How to deal with amotivated students?

Lohyd TERRIER, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne
Arthur RECH, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne
Bénédicte MARFAING, Université de Fribourg
Sebastien FERNANDEZ, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne
Charlotte DE BOER, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne

Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne, HES-SO // University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland

Abstract

Amotivation can be considered one of the more important problems faced in hospitality training. This research paper used commitment to reduce amotivation and increase performance in a training program. We used action identification to improve the effectiveness of commitment. Ninety-two students participated in the experiment. Broken down into three experimental conditions, 29 participated in a standard training program and 63 in one of two training programs using commitment (33 participants for the low identification commitment and 30 for the high). Results show that commitment increases performance and reduces amotivation. Furthermore, the link between participants' commitment and performance appears to be mediated by amotivation. Finally, results are discussed and future avenues of research are suggested.

Key Words *Commitment, Amotivation, Performance*

Theme *What's going well in education and teaching?*

Focus of Paper *Theoretical/Academic*

1. Introduction

Despite recent economic crises, the tourism and hospitality sectors continue to grow exponentially (Rynne, Kwek & Bui, 2013). It is estimated that 69 million new jobs will be created in the hospitality industry to 2021. Among the multiple challenges that this development will entail, the hospitality workforce will have to be motivated and qualified to ensure operational success and high service quality. As such, academic training is a strategic element in disseminating the knowledge and skills that will enable hoteliers to face the challenges of tomorrow (Dalbor & Feinstein, 2001).

To reach this objective, trainers must motivate their students and develop a strong commitment to training (Drysdale & Mayo, 2007). Indeed, several studies emphasize the importance of motivation in predicting performance during training and in the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Unfortunately, training programs often fail to motivate their participants and fall short of their goals in terms of skill development. For many trainers, an inefficient training is primarily due to reduced motivation among participant (McFarlane, 2010).

Therefore, it is essential to introduce tools to ensure sufficient levels of motivation in training.

2. Literature review
Motivation: A training objective?
Many different definitions of the concept of motivation exist. Thus, Vallerand and Thill (1993, p. 428) define the concept of motivation as a "hypothetical construct to describe the internal and/or external forces that lead to the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behavior".

According Deci and Ryan (2002), different forms of motivation are linked to the feeling of freedom associated with behavioral choices: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation. The more people feel responsible for their behavioral choices the more they tend to be intrinsically motivated. This form of motivation is related to internal factors such as satisfaction and pleasure derived from an activity (i.e. I am attending a hospitality training program because I like hospitality). Instead, we are referring to extrinsic motivation when individuals are motivated by external factors such as the desire to obtain or avoid something (reinforcement or avoid a punishment; i.e. I am attending a hospitality training program because because I plan to earn a substantial amount of money with my new knowledge). Finally, sometimes individuals are unable to make the connection between their actions and the results obtained. They believe that their behaviors are caused by factors beyond their control and do not feel motivated to perform them. This is known as amotivation (i.e. I am attending a hospitality training program but I do not really know why). In a training context, amotivation is usually related to a lack of involvement and commitment from participants. Consequently, results of several studies show that this form of motivation is negatively linked to academic performance (Legault, Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2006). For instance, amotivated students are more often bored during classes (Vallerand & Thill, 1993), are more stressed out during their studies (Baker, 2004) and tend to drop out more often (Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992; Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997). Therefore, it is important to understand how it is possible to reduce amotivation in the context of training.

Commitment: a tool of influence
Individuals generally try to be as consistent as possible in their commitments, choices and behaviors (Cialdini, 2007). Thus, many studies show that this need for consistency between opinions and behaviors is a powerful tool of influence (Cialdini, 2007; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For instance, Freedman and Fraser (1966) have shown that individuals who agreed to make a commitment (display a small sign for road safety in front of their home) were more likely to accept a subsequent and more burdensome target request (install a large sign for road safety) than individuals exposed only to the large request. This result refers to the commitment theory (Kiesler & Sakamura, 1966) whereby individuals are motivated to behave in a consistent manner, i.e. they are more likely to act in the same way as they had in the past. In other words, obtaining preparatory commitment could significantly increase the likelihood that individuals subsequently accept to make more important behaviors. This is done in order to stay consistent with past behavior (Cialdini, 2007).

For a behavior to be considered as a commitment, it must be done under conditions 'in which an action can only be attributed to the person who carried it out' (Joule & Beauvois, 1998 p.60). It must also be achieved freely, without invoking either threat or possibility of reinforcement. Finally, several researchers (Girandola, 2003; Girandola & Joule, 2008; Joule & Beauvois, 2002; Meneiri & Gueguen, 2014) propose to use the concept of 'action identification' to define the strength of a commitment.

According to Vallacher & Wegner (1985), an action may be identified through different linguistic labels. For instance, a person signing a petition in favor of the environment can identify his behavior in different ways: 1) he put his name on a piece of paper, or 2) he agrees to behave in accordance with the proposals included in the petition. These examples refer to different levels of identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). Low identification levels – example 1 – are concrete, and describe how an action is effectively performed (Dar & Katz, 2005); high identification levels – example 2 – are more abstract, and describe why an action is performed and the potential consequences (Dar & Katz, 2005). According to Girandola (2003), a high identification level of an action reinforces the commitment to this action.

The work of Fointiat, Caillaud and Martinie (2004 Fointiat, 2006) tested Girandola's proposal. In this research paper, the researchers' goal was to obtain help behaviors from passersby (report the loss of a ticket or a scarf. To do this, passersby were first asked to perform a preparatory act (indicate a direction on a map). Once this action was performed, researchers manipulated the level of identification of this action by thanking them in several

different ways: first, uttering – "It's clear" - had the effect of assigning a low level of identification with the preparatory behavior (concrete, description); while the second – "You very helpful" - had the effect of assigning a higher level of identification (abstract reasons for the action). The results show that the effect of the engagement strategy is more effective, the preparatory act has a high level of identification.

Several studies attest to the effectiveness of commitment strategies in various fields such as citizenship (Deschamps, Joule & Gumy, 2005), healthcare (Eyssartier, Joule & Guimelli, 2007), environmental protection (Meineri & Gueguen, 2014; Terrier & Marfaing, 2015[ab]) and performance (Girandola, 2003; Meineri et al., 2011).

Recently, Weiss, Girandola & Colbeau-Justin (2011) have used a commitment strategy during a training program dedicated to increasing safety behaviors in the event of a natural disaster. To this end, participants were asked to perform a preparatory act: they had to agree, by raising their hands, to perform both at home and at work a task involving the identification of the danger (locate warning signs, etc.). In order to ensure commitment, they were free to accept or decline to perform the preparatory act. This training program was compared to a more conventional training program without a preparatory act. Results show that the use of commitment increases the effectiveness of training, as evidenced by the continued increase in safety behaviors in the group with commitment.

The aim of our research is to extend these results to the academic training but also to study the effect of commitment on participants' amotivation. More concretely, we propose to test 1) if commitment can reduce the amotivation level of hospitality management students and 2) if commitment can increase training performance.

Method
Participants
Ninety-two students from a hospitality management school participated in the experiment (47 women, 45 men, 18 to 28 years old). Research was conducted during a housekeeping training class.
Procedure
This research paper uses a control condition and two experimental conditions. Under the control condition (CC), no commitment was applied: students participated in a conventional training program. Under the experimental conditions, a commitment was added to the training. The strength of commitment was defined by manipulating the identification level of the commitment (low versus high). The experiment was conducted in three stages.

Step 1. Before the start of training, all participants were assessed by the trainer. The assessment allowed us to determine the initial level of participants' performance. The assessment was the same for all the conditions of the experiment.

Step 2. Once the assessment of performance was completed, the trainer asked participants exposed to the experimental conditions to sign a document whereby they committed to being actively involved during the training program. Participants were free to accept or reject this request (but all of them accepted). This preparatory act - to sign a contract of commitment - should increase participants' commitment by allowing them to take an active role in the training program. The identification level of this preparatory act was manipulated by changing the content of the contract according to the experimental conditions[a].

The message in the low identification condition was:

This contract testifies my commitment to actively participate in housekeeping training.

By this, I pledge to follow the guidelines that will be transmitted to me in this course and to respect the instructions given by the teacher.

On the contrary, the message in the high identification condition was:

This contract testifies my commitment to actively participate in housekeeping training.

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[a] *It was done by following the procedure designed by other scholar (Dar & Katz, 2005 ; Grandjean, 2010 Vallacher & Wegner (1985).*

By this, I pledge to develop subject-specific skills that are essential to complete my studies at (name of the school) and to respect the instructions given by the teacher

Step 3. At the end of the training session, participants' performance was again measured using the same criteria as in the initial assessment. Comparison of pre- and post-training measures allowed us to assess the performance increase. Finally, all participants answered a questionnaire about their motivation following training.

Measures

Training performance: Participants' performance was assessed by the trainer through 18 criteria measured on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 being the lowest rating, 6 the maximum). Performance was assessed at the beginning and the end of the training session. The internal consistency of the evaluation was good with regards to both the pre-training and post-training (respectively, α=.95 and α=.94). The first assessment's mean score was subtracted from the second assessment's mean score to obtain a measure of the performance increase. Thus, the higher the score, the higher the performance gain. This procedure was done in order to control for initial levels of performance that could be different between conditions.

Motivation: We used the amotivation scale of the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al, 1989) to assess amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). This scale consists of 4 items with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree" (α=.85). The higher the score, the higher the participants feel amotivation.
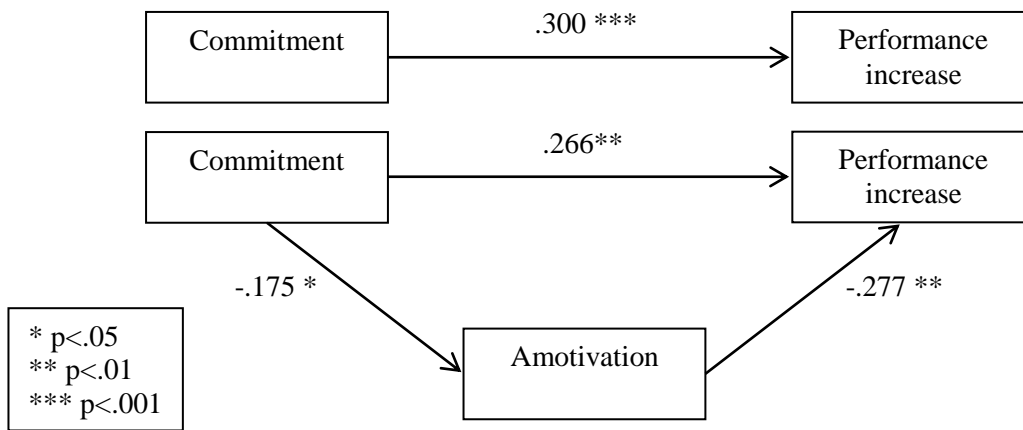
Results

Of the 92 participants in this study, 29 participated in the conventional training program and 63 in one of the two training programs using commitment (33 participants for the low identification commitment and 30 for the high). In our sample, the pre-training performance test was 4.539 (SD=0.453), and the post-training performance was 5.150 (SD=0.348). The average performance increase was 0.611 (SD=0.354). The average score of amotivation was 1.130 (SD=0.356).

Regarding our hypotheses, participants using commitment in the experimental condition (commitment) show an amotivation level significantly lower than that of the participants of the conventional training (respectively, M=1.075, SD=0.332 versus M=1.250, SD=0.383, $t(90)=2.230$, $p<.05$). Moreover, participants in the high identification condition were less amotivated than participants exposed to the low identification condition (respectively M=1.000, SD=0.000 versus M=1.144, SD=0.450, $t(61)=1.747$, $p=.08$).

Futhermore, the performance increase linked to training was significantly higher in the training sessions using commitment than in the regular training program (respectively M=0.705, SD=0.315 versus M=0.405, SD=0.352, $t(90)=-4.087$, $p<.001$). We can also see that the performance of participants exposed to the high identification condition increased more than the performance of participants in the low identification condition (respectively M=0.825, SD=0.196 versus M=0.596, SD=0.363, $t(61)=-3.064$, $p<.01$). Finally, the effect of commitment on performance gains was partially mediated by participants' amotivation. Specifically, a partial mediation[b] of amotivation to the link between commitment and performance increase was observed ($Z=1.509$, $p=.06$). Thus, it seems that participating in a training course using commitment decreased the level of amotivation, which generated a performance increase.

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[b] We used Baron and Kenny's method (1986) and Sobel's test (1982) to test this mediation.

Figure 1. Mediation analysis

Commitment — .300 *** → Performance increase

Commitment — .266** → Performance increase

Commitment — -.175 * → Amotivation — -.277 ** → Performance increase

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

5. Discussion

The objective of this research paper was to measure the effectiveness of a training program using commitment. We wanted to improve training's effectiveness by reducing participants' amotivation. To do this, we asked some participants to perform a preparatory behavior: to sign a contract committing them to actively participate in the training course. For some participants, this behavior was a high identification level behavior, while for the others it was a low identification level behavior. A third group of participants attended a conventional training class without performing a preparatory behavior.

Results largely confirmed our hypotheses. Indeed, we demonstrated that the training class in the experimental conditions had a larger effect on participants' performance than the regular training session. These results are in line with other studies in which commitment was used as a persuasive tool (Grandjean, 2010). They show that it is more effective to use a high identification preparatory behavior to increase performance than to use a low identification preparatory behavior. This confirms that a high identification level is an efficient way to increase the committing nature of a behavior (Girandola, 2003). On this basis, we can propose that the performance increase related to training could be linked to the committing character of this training.

Moreover, according to our hypotheses, commitment reduces the students' amotivation level. As the commitment reduced the amotivation level and increased participants' performance, we tried to specify the relationship between these variables. Results showed that the effect of commitment on performance increase is mediated by the amotivation level. We therefore propose that the use of commitment strategies could, by reducing their amotivation, increase participants' performance and, consequently, increase training's effectiveness. These results represent a major opportunity for training, whether academic or organizational. Indeed, trainers seek to avoid at all costs participants' amotivation (Legault et al., 2006; Vallerand et al., 1993). Commitment could be considered as a useful tool in preventing high amotivation levels and thus enhance participants' performance.

In terms of managerial implications, our results support the proposal of Joule and Beauvois (1998, p.93) that "admit that a commitment in an act is also a commitment to an identified act [...] it has serious consequences in terms of practice, the intervener must be sure that the acts he has managed to get are identified at the right identification levels." Indeed, the same preparatory act may, depending on level of identification of the action which it is associated, lead to different results. Here, the manipulation of the action identification level allowed us to act on the level of performance. From an operational point of view, these results are important because they point out that the most important element of a committing strategy is not only the behavior, but also the representation that the individual has of this behavior.

In conclusion, our results support the proposition that a committing communication strategy could, by increasing participants' performance, improve the effectiveness of training. This finding obviously deserves to be

developed and calls for further research that could clarify the conditions under which the commitment has a significant impact on participants' motivation.

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