

2.6 EQ – ingredients of motivation: part 1

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Maintaining high levels of motivation over the course of a research project, let alone your whole career, is difficult and we should expect our motivation to fluctuate – obviously, this is completely normal.

If you research yourself a little and notice what is happening to either enhance or erode your motivation, you can then plan to put ingredients into your regular routines and processes that are designed to either prevent dips in motivation or to re-motivate yourself after a dip..

In this presentation, we will take a look at just a few motivators that are common to researchers.

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Over the years, in many workshops when researchers have been asked to reflect back on when they feel really motivated in their work, and what was happening that enabled that motivation, they mention a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

Intrinsic motivators are those that are internal or personal to us, our unique values, passions and interests.

Whilst extrinsic motivators are external demands, obligations or rewards (the carrots and sticks).

Intrinsic motivators tend to lead to a more sustainable and positive motivation, so it's important for us to be clear about what our intrinsic motivators are and to try and maximise them in what we do and how we do it

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Here are some examples of the common ingredients of motivation mentioned by researchers

Notice that most are either intrinsic motivators or, where there are extrinsic motivators, they tend to be rewards and recognition of some kind (carrots rather than sticks!).

We will now look at subsets of these motivators in turn...

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Something that this first group has in common is a sense of purpose, or having an impact in some way.... for example:

Knowing that your outputs lead on to something important such as an impact on career prospects, particularly to funding opportunities or publications, as well as impacts on the real world and society.

Or

Having a meaningful deadline or milestone to work towards, and a sense of achievement at having accomplished something.

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What does having a sense of purpose mean for you?

Ikigai is the Japanese concept that means "a reason for being". The word refers to having a direction or purpose in life, that makes life worthwhile. If our life and career can successfully bring together something we love doing, something the world needs, something we are good at, and something we can get paid for, then we have found our purpose. If these things are missing and we lack purpose, we will also lack motivation. In the resources section of these materials, you will find a link to more information about Ikigai.

But to take this idea forward and apply it, you could think of practical ways to have a greater sense of purpose or to notice that what you are doing has a purpose.

- Are you connected with the potential impacts of your research? Think of things you could do to remind yourself and connect with its ultimate purpose. Could you meet stakeholders or go to places to connect with and visualise the impact of your research?
- For example, field visits, meetings with beneficiaries. Or Public engagement activities can help you to gain perspective and re-engage with why your work is needed.
- What will you do with the skills and experiences you are gathering? Career conversations with a mentor or some long-term planning can motivate you towards something that you will love or something that might win your next post or funding.
- What can you do to recognise and celebrate when you meet a target, milestone or deadline? Do you have enough short-term goals and milestones to keep you motivated? Many of us are motivated by a deadline and accountability to others, which leads us on to our next category.

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Another subset of the ingredients of motivation.

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..is related to people and places, being accountable to other people, feeling part of a team, group or organisation – getting a chance to work with interesting people and in a variety of places

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Sometimes being a researcher can feel monotonous or isolating, most of us need to feel connected or accountable to or inspired by working with other people. Can you think of some ingredients you can incorporate into your routine to stay motivated? For example:

- Engagement in some sort of collaboration or network is one of the most important factors to help you to feel less isolated.
- The accountability of being involved in a peer review circle might nudge you towards getting a paper or proposal written sooner than if no-one is waiting to read it.
- Mentoring is a great motivator, and you should definitely meet with your own mentor. But have you thought of mentoring a more junior researcher yourself? – many mentors say this helps them to feel motivated and engaged: to feel that they have invested in a less experienced researcher and reflected on their own careers.

- An obvious one, but most of us feel more motivated after we have attended a conference, seminar or training – can you even organise something if there is nothing being offered?
- Visits to learn and collaborate with other research groups can reinvigorate your enthusiasm.
- Finally, simply committing to attend some social gatherings such as departmental or research group lunches or coffee breaks can give us a boost.

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The next group are very much intrinsic motivators....

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...and they overlap with the previous ones, but are quite personal to individuals. ..they relate to what it is that we individually value, are fascinated by, or are passionate about. For example, a fascination with the subject, lots of variety, interesting colleagues and interesting places to work in.

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Undertaking work that aligns with our values helps us to stay motivated.

- No one can tell you what your values and passions are, but have you made it known to your manager, colleagues or collaborators?

If other people don't know what it is about your role that you really enjoy or get excited about, then they can't ensure they direct similar opportunities to you in future, to give you more of these.

- For example, can your current research approach or methodology be adapted to include challenges, people, places or products that you would really care or get excited about?

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In part 2, we will look at two more ingredients of motivation: mastery and autonomy.