

# THE WORK SCIENCE CENTER



## The Work Science Center Podcast

### Episode 8 Motivation in the Modern Workforce

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**Keaton Fletcher:** Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am your host, Keaton Fletcher. You can find more about the Work Science Center at our website [www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu](http://www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu). In today's podcast I speak with Ruth Kanfer, Professor of Industrial-Organizational Psychology at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Director of the Work Science Center. Ruth and I discuss all things motivation, what we know and where we need to go.

Hi Ruth, thanks for joining me today. Really quickly, could you give me just a brief overview of who you are and how you came to be where you are at in your career.

**Ruth Kanfer:** Well, I am a professor in the School of Psychology at Georgia Tech in the Work and Organizational Psychology program. I have been here since 1998. I am also the Director of the Work Science Center, and have been here doing that since its start in 2015. I graduated with a clinical psych Ph.D. from Arizona State and decided that I wanted to work with people in organizations rather than hanging out a shingle. So, I took a post-doc in quantitative psychology at the University of Illinois, and my first job was then at the University of Minnesota in 1984. I stayed there until I came to Georgia Tech in '98. But my research interests have always really been the same. They have always been about how people grow and develop and achieve, and how work plays a role in that. How the working experience affects that. The specific areas that I have worked in are work motivation, self-regulation, and workforce aging.

**KF:** Awesome. I just want to dive into motivation. I think that is of interest, certainly to me, and I think also our listeners. What do we know about motivation? I know there are a lot of theories out there, but at this point, I think there has been a lot of research on it. So, at this point, what can we say almost for certain about motivation?

**RK:** Well, we know a lot about motivation, and there is a lot more to know. Motivation is probably the most popular topic among people in organizations, practitioners, and it is also extremely popular in the academic world. And, we have studied motivation and in particular, work motivation, for a hundred years or more. So there is a lot we know. We know that motivation, and I am talking about work motivation, but it is true of motivation in general. It waxes and wanes, it is always in flux, it is never constant. You only need look at your own experience to realize that you might start out very excited and motivated to read a book and then twenty minutes later you are less motivated to read that you put it down. So, it changes over time. It is never constant. And, I think that is something we tend to forget in the work world. It also, and we know this because of some of the more recent work, changes over the lifespan. That, what motivates us, both intrinsic and extrinsic motives, change over the lifespan.

We also know that motivation is not simply a characteristic of the individual or of the situation. We like to talk about people as being unmotivated, or lazy, or so on, and there are even theories about that. And, it is true that there are characteristics or attributes of people that make them more or less disposed to responding to certain situational incentives, but it isn't a characteristic of the person. Someone at work may appear unmotivated but if you look at them out fishing up at 5:30 in the morning, doing everything perfectly, and being very attentive, you realize that they



are motivated but it is not that they are always unmotivated, but the question is motivated for what? And, it is not solely an attribute of the situation, but it is the interaction.

So, we also know that there are universal motives; there are motives that seem to appear to be common to all human organisms. The motive to belong, or to affiliate, or to be with other human beings in a relationship of some sort. The motive to achieve and to be competent. The motive to have control and autonomy over one's behavior and oneself. These are motives that are pretty classic motives that almost all motivational scientist will agree exist for all people and that when one of those motives appears to be violated, there is a reaction. Another motive that has come up, and more recently, is the motive for justice or fairness depending on how people see that. Whether it is equity or equality. And then there are external motives and those are the motives that for many years, managers focused on. Financial gains and losses, monetary incentives, extrinsic incentives that were pleasure, like giving extra perks, a parking space, a closed in parking space, an extra day of vacation, and so on. So we know that there are both intrinsic and extrinsic motives.

We know that goals drive action, and we know that goals are really important. Goals are representations in our mind about what we want to experience or realize, or what that motive state will get us. And they can be conscious or even unconscious but that those goals really drive the motivational process. In the work world, the last 30 or 40 years of research on goal setting and self-regulation, has really taught us about what the processes are that are involved in motivation, work motivation. And we know that the goals that a person has for their task and their job affect how much effort the kinds of strategies and how long they persist work activities to accomplish their goal. And we know that difficult, specific goals, that are realistic to the individual also promote effort. So we also know that job goals and motivation occurs in a social context, and that motivation is affected by that social context. And I think our recent work is really focused more on how that social context affects our motivation.

Finally, we know that motivation and emotion are intimately related. And that our emotions both support and prompt actions. That high levels of motivation are usually associated with high or positive levels of job satisfaction. So we know a lot about motivation or work motivation.

**KF:** Yeah, it sounds like it. There was a lot of really interesting stuff in there that you had mentioned. One thing I want to dive into a little bit more because I know it is also a passion of yours is the intersection of age and motivation. You had mentioned that it changes over the lifespan. I was wondering what do we know, or what does your research show about how motivation and age are related especially now that people are living longer and working longer.

**RK:** Definitely. Well this is something that has been kind of interesting to me in the last 10 or 15 years, maybe as I traverse the lifespan. It is definitely the case that we are living longer lives and that longer working lives is something that is seen as, for the most part, as beneficial both to individuals and to our society. There has been this closer look at work motivation across the lifespan. What we find is that motives change over the lifespan. What changes is what is important. It is not that motives go away or come up, it is just that their relative salience changes across the lifespan. So, when we are young, things that are salient to us have to do with



achieving and accomplishing things, and establishing ourselves and our status in the world. And those are motives that drive a lot of our work related goals. And that is what is important. As we get older security motives become important. Goals that are related to protecting a positive sense of ourselves. And, often midlife, there is work that suggests generativity motives become important, that we seek to engage in activities transmit our knowledge to the next generation.

We also know that these motives seem to have a natural inborn and innate change, but that also motives change as a function of how aging affects other things about ourselves. Our cognitive and physical abilities change across the lifespan. And that affects our ability to meet task demands. So we become, over time, more selective about our work goals. We develop these compensatory strategies to accomplish work goals as we get older and we see declines. And for everybody, that is a little different, depending on both their own internal makeup as well as the job demands that they have.

We also know another consequence of aging is that we are seeing a difference between the term motivation at work versus motivation to work. For the most part, when we studied work motivation in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we were studying people who didn't have a choice. They were mostly white males. And they mostly needed to work. It wasn't whether they wanted to work or they could find work. It was really about their motivation at work. It was what can we tell managers and supervisors to help them motivate their employees. That has broadened as we have talked about longer working lives. So that the motivation to work might change. You may have more choices. Although motivation at work appears to be governed by the same processes and structures across the lifespan, motivation to work really changes across the life course. That is typically associated with age.

**KF:** Part of the reason I asked about that, is we know that the workforce is changing. We are getting people who working a lot longer, but that is certainly not the only thing that is changing about the workforce. We see that there has been this shift lately over the last five, ten years, towards more what one could argue is insecure work. Things like gig work, like rideshares, things along those lines. So how might that change what motivation looks like at work? You have kind of potentially taken away the manager from the equation.

**RK:** That is a really good point. Lots of things are changing. Our cheese is really moving with respect to this whole economy and the role of people, humans, in these economies. And one of them is this gig economy. Now gig work is increasing. But, insecure work is only part of gig work. So, job insecurity, when you talk about insecure work, is work where people might perceive a threat of losing that job. There is some gig work that people take on and they actually are not concerned about whether or not that gig work declines. They may be seeking part-time or temporary work to begin with. So, the temporary nature of gig work, or the limited nature of gig work may not be a problem, although the lack of perks and other features like healthcare may be a serious problem in gig economies, and it is actually.

But, insecure work, where you are actually looking, you are really under employed, you are engaged in gig work when you want to be full time employed is generally unhealthy. It can divert attentional resources that might otherwise be devoted to the job. So, in a sense your



emotional response is to worrying about when you are going to be laid off, if you are going to be laid off. The time and effort you spend looking for alternative work can take away from attention to your job. And it can lower also your motive for making friends at the place you are at, if you know it is temporary work. Now some people have also made an argument and provided some data that job insecurity can increase motivation at work, so people try harder in order to keep that position. But when you are talking about the growing gig economy, I think that is less compelling. I think the argument is that in the gig economy, motivation at work is really driven more by the individual situation that brought them into the economy than it is by the economy itself.

**KF:** This may be asking you to engage in a little bit speculation here, but what do you think then the role of the company can be or ought to be in the case of these insecure positions, as far as individual motivation.

**RK:** You mean like an Uber or a Lyft?

**KF:** Yeah. If I know my employees are potentially in this insecure job or employment, what can I be doing to keep them motivated? What should I be doing to keep them motivated? Or might I lean into the fact that insecure work itself might be motivating? I don't know? Do you have thoughts on that?

**RK:** Well, right, so places like Uber and Lyft have done things to try to motivate their workforce to work harder when they are at work. So they will do things like, they will use performance feedback, and progress toward the last drive, what is your goal for today's driving? How many rides? How much money do you want to make? And then they will give them feedback about how they are doing. They will give them feedback. They are using technologies to tell them well "there is a ride that is very close to you and can help you meet your goal." So they are doing things like that to motivate sustained effort in the workplace. But that does not take away from the fact that not only is that work, it is not so much that it is insecure, but it is underemployment in most cases. Most of these people do this as an interim type of employment. When, for example, they don't have a permanent schedule, or can't schedule their work in a regular way, or are engaged in other part-time work that is irregular. So for example if you are looking for extra jobs and you are employed by an employer that does not give you a regular schedule, you might work Uber when you are not working because you have some control over time. Some people work Uber or Lyft or these kind of gig work because they can control when they work. But that is a very different kind of working experience than working full time in an organization.

**KF:** In your answer there, you brought up the role of technologies that for companies like Uber and Lyft, are using that to keep their employees motivated. That segues nicely into a different question I wanted to ask you, was we are also seeing another shift in the nature of work. Technology, things like automation, are altering what we do on the job. They are potentially eliminating routinized parts, things along those lines. So what do you think are some of the effects we could be seeing on motivation as far as technology starts to play a bigger and bigger role in what we do?





**RK:** So your motivation to work may be constant, but as technology and automation change the workplace it may decrease or increase your motivation to work. For older individuals, they may not want to, they may retire rather than learn new technologies. Now there are a group of Fortran programmers who said “I am not going to learn new programming skills.” So they basically decided mostly to retire after the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. On the other hand, for younger people, imposing new technologies and automating is an opportunity for, and seen as a plus for giving greater license to innovate and create new products and so on. It can be very motivating to work in a particular organization. So it really depends on, for one, where you are in that learning curve.

When you are at work, technologies, automation is profoundly affecting our working experience. It affects who and what we know. What we do through the day. Who we trust. Who we develop friendships with. It affects the availability of the knowledge we have for making decisions in the organization. It also can make salient new motives. By using technologies you might get more feedback about how your team is doing that you wouldn’t otherwise know, or how your organization is doing. That might strengthen motives for the organization or the team that wouldn’t be there otherwise. Automation and new technologies can also affect your desire and your motivation to learn. So I think there are so many things that automation and new technologies do to affect new motivation and we have only begun to really understand that.

**KF:** I fully agree. I am excited to see where things head with that. As far as the research is concerned with motivation as a whole, as a field, you are one of the leading experts in motivation, so what do you think we need to be doing to stay relevant, for people who are researching motivation? What kinds of questions should they be asking going into the future?

**RK:** Well if you look at the future of human work, I think there are some really important questions that I-O psychologists need to address. I think one is related to this technology question that we really don’t have the kind of body of research we need for understanding the effects of technology and automation on human behavior. It is the biggest story of the decade, and yet if you look at our annual meetings, we have almost no discussion of how working with things and robots and new technologies affects motivation at work, how it affects trust, how it affects affiliation, how it affects a sense of autonomy and control. We need to know those things not just so that we can help people live more satisfying work lives, have better work experiences, and have more joy at work, but also because people in AI want to know what to program into robots that will support their human colleagues that robots are going to work with. They need to know about what kinds of feedback are most important for a human worker to get from their colleagues if that colleague is a robot. How should they program in feedback? How should they program in emotional states and so on? That is something we can provide information on.

The second thing is we really need to know again looking at the future about motivation to work versus at work. We know a lot about motivation at work. We really don’t know how work satisfies basic human needs. A growing number of able people are either not working or engaged in poorly paid work. These are people with low education levels. Older workers who cannot find work. We don’t know what happens to people who don’t work. In the past people who don’t work were near death. But now, we are in a situation where we don’t know if, for example, if during an economic recession and you go without work, paid employment for years, what



happens to work ethics, what happens to social networks, what happens to even occupational well-being and skill employability later in life.

We need to know about continuous learning. Our old model was go to school, go to work, then spend the rest of your life until death taking care of your declining health. Well, that isn't a model that works. Most adults today learn, and take care of the health while they are working. These three things are all mixed together more today. But it is also true that most adults neither want or can afford to go to traditional school programs to update and develop new skills. Yet they know that new schools are going to be needed for decent income employability in the future. So how does this new learning take place among adults who are outside of traditional programs? What motivates their enrollment into voluntary programs? How do they manage their work and non-work lives to learn in these non-traditional programs? I suspect that social factors play a very large role in sustaining learning motivation among these adults. And I think we need to know a lot more about that.

We need to know how motivation works over time, and how it links to careers and the life course. We need to know how events that happen to people change and accumulate to affect their motivation to work and at work. What leads them to be passionate about certain lines of work? We need to also know what leads them to be tired of certain kinds of work. You will often hear individuals who have been in a job their long, tenured, 25/35 years, say "it's not that I want to retire, it's that I need a new problem and place to revitalize myself." We really need to understand how motivation works over time and then how it links to these careers. So those are my areas that I think are really important.

**KF:** That sounds like we have got a lot of questions that remain unanswered, which is exciting.

**RK:** It is exciting. It is a great area.

**KF:** Before we wrap up, I do want to shift gears briefly and shift the spotlight from motivation to you actually and get your perspective on your career thus far. I think that some of our listeners can identify with you and get some insight just from hearing your perspective on what strategies you have used to succeed, and, keeping with the motivation theme, what keeps you motivated? Why are you still doing this?

**RK:** OK. That is a hard thing to answer. I think I have always done what, and I got into this, because I have done what I found interesting and important. That has always motivated me. I become passionate about things we don't know that might have, in the Pasteur's Quadrant sense, might have important implications for use. That was early on in my career about goal setting and so on. But I think, if I really think about it over the long haul, that the strategy that has been helpful to me, over time, is really thinking about opportunities come up and whether I should say no, or yes, or maybe to them. Learning how to leverage those opportunities that stretches me but doesn't break me from what my focus is. I think that has been a strategy that has been the most important. An example of that is when we developed the air traffic control simulation to understand abilities and motivation in that real world context, the opportunity came up the to build a system for them. It was a great opportunity. I decided to take it because it also answered some really important questions for me about what motivates people to learn and do well in air



traffic controller training. So, I think over the long haul, you are going to get many opportunities and the question is how does that opportunity fit in with what you want to do? Can you leverage it to both solve a practical problem and advance the science?

**KF:** That is very helpful. Well, anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

**RK:** No. I think that's it. This is a really great area. There is so much coming down the pike with the change in the work experience and the work world, even the change in human beings and how they relate to work. And the importance that work is going to have for society. I would encourage people to consider it.

**KF:** Awesome. Well thank you so much, Ruth.

**RK:** It's been my pleasure.



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