

Employees' Willingness to Go the Extra Mile Influenced by Framing

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Introduction

In partnership with Amárach Research, the Behavioural Economics and Sciences Team at Carr Communications conducted a survey experiment on a sample of 458 respondents currently in employment from across Ireland in June 2017.

Context and rationale

We wanted to explore the impact of positive and negative framing on responses to an employee engagement style question. Framing effects have been widely explored within the field of behavioural science, such as the influence of framing vaccination policies in terms of “people will live” or “people will die” (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) and if an army should go to war (Schuman and Presser, 1981)¹. Two questions framed slightly differently can lead to different responses and represent a different picture of the world than we might imagine.

To our knowledge though, little research has been conducted within HR and in particular around employee engagement surveys. HR is a great area for behavioural science to be explored as organisations seek to understand their employees better and boost performance in organisational activities.

Methods

We conducted this research by randomly assigning survey participants to one of two versions of a survey question, with a slight change in wording. We expected, due to positive and negative framing effects, there to be a significant difference in average scores of respondents depending on if they were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statements:

- “I feel motivated to go the extra mile in my job” (Positive frame)

OR

- “I don't feel motivated to go the extra mile in my job” (Negative frame).

Our final sample included 458 responses, meaning that 16.3% of the sample did not meet the inclusion criteria. This was due to missing responses or answers of “I don't know” on a number of questions. The final analyses were calculated on this smaller sample of 458 responses.

Results

The results indicated that the change in framing lead to a significant difference in survey responses. The group who viewed the positively framed question (N=221) gave significantly more positive responses in terms of their level of motivation compared to those who viewed the negatively framed question (N=237).

¹ Further explanations of these studies and more can be found at https://courses.eller.arizona.edu/mgmt/delaney/p_chapter6.pdf

Framing the question positively increases the average response rating by 9.73% ($p = 0.002$) compared to the negative frame, as shown in figure 1.

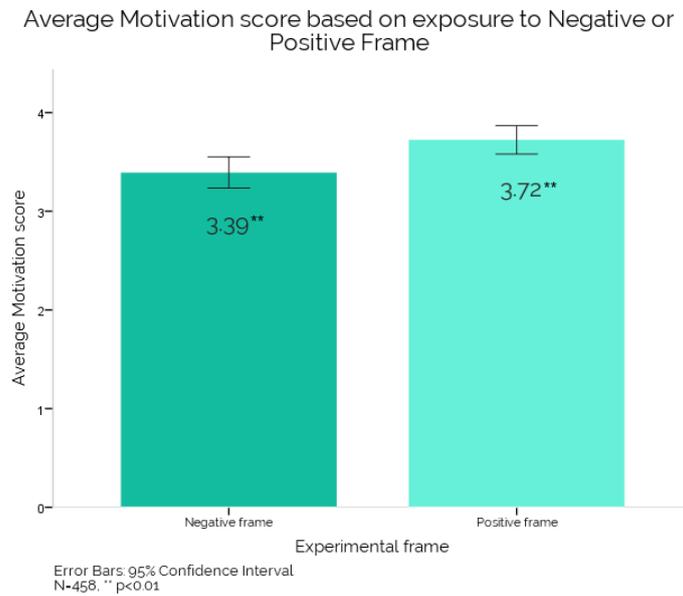


Figure 1: Average Motivation score based on exposure to Negative or Positive Frame

This effect is robust to controlling for important factors such as income, marital status, gender, age, employment sector, and whether or not the respondent is a manager. Interestingly none of these other variables were predictive of respondents’ willingness to “go the extra mile” in their job.

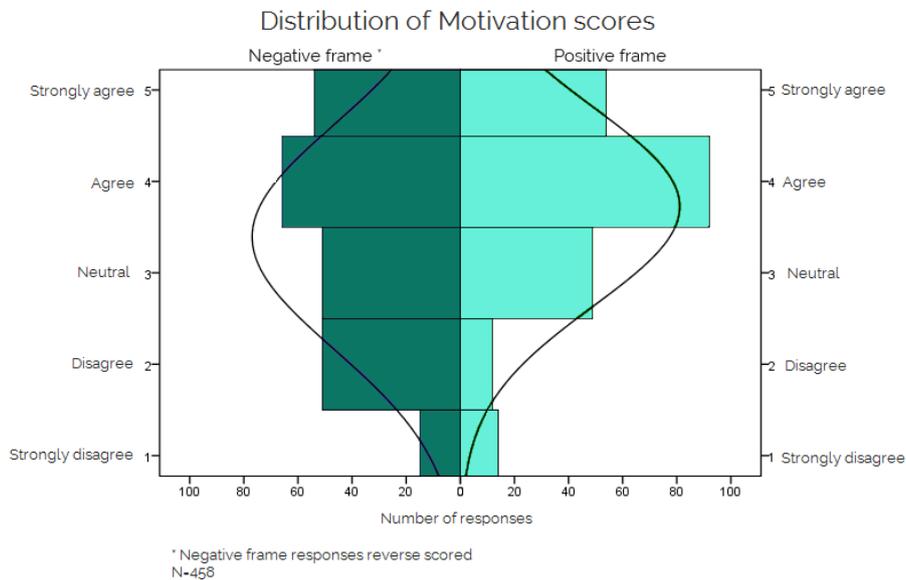


Figure 2: Distribution of Motivation scores

Whether the question is framed negatively or positively also changes the distribution of responses as shown in figure 2. As can be seen in figure 2, people are more likely to agree that they are motivated to go the extra mile in their job when the question is framed

positively. Similarly, people are more likely to disagree that they would go the extra mile in their job when the question is framed negatively².

Figure 3 shows the effect of the change in frame more clearly.

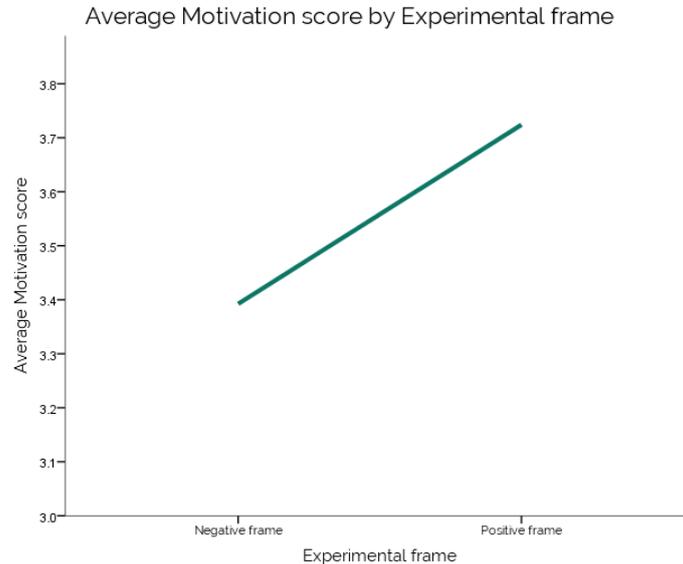


Figure 3: Average Motivation score by Experimental frame

Discussion and implications

This finding has important implications for employers conducting these surveys. Given that simply reframing a question from negative to positive can lead to a substantial increase in positive responses, some caution should be applied when interpreting the results of typical HR employee engagement surveys.

Further research is required to determine whether there is a more accurate way of eliciting employees level of motivation.

² Please note that the scores for the negatively framed questions have been reverse coded to allow for more straightforward comparison between the two frames.