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Article

Importance–Experience Gaps in Employee Motivation and Job Satisfaction: Evidence from a Paper and Packaging Manufacturer in Serbia

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Abstract: Industrial companies in ageing, depopulating regions compete for scarce labour, and their ability to attract and retain employees depends on how closely management practice matches what employees value. This study analyses the gap between the importance employees attach to motivation and job-satisfaction factors and the extent to which they experience these factors in their company. A survey was carried out in March–April 2026 in a large Serbian producer of paper and cardboard packaging and complemented by an interview with management. In total, 300 valid questionnaires were collected (response rate 57.7%). Respondents rated 44 statements, grouped into 12 dimensions, for importance and for experience, and ranked motivators. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA and Pearson correlations. Mean importance (4.22) exceeded mean experience (3.73) by 0.49 points. Safety, relations with colleagues, information flow, fair pay and company reputation were rated most important (4.54–4.58), whereas the largest gaps concerned the motivation and recognition system (1.35), compensation (1.00) and career and development (0.78). Gaps differed by department, gender, age, education and tenure; maintenance and warehouse staff reported the least fair pay. Basic pay, performance bonus, suitable working hours, stable employment and a good team were the strongest motivators. The results support a formal reward policy, development-oriented training and structured employee voice.

Keywords: *Employee motivation; job satisfaction; importance–experience gap; manufacturing; human resource management; Serbia.*

1. Introduction

A shortage of qualified labour has become a structural problem for industrial companies in many regions [1]. In Serbia, as in much of South-East Europe, it is reinforced by population ageing and by the outflow of working-age people from rural and smaller communities to urban centres and abroad [2]. Under such conditions, the competitiveness of a manufacturer depends not only on its technology and capital, but also on its capacity to attract, motivate and keep people. Becoming an "employer of choice" in a less developed labour market requires a detailed understanding of what drives employees, what satisfies them and what builds their long-term loyalty.

Job satisfaction and work motivation are the two concepts through which this understanding is usually pursued. Job satisfaction is a multidimensional attitude with cognitive, affective and behavioural components [3]. Locke defined it as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job and showed that it can be understood only through three elements: the values a person holds, the person's perception of how far the job fulfils them, and the importance

attached to each value [4,5]. Motivation, in turn, is the internal state that activates, directs and sustains behaviour towards goals [6]. The two are closely related: satisfaction reflects the fulfilment of needs, while motivation directs behaviour towards fulfilling them, and both are linked to performance, retention and business outcomes [7–9].

In company practice, however, measurement often stops at a single satisfaction score. Such a score says little about where managerial effort would pay off, because a factor with low satisfaction but low importance is a lesser concern than a factor with the same score and high importance. Studies of employee motivation and satisfaction in Serbia have mostly addressed these concepts in general terms [10,11], and, to our knowledge, few have confronted the importance employees attach to individual factors with their actual experience of them in a heavy-industry setting.

This paper applies an importance–experience (gap) approach in a large Serbian manufacturer of paper and cardboard packaging. Drawing on the responses of 300 employees, who rated 44 statements twice, we (I) identify where the largest gaps lie; (II) show how experience varies across departments and sociodemographic groups; (III) examine how the dimensions of satisfaction and motivation are interrelated; and (IV) identify the motivators employees rank highest. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical background and formulates the research questions. Section 3 describes the research setting, instrument and analysis. Section 4 presents the results, which are discussed in Section 5 together with managerial implications and limitations. Section 6 concludes.

Theories of motivation are commonly divided into content theories, which explain *what* motivates people, and process theories, which explain *how* motivation arises and is sustained. Among the former, Maslow's hierarchy of needs [12] arranges needs from physiological and safety needs to belonging, esteem and self-actualisation, while Herzberg's two-factor theory separates "hygiene" factors, such as pay, working conditions and job security, which prevent dissatisfaction, from "motivators", such as achievement, recognition and growth, which generate satisfaction [13,14]. Although the two-factor theory has been debated, tests in different sectors continue to find support for at least part of its logic [15]. Among process theories, goal-setting theory holds that performance is highest when goals are specific, challenging and accompanied by feedback [16], and self-determination theory distinguishes intrinsic from extrinsic motivation [17]. Empirical evidence suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic incentives jointly predict performance [18].

Pay occupies a special place in this debate. Employees often understate the importance of pay when asked directly, although it strongly shapes what they actually do [19], and pay level is an established determinant of job satisfaction in European data [20]. At the same time, non-financial rewards, such as recognition and feedback, have been shown to contribute to motivation beyond pay [21–23]. Relationships also matter: employees who perceive that the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being reciprocate with stronger commitment [24], and the quality of the relationship with the supervisor shapes how work is experienced [25]. Development opportunities, including well-designed training, are further drivers of motivation and performance [26], while the way jobs are designed, including autonomy and feedback, influences internal work motivation [27]. Finally, the weight employees give to particular factors is not uniform but varies with life stage; for example, meta-analytic evidence indicates that work-related motives and job attitudes change with age [28,29].

Locke's conceptualisation implies that satisfaction should be assessed as the discrepancy between what employees want and what they perceive they have, weighted by the importance of each value [4]. Operationally, this can be achieved by asking respondents to rate the same statement twice: how important it is to them and to what extent they experience it in their company. The difference between the two scores (the gap) shows where the organisation falls short of employee expectations, and plotting importance against experience allows factors to be prioritised for managerial action. This logic is adopted here. Three research questions guide the analysis:

- **RQ1.** Which factors of motivation and job satisfaction show the largest gaps between importance and experience, and are these gaps concentrated in reward- and development-related factors rather than in relational ones?

- **RQ2.** Does the experience of these factors differ across departments and sociodemographic groups (gender, age, education, tenure)?
- **RQ3.** How are the dimensions of satisfaction and motivation interrelated, and what are the strongest motivators in the eyes of employees?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Setting

The study was conducted in a large producer of paper and cardboard packaging located in Serbia, referred to here as Company X to preserve anonymity. Over the last decade the company has grown from approximately 400 to more than 500 employees; the headcount rose from about 455 in 2021 to 520 in 2025/2026 following investment in production technology, and the plant operates around the clock in four shifts. Employees work in five organisational units: paper production, cardboard packaging production, production of consumer goods, sales and administration (21 office-based employees), and maintenance and warehouse. According to management, natural labour turnover is about 3% a year, a level considered low and healthy.

The existing motivation system was described by the sales manager in a semi-structured interview. Pay consists of a base salary and a variable bonus. Non-pay elements include a free meal, an annual company day and New Year's party (with gifts for employees' children), birthday gifts, free products, an annual training session on the management system and the company's goals, annual evacuation drills and fire-extinguisher training, and motivational training for office staff. Meetings are held daily in production units and quarterly at board level, and development talks with employees are held monthly or quarterly. Satisfaction surveys had been conducted since 2023 together with a consultancy (51% of 495 employees responded in 2023), but they did not capture the importance of factors, did not segment results by sociodemographic characteristics and paid little attention to motivation.

2.2. Instrument and Procedure

The survey combined document analysis, the above interview (18 open-ended questions on eight themes) and a questionnaire of 25 questions in six blocks. The questionnaire was developed from the theoretical review, from the earlier surveys of the company and from comparable instruments, and it retained the 18 questions of the 2023 survey to allow comparison. Block 1 collected sociodemographic data (gender, age, education, department, working time and tenure). Block 2 asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with 13 factors of work (such as tools, workspace, workload, schedule, pay, colleagues, supervisor, management and career opportunities). Block 3, the core of the study, contained 44 statements grouped into 12 dimensions (Table 2), each rated twice, for *importance* ("how important is this to me?") and for *experience* ("to what extent is this true in my company?"). Two additional experience-only items measured willingness to recommend the company as an employer and to still work there in five years. Block 4 measured general satisfaction with the statement "I come to work gladly in the morning". Block 5 addressed the motivation and recognition system, and Block 6 asked respondents to rank 16 motivators from the most to the least motivating, both in general and in their own company, and to add open comments. Statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest level of importance or agreement).

The questionnaire was administered between 9 March and 3 April 2026 to all employees of the company through a Google Forms link distributed by management; because not everyone had access to a computer, paper questionnaires were also distributed and returned to a collection box. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were told that results would be reported only in aggregate. A total of 300 valid questionnaires were returned, which corresponds to a response rate of 57.7%.

2.3. Sample

Table 1 presents the structure of the sample. Men accounted for 56% of respondents, and almost half of the respondents (48%) were aged 36–45. Most had secondary education (58%), worked in

shifts (78%) and had been with the company for four to six years (44%). The largest unit was cardboard packaging production (42% of respondents). For the analysis, age was grouped into up to 35, 36–45 and 46+ years, and tenure into up to three, four to six and seven or more years.

Table 1. Sociodemographic structure of the sample (N = 300).

Characteristic	Group	*n*	%
Gender	Male	168	56
	Female	132	44
Age	Up to 35 years	72	24
	36–45 years	143	48
	46 years and over	85	28
Education	Primary	41	14
	Secondary	175	58
	Vocational	72	24
	Higher	12	4
Department	Paper production	48	16
	Cardboard packaging production	125	42
	Consumer goods production	61	20
	Sales and administration	24	8
	Maintenance and warehouse	42	14
Working time	Shift work	235	78
	Fixed working hours	65	22
Tenure	Up to 3 years	72	24
	4–6 years	132	44
	7 years and more	96	32

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were processed in SPSS 21 and Excel. Descriptive statistics (means m, standard deviations s, frequencies) were calculated for each statement. For every statement, the gap was calculated as importance minus experience, and the relative gap as (importance − experience) / importance × 100. Dimension scores are unweighted means of the statements in the dimension. To prioritise statements, an importance–experience matrix was constructed using the grand means of importance and experience as cross-hairs. Differences between groups were tested with independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA ($p \leq 0.05$) [30], the internal consistency of the instrument was checked with Cronbach's alpha [31], and the relationships between statements were examined with Pearson's correlation coefficient r; only coefficients above 0.50 at $p < 0.01$ were retained, in line with common interpretation conventions [32].

3. Results

3.1. Importance and Experience at the Level of Dimensions

Across the 44 statements, the mean importance (4.22) exceeded the mean experience (3.73) by 0.49 points, or 11.7%. Importance scores were uniformly high: all item means were at or above 3.54, and 31 statements were rated 4.0 or higher. The five statements judged most important were a safe working environment (m = 4.58), good interpersonal relations (4.56), timely flow of information (4.56), fair pay (4.54) and the reputation of the company (4.54). Experience was lower than importance in almost every case. The gap was no larger than 0.10 points only for four statements:

applying skills and knowledge (−0.02), knowing what is expected at work (0.08), having a good friend at work (0.08) and having colleagues who care (0.10).

Table 2 and Figure 1 summarise the gaps by dimension. The motivation and recognition system shows by far the largest gap (1.35 points, 30.9% of importance), followed by compensation (1.00; 22.4%) and career and development (0.78; 19.0%). Gaps are smallest for the nature of work (0.25), relations with the direct supervisor (0.33), responsibility (0.33) and relations with management (0.35). The pattern therefore points to reward- and development-related factors, rather than to interpersonal relations, as the main source of unmet expectations.

Table 2. Mean importance, experience and gap by dimension (scale 1–5).

Dimension	Items	Importance	Experience	Gap	Relative gap (%)
Motivation and recognition system	2	4.37	3.02	1.35	30.9
Compensation	2	4.46	3.46	1.00	22.4
Career and development	4	4.12	3.33	0.78	19.0
Availability of information	2	4.47	3.91	0.56	12.5
Inclusion	2	3.79	3.25	0.54	14.2
Safety of the working environment	3	4.48	3.95	0.53	11.9
Relations with colleagues	4	4.24	3.80	0.44	10.4
Work culture	6	4.39	3.95	0.44	10.0
Relations with management	2	4.50	4.15	0.35	7.8
Relations with direct supervisor	7	4.09	3.76	0.33	8.1
Responsibility	2	4.04	3.71	0.33	8.2
Nature of work	8	4.08	3.83	0.25	6.1
Overall (44 statements)	**44**	**4.22**	**3.73**	**0.49**	**11.7**

Note: dimension scores are unweighted means of statements; relative gap = (importance − experience) / importance × 100.

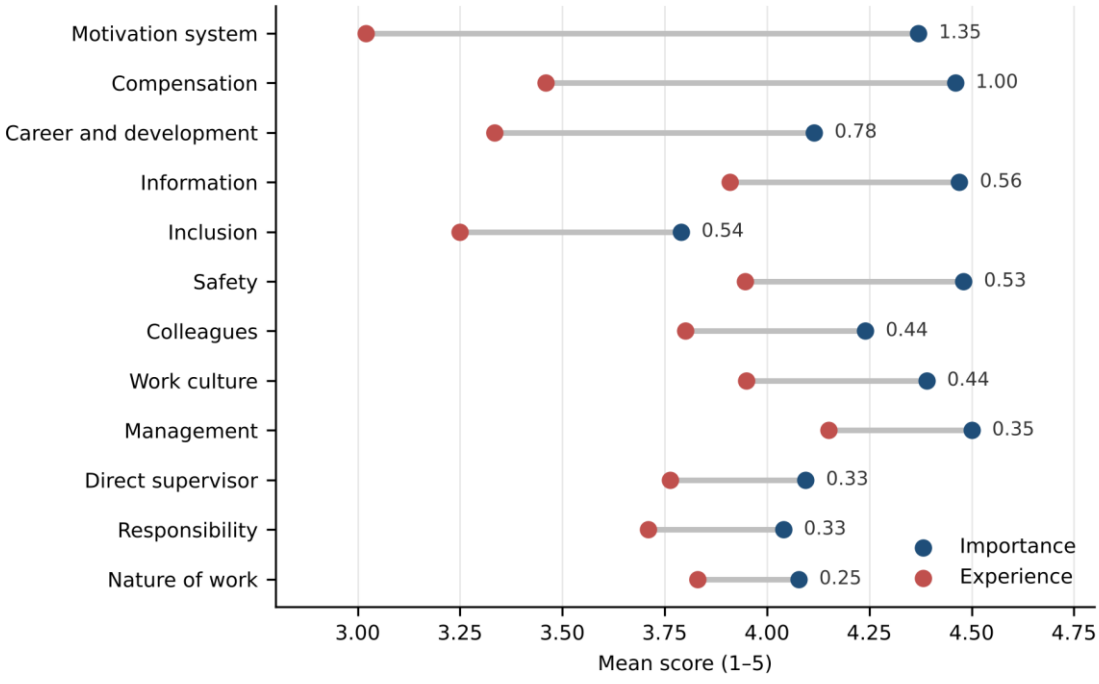

Figure 1. Importance and experience by dimension (mean scores; numbers show the gap, importance minus experience).

3.2. Gaps at the Level of Individual Statements

Table 3 lists the ten statements with the largest gaps. The widest gap by far concerns the statement that the company contributes to raising employees' motivation (importance 4.38, experience 2.68; gap 1.70, or 38.8%), which also received the lowest experience score of all 44 statements. It is followed by fair pay (1.12; 24.7%), the system of employee recognition (1.00; 22.9%), development training (0.90; 21.0%) and performance-related pay (0.88; 20.1%). Development talks, career opportunities and opportunities to learn and develop complete the group of statements with gaps of 0.70–0.78. Among the statements with the lowest experience scores, besides the motivation statement (2.68), are development talks (3.14), participation in the development of the company (3.18) and career opportunities (3.28).

Table 3. The ten statements with the largest gaps between importance and experience (mean, with standard deviation in parentheses).

Statement	Dimension	Importance	Experience	Gap	Relative gap (%)
The company contributes to raising employee motivation	Motivation and recognition system	4.38 (0.75)	2.68 (1.24)	1.70	38.8
Fair pay that corresponds to effort	Compensation	4.54 (0.61)	3.42 (1.21)	1.12	24.7
Recognition system that values employees	Motivation and recognition system	4.36 (0.72)	3.36 (1.21)	1.00	22.9
Training important for my development	Career and development	4.28 (0.73)	3.38 (1.37)	0.90	21.0
Possibility of performance-related pay	Compensation	4.38 (0.81)	3.50 (1.15)	0.88	20.1
Talks about my development	Career and development	3.92 (0.88)	3.14 (1.25)	0.78	19.9
Opportunity to advance in career	Career and development	4.02 (0.80)	3.28 (1.09)	0.74	18.4
Opportunity to learn and develop	Career and development	4.24 (0.74)	3.54 (1.11)	0.70	16.5
Good interpersonal relations	Relations with colleagues	4.56 (0.70)	3.86 (1.20)	0.70	15.4
Occupational safety training	Safety of the working environment	4.40 (0.67)	3.74 (1.07)	0.66	15.0

Note: *s* – standard deviation; relative gap = (importance − experience) / importance × 100.

Figure 2 positions all statements in the importance–experience matrix. Seven statements fall in the "concentrate here" quadrant, i.e. they are rated above-average in importance but below-average in experience: the company's contribution to motivation, fair pay, the recognition system, development training, performance-related pay, opportunities to learn and develop, and the sense of unity. By contrast, the strongest experiences are found for a clear understanding of what is expected (4.32), equal treatment of subordinates (4.24), a receptive supervisor (4.22), respectful treatment by management (4.16) and the reputation of the company (4.14). Relations with supervisors are thus experienced as good, but the developmental side of supervision lags behind: feedback on work (importance 4.06, experience 3.60), praise and recognition (3.96, 3.44) and constructive criticism (3.86, 3.34) show gaps of about 0.5 points.

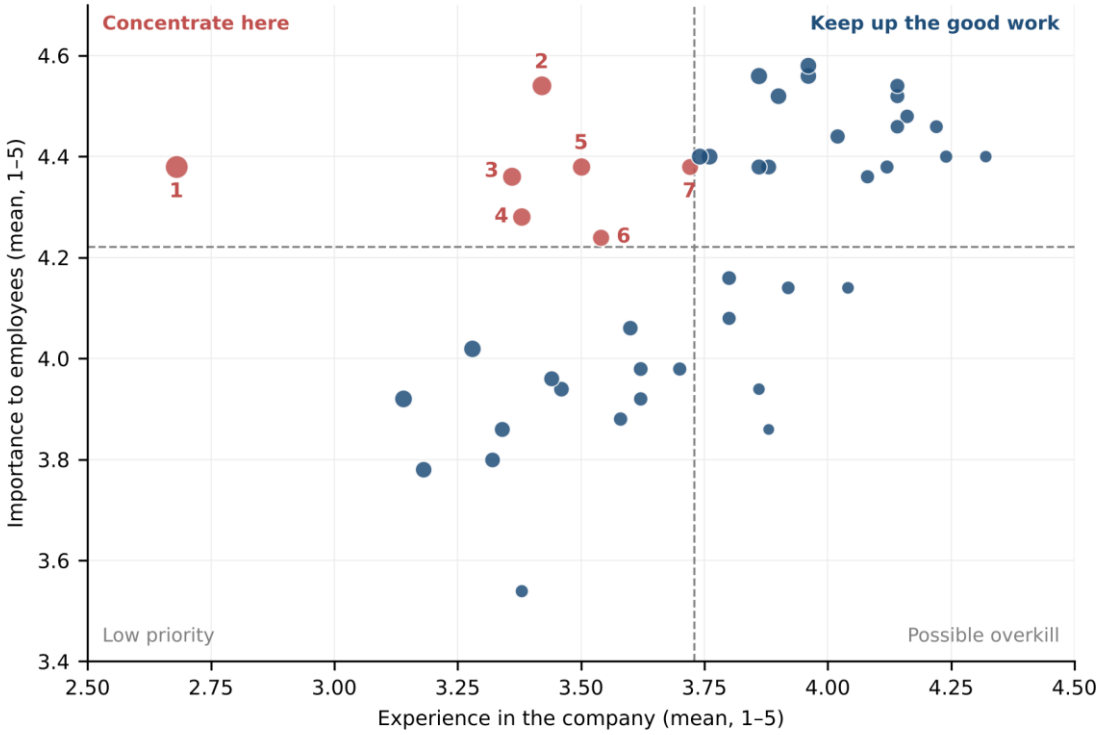

Figure 2. Importance–experience matrix of the 44 statements (dashed lines: grand means 4.22 and 3.73). Highlighted statements: 1 – company raises employee motivation; 2 – fair pay; 3 – employee recognition system; 4 – development training; 5 – performance-related pay; 6 – opportunity to learn and develop; 7 – sense of unity.

3.3. Differences Across Departments and Sociodemographic Groups

Table 4 summarises the statistically significant differences in experience scores reported by the group comparisons ($p \leq 0.05$). The most pronounced contrasts concern pay. Fairness of pay was rated highest in sales and administration (m = 4.75; relative gap with importance 5%) and lowest in maintenance and warehouse (2.43; gap 39%), with cardboard packaging production (3.24; gap 29%) and paper production (3.63; gap 22%) in between. Women assessed pay as fairer than men did (3.86 vs. 3.07).

Development-related statements show a similar office–plant divide. Sales and administration staff gave the highest scores to the availability of training (5.00) and to the opportunity to voice their opinion on important issues (4.00), while paper-production employees gave the lowest scores to both (2.63 and 2.75). The gap between the importance of learning and development and its experience reached 25% in cardboard packaging production and 23% in maintenance and warehouse; for career advancement, gaps of 24%, 22% and 14% were observed in cardboard packaging, consumer goods and paper production, respectively. Respondents commented, for example, that they would like "motivational training" and "more training", and that safety training could be organised more often than once a year.

Sociodemographic differences were also notable. Employees aged 46 and over felt more secure in their jobs (4.50) and were more convinced that all employees matter to the company (4.50) than those aged up to 35 (3.83 and 3.50), who also saw fewer career opportunities (2.75 vs. 3.57 among those 46+). Education showed a non-linear pattern: employees with primary education felt the most secure (4.57) and saw the best career opportunities (4.29), while those with vocational education reported the lowest scores for security (3.67) and career opportunities (2.92). Tenure mattered as well: employees with up to three years of service were the most positive about learning (4.08) and about joint events (4.25), the group with four to six years was the least positive about learning (3.05), and employees with seven or more years were the least satisfied with the number of joint events (3.63). Finally, women felt more strongly than men that they belong to a solid team (4.41 vs. 3.82).

Table 4. Selected statistically significant differences in experience scores (mean values, scale 1–5; ANOVA / *t*-test, $p \leq 0.05$).

Statement	Grouping	Group means
Fair pay	Department	Sales/administration 4.75; Consumer goods 3.80; Paper 3.63; Cardboard 3.24; Maintenance/warehouse 2.43
	Gender	Men 3.07; Women 3.86
I feel part of a solid team	Gender	Men 3.82; Women 4.41
All employees matter to the company	Age	≤35: 3.50; 36–45: 3.75; 46+: 4.50
I feel secure (secure job and pay)	Age	≤35: 3.83; 36–45: 3.83; 46+: 4.50
	Education	Primary 4.57; Secondary 4.03; Vocational 3.67; Higher 4.00
The company organises enough joint events	Tenure	Up to 3 years 4.25; 4–6 years 3.68; 7+ years 3.63
My work allows me to learn and develop	Tenure	Up to 3 years 4.08; 4–6 years 3.05; 7+ years 3.81
My job offers career opportunities	Age	≤35: 2.75; 36–45: 3.38; 46+: 3.57
	Education	Primary 4.29; Secondary 3.14; Vocational 2.92; Higher 4.00
The company enables me to take part in training important for my development	Department	Paper 2.63; Cardboard 3.24; Consumer goods 3.30; Sales/administration 5.00; Maintenance/warehouse 3.86
My job allows me to express my opinion on important issues	Department	Paper 2.75; Cardboard 3.24; Consumer goods 2.90; Sales/administration 4.00; Maintenance/warehouse 3.43

Note: ≤35, 36–45 and 46+ denote age groups in years; tenure groups: up to 3, 4–6 and 7+ years.

3.4. Relationships Between Statements

Table 5 reports the correlations that exceeded $r = 0.50$ at $p < 0.01$. Importance and experience of the same statement were strongly related, notably for fair pay ($r = 0.896$), team functioning (0.889), applying skills and knowledge (0.882) and caring colleagues (0.855). Within the experience scores, timely information and easy access to information moved together (0.956), as did being heard and being able to influence company development (0.852), autonomy and responsible work (0.836), and security and the reputation of the company (0.826). Opportunities to learn were linked to career opportunities (0.716), and having one's opinion taken into account was linked to development opportunities (0.667).

The perceived contribution of the company to raising motivation was most strongly associated with satisfaction with management's work (0.770), followed by career opportunities (0.624), reward principles (0.621), performance-related pay (0.559) and tools and materials (0.551). Employees who attached greater importance to a safe workplace and to protection from external threats also attached greater importance to the company's role in raising motivation (0.724 and 0.835), and those who valued a recognition system valued that role even more (0.870). Employees who could see themselves in the company in five years were also more willing to recommend it as an employer (0.634). The very high congruence between importance and experience scores should be read with caution, as it may partly reflect a response style in which respondents who rate one aspect highly rate the other highly too.

Table 5. Strong correlations between statements (Pearson's $r > 0.50$, $p < 0.01$).

Pair of statements	*r*
Importance and experience of the same statement	
Fair pay	0.896
Company functioning as one team	0.889
Applying skills and knowledge	0.882
Having a good friend at work	0.875
Colleagues who care about me as a person	0.855
Associations among experience statements	
Timely information – easy access to information	0.956
Opinion taken into account in discussions – ability to influence company development	0.852
Autonomy in decision-making – responsible work	0.836
Feeling secure – reputation of the company	0.826
Belonging to a solid team – reputation of the company	0.800
Opportunity to learn and develop – opportunity to advance in career	0.716
Opinion taken into account – opportunities for development	0.667
Motivation and recognition system	
Importance of a recognition system – importance of company raising motivation	0.870
Importance of protection from external threats – importance of company raising motivation	0.835
Experience: company raises motivation – satisfaction with management's work	0.770
Experience: company raises motivation – satisfaction with career opportunities	0.624
Experience: company raises motivation – satisfaction with reward principles	0.621
Experience: company raises motivation – satisfaction with performance-related pay	0.559
Loyalty	
Seeing oneself in the company in five years – recommending the company as an employer	0.634

3.5. Motivators, Overall Satisfaction and Loyalty

Ranking of the 16 motivators identified five that motivate employees most, in the order of importance: basic salary, performance bonus, suitable working hours, stable employment and a good team. The same four factors (basic salary, stable employment, suitable working hours and performance bonus) were also ranked highest when respondents were asked what motivates them to work well in their own company, so the rankings of motivators in general and in the company coincide; safety at work was highly rated from both perspectives. Conversely, public recognition and praise, and gifts and benefits, were ranked as the least motivating in both respects.

General satisfaction and loyalty were fairly high. Some 60% of respondents said they come to work gladly every morning, which is a 29% increase compared with the 2024 survey, while 8% never do. About 74% would recommend the company as an employer to a friend ($m = 4.16$, $s = 0.82$); 58% would still like to work in the company in five years' time, 6% definitely would not and 36% were undecided ($m = 3.78$, $s = 1.09$).

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of the Findings

The findings can be read through the lenses of the theories reviewed above. Consistent with Locke's discrepancy logic [4], dissatisfaction in Company X is not spread evenly: it concentrates where importance and shortfall coincide, i.e. in the motivation and recognition system, pay and development. Employees' highest-ranked motivators (basic pay, performance bonus, suitable working hours and stable employment) are largely hygiene factors in Herzberg's terms [13], and the high importance attached to safety and reputation reflects the lower tiers of Maslow's hierarchy [12]. That the same motivators top both the general and the company-specific ranking indicates that the company's offer is aligned in kind with what employees say motivates them; the gap for fair pay, however, shows that it is not yet aligned in degree, since employees want pay that is perceived as

fair and tied to performance. The large gaps for training, career opportunities and development talks, in turn, point to unmet "motivator" needs of growth, in line with the evidence that development opportunities and training sustain motivation and performance [26]. The high importance of fair and performance-related pay accords with research showing that pay is a stronger driver of behaviour than employees admit [19], while the simultaneous importance of pay, relationships and development fits the view that extrinsic incentives and intrinsic motivators work jointly [18].

An apparent paradox concerns recognition. Employees rank public recognition and praise among the least motivating factors, yet they attach high importance to a *system* of recognition that values employees (4.36) and experience it as lacking (3.36), and the correlation between valuing such a system and valuing the company's role in raising motivation is among the strongest we observed (0.870). A plausible reading is that employees want recognition that is institutionalised, fair and linked to tangible outcomes such as pay, bonuses and career, rather than symbolic gestures. This is compatible with evidence that non-financial rewards work best when combined with systematic reinforcement of performance [21] and that recognition programmes matter for motivation [22,23]. The relatively low scores for feedback, praise and criticism, despite good ratings of supervisors' fairness and approachability, suggest that supervisors are experienced as friendly but not yet as developmental, a point that connects to the role of the leader–member relationship [25] and of perceived organisational support [24] in translating good relations into motivation.

The group differences show that the workforce is far from homogeneous. Maintenance and warehouse staff and cardboard packaging workers experience the largest pay gaps, while sales and administration staff are the most positive on most of the reported statements; the divide between office and shop-floor employees is therefore a salient axis of difference. Older employees seem to value and experience security more, which is consistent with age-related shifts in work motives [28,29]; younger employees, however, see few career prospects, which is worrying in a labour market where turnover is costly [9]. The lower scores of vocationally educated employees on security, career opportunities and pay deserve targeted attention, as this group is likely to include the skilled technical staff on which production depends. The dip in the perceived opportunity to learn among employees with four to six years of tenure suggests a mid-tenure plateau after the initial enthusiasm of newcomers. These interpretations are tentative, because the data do not allow group effects to be separated from differences in the composition of departments.

4.2. Managerial Implications

The results suggest the following priorities for Company X and, by extension, for similar manufacturers:

- adopt a binding written policy on motivation and rewards, so that recognition and bonuses follow explicit and transparent rules;
- review salaries and the variable part of pay at least annually and by unit, and link the review to the existing development talks so that employees can express their view on pay, starting with maintenance and warehouse and cardboard packaging;
- expand development-oriented training beyond occupational safety, based on needs identified in development talks, and provide leadership training that equips supervisors to give feedback, praise and constructive criticism;
- create regular forums in which employees from all units, including shift workers, can express their opinion on company matters, and improve the timeliness of information in units where it is lacking; and
- repeat the importance–experience survey annually or biennially, so that progress can be tracked and the effect of measures assessed.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. It covers a single company in one industry and one country, so the results cannot be generalised, although they may be informative for similar manufacturers in labour-scarce regions. The design is cross-sectional and based on self-reported data, which are

exposed to social desirability and halo effects, as the very high importance–experience correlations indicate. Participation was voluntary, and the 57.7% response rate leaves room for self-selection. The gaps were computed from mean scores and have not been tested with paired-samples tests or modelled in a multivariate framework; some groups, such as employees with higher education (n = 12), are small; and comparisons with the 2023 and 2024 surveys are limited because different instruments were used. Future research should test gaps with paired tests, regress general satisfaction and loyalty on the gaps, follow the same employees over time, complement the survey with qualitative interviews with shift workers and supervisors, and replicate the approach in other companies and sectors.

5. Conclusions

This study examined motivation and job satisfaction in a large Serbian manufacturer of paper and cardboard packaging by confronting the importance that 300 employees attach to 44 work-related statements with their experience of them. Employees consider safety, good relations with colleagues, timely information, fair pay and company reputation to be the most important, and they experience relations with management and supervisors, and the clarity of their roles, as relatively good. The largest unmet expectations concern the motivation and recognition system, pay and development: employees want the company to do more to raise their motivation, to reward effort fairly and to invest in their growth. Experience differs markedly across departments, genders, age groups, education levels and tenure, with maintenance and warehouse and cardboard packaging workers, younger employees and those with vocational education being most exposed to unmet expectations.

From a theoretical perspective, the study shows that an importance–experience approach produces more actionable insights than satisfaction scores alone, because it separates what is merely unsatisfying from what is both important and lacking. From a practical perspective, it offers management a concrete agenda: a formal reward policy, a regular and unit-specific pay review, development training and leadership skills for supervisors, structured employee voice, and a recurring survey. Confirming the generality of these findings, and their relationship to retention and performance, remains a task for future research.

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