins, newspapers, media articles, and website information of the case organisation. Interviews were conducted at the PSU's headquarters, which provided the advantage of observing the environment and context in which the investigated phenomenon was occurring. Semi-structured questions were administered based on the theoretical framework, namely nudge management, motivation and performance orientation with each interview lasting around 15 minutes. Due to the high security and surveillance nature of the environment, the interviewees

requested not to be audio recorded therefore leaving the researcher with only the option of hand noting the interview content.

4.4 The Problem Statement

The case in question is a central public sector entity with a long history of operations. The shift in order allotment process from nomination basis to competitive bidding has prompted the organisation to implement major change initiatives in the last few years in order to stay competitive and enhance capacity utilization. Having won a huge work order, the PSU now is geared up for an IPO, slated for early September 2018.

The key concern of the management is to revamp efficiency and effectiveness, adhering to the delivery schedules, cost and quality parameters as per client requirements. The organisation is plagued with persistent labor issues owing to unionized environment, locational constraints and ongoing challenges of higher than industry standard rate of employee absenteeism and lower than desired productivity levels. The absenteeism figure taken for the last 5 years (as on 31.03.2018) for the organisation stands at a whopping 18.16% apart from medical or sickness leave which amounts to 4.62% of the total employee leave data. The management initiated various cash-based rewards to employees as a part of its rewards and recognition program to boost employee motivation and engagement.

This strategy makes good economic sense – who wouldn't want to earn more incentive and a fatter paycheck? However, unfortunately this strategy was not getting the required results. Behavioural Economics aims to provide the answer to this problem!

4.5 Participant profile

To conduct the study, it was originally decided to conduct 6-8 interviews with two different PSUs located in and around Kolkata which has recently undergone various change implementations to incentivize employees towards productivity enhancement. However, owing to bureaucratic and approval issues, the study had to be done with a single organisation.

In order to specifically understand what motivated staff and what did not, a purposive sampling was conducted for the interviews, (Bryman & Bell, 2015), with five incumbents from the junior management and three from the middle management who were aware of the incentive initiative initiated by the company, but did not avail of it themselves. The gender or age profile of the interviewees was not considered relevant for this study. In order to make an ethical research, the participants were volunteers and anonymous, and were informed about the purpose of the study.

4.6 Administering the Study

The interviews were conducted primarily during the interviewees' lunch break for 3 days to enable easier elicitation of responses. Follow up questions were asked along with semi-structured in-person interviews to create a flowing discussion, allowing the interviewees to speak freely without hesitation.

4.7 Analysis

The study findings from the semi-structured interviews were categorized to create a structure according to the interview guide. The keywords and the categories were related to the main theories of use, viz. the nudge management, motivation and job characteristics in order to create a better foundation for analysis and discussion thereof. The similarities, differences and connections in terms of the interviews responses were identified. The overall attempt has remained to stay objective in the analysis process with least amount of bias arising out of preconceived expectations of the outcome, if any.

5. Empirical Findings

It was revealed during the study that the company has devised a reward incentive based on employee wellness in order to promote healthy lifestyle and employee motivation. Further, an Open Gym was provided inside manufacturing premises for usage of all employees during leisure periods. It also offers the choice of a wellness hour, with the benefit of exercising one hour per week during work hours.

It is evidenced that the new incentive nudge was highly applauded by the employees who wholeheartedly participated in the wellness sessions (around 383 employees participated over 10 batches of wellness sessions) and felt elated to receive rewards from the top management (128 eligible employees made it to the competition round and 22 made to the grand finale, out of which 7 employees emerged as winners). This in turn led them to personally promote the initiative. This initiative helped promote individual & group behaviors to focus on achieving targets, increasing motivation, reducing absenteeism while also increasing the overall productivity. The absenteeism has reduced by around 2% in the first quarter followed by enhanced performance and motivation among workforce, which has contributed to higher teamwork and productivity.

5.1 Key Observations

5.1.1 Rewards Should Motivate, Not Backfire

Reward structures are important levers to examine when considering organisational nudges. To motivate behavior in the desired direction, reward structures need to be aligned with organisational objectives. Organizations need criteria by which to judge success, measure and reward performance. Often, this leads to tangible metrics (money spent, time spent etc.) that are not tapping into important components of effectiveness and work quality, often coupled with undue emphasis on highly visible behaviors. Team building and creativity are examples of behaviors which may not be rewarded because they are difficult to observe and measure, even though they are important. Organizational policies and procedures should encourage and reward innovation at varying levels and allow for creativity and innovation, self-efficacy inducing interventions (training, exercises etc.) which increases confidence in the prospect of carrying out innovation.

There is often an inconsistency between what is hoped for and what is rewarded. Organizations often nudge the workforce in unintended directions via their informal or formal reward structures. Effective solutions to this problem require attention to organisational policies as well as more micro-level psychological consequences of rewards and punishments.

5.1.2 There Is More to Work Motivation Than Monetary Rewards and Incentives

The rewards may be only weak reinforcers in the short term and have hidden costs, which may become negative reinforcers once they are withdrawn, (Benabou and Tirole, 2003). Extrinsic incentives and rewards may cause employees to conceptualize their motivation to perform a task in external terms (e.g. for a bonus) rather than seeing the task as intrinsically worthwhile. Autonomous motivation and high performance result from work environments that satisfy these needs. Therefore, one component of the diagnostic phase of determining how best to nudge an organisation entails considering the degree to which these needs are met on the job. Their absence renders an organisation increasingly reliant on external rewards, with motivational effects that are often unsustainable.

5.2 Application of Nudge Management

This section explores how organisations can use nudge management and the wellness incentives in a better way to help their employees make better decisions towards motivation and productivity.

The primary obstacle the respondents struggled with was lack of time owing to work pressure. The solution for this however remains with the individual – it is their responsibility to exercise self-control and discipline and manage their own schedule. The organisation does not have much control over employees’ personal scheduling or family lives, but can offer information or training on better time-management. Thaler and Sunstein, (2016) talk about “frequency” where practice makes perfect, and that difficult things become easier with time. Thus, the junior level employees might need more nudging in the area of planning, preparing and time-management.

Another large obstacle the respondents struggle with is the lack of energy due to excessive workload and the stress they encounter when at work. They all say that they have a lot of work to do, and that they are too tired to exercise after work. If they use the wellness hour, they would instead be backed-up at work and have to work overtime. It is felt that this is something very

important that the organisation must look into in order to nudge the employees to live a healthier lifestyle. It would also be a good idea to offer stress-management.

The third main obstacle is lack of motivation to attend wellness sessions. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) explain that “priming” is a way to nudge a person’s choices by generally talking about an issue beforehand which can work as an unconscious reminder. Organizations can use priming to stir the unconscious by mentioning health and using certain images in communication.

5.3 Incentive Nudges

When it comes to the wellness incentives, two areas have been well appreciated by the respondents, viz. competitions and group exercises to promote wellness incentives, which created increased enthusiasm, resulting in enhanced productivity and less absenteeism. This is called social nudging, and is explained as, “Humans, on the other hand, are frequently nudged by other humans”, (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, s.53). However, the respondents feel that the information about the wellness incentives is insufficient. If the organisation wishes to get the employees to use the wellness incentives, they should share the information and knowledge in a clearer way. An e-mail with written information or discussion in employee meeting is not enough. There are many different ways to market the incentives to the employees. According to Perrson (2013), an increase in information flow and increased investment in wellness incentives leads to increased participation among employees. Another way to use nudge management in organisations could be raising health awareness by arranging lectures held by internal/ external medical practitioners, through which the employees can get feedback and support, and even motivation to utilize the incentives.

6. Key learning

6.1 Goal Setting as Motivational Tool

In order for goals to improve job performance, the goals must be: challenging; specific; accepted by the worker; and accompanied by feedback on progress toward the goals (Lock and Henne, 1986). Goal-setting theory overlaps with and is supported by techniques familiar to behavioral economists, such as commitment devices and implementation intentions, described in Shephard

(in progress), which helps bolster goal specificity and buy-in via active engagement in the process of translating goals into concrete action steps.

6.2 Timely Performance Feedback

Timely feedback is critical to performance management. There are several behavioral barriers to high-quality feedback, which are both cognitive and social in nature. The benefits of providing performance feedback are seldom immediately realized. Managers taking time out of their busy schedules to provide feedback rarely see improvements right away, as behavioral change takes time and effort. Delivering feedback is often socially uncomfortable for all involved, and the present bias sets in: people will tend to favor gains, preferring them to larger pay-offs in the future. Understanding this barrier to feedback delivery and performance management is important to addressing it.

6.3 Every Performance Issue is Not Behavioural

The most highly motivated workforce in the world will fail to produce results if it does not have the skills needed for the job. Measuring actual job performance after training is important to analyze in case of non-transfer of learning application to the work setting for reasons unrelated to skill acquisition, but instead related to the work environment, (Baldwin and Ford, 1988).

6.4 Aligning Individual and Organizational Goals

Work environments and jobs should be aligned in a way that align individual and organisational goals so as to create win-win situations whereby individual and organisational growth occurs in tandem, and work motivation is sustained over time. Effective partnership occurs when there is a common agenda backed by effective information flow within the organisation and strong collaboration.

7. Practical Implications

In this study, it is explored as to how firms can use nudge management to motivate their employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle. It is observed that the employees faced certain obstacles and needed different levels of motivation and different nudges to change. Furthermore, it is specifically chosen to focus on the wellness incentives offered at the workplace and how organisations can use it in a more effective way. By collecting information from employees who do not use the incentives, it is clearly seen where it was lacking in effectiveness. The findings provided interesting information for analysis and discussion.

The research aims to motivate potential researchers to delve further in various areas of application of nudge management in organisations in the light of behavioral economics. It also provides insights into alignment of employee expectations related to such application in the organisational context. Combining traditional management techniques with insights from Behavioural Economics would surely bring better perspectives at workplace to moderate employee behavior and drive enhanced productivity and organisational success.

8. Limitations

Since the study only focused on the particular PSU, the findings are specific to a particular case, a specific location and a specific period. The findings and interpretations may not be specifically applicable to other situations, as per the limitations of case study research. The viewpoint/s of the respondents may not be representative of the general group or population. The findings could, however, be used to compare with extant literature on nudge management or any other theory of behavioral sciences that could be tested with other similar organisations, in other locations and at some other time. Extensive utilization of nudges in a way to improve employee satisfaction and performance has not been adequately addressed in literature. Further the models applied in the private sector could not be applied in public sector organisations.

9. Conclusion

The practicability and the assumed benefits of a nudge should be tested and improved before implementation (Sunstein, 2014, p. 585). However, identifying and contemplating these kinds of

hidden nudges and measuring their effectiveness and level of influence on employee satisfaction and performance is essential to using them consciously and systematically in an effective manner to maximize the benefits for both the business organisation and employees.

We assert that the potential for the use of nudges to enhance the well-being and productivity of the employees would be incredibly high. Moreover, considering that self-efficacy has a high degree of influence in the employee's organisational behavior, job satisfaction and performance, nudges that might promote this feeling among employees may be used to achieve higher employee performance. While nudges can serve as an effective and efficient tool, some promising nudges may create no influence, or worse, may have negative impacts when implemented (Sunstein, 2014, p. 585). Therefore, nudges need to be supported by empirical evidence in order to more forcefully posit their benefits and contribution to business performance, so that the most effective type of nudges may be detected and put into use by organisations.

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