

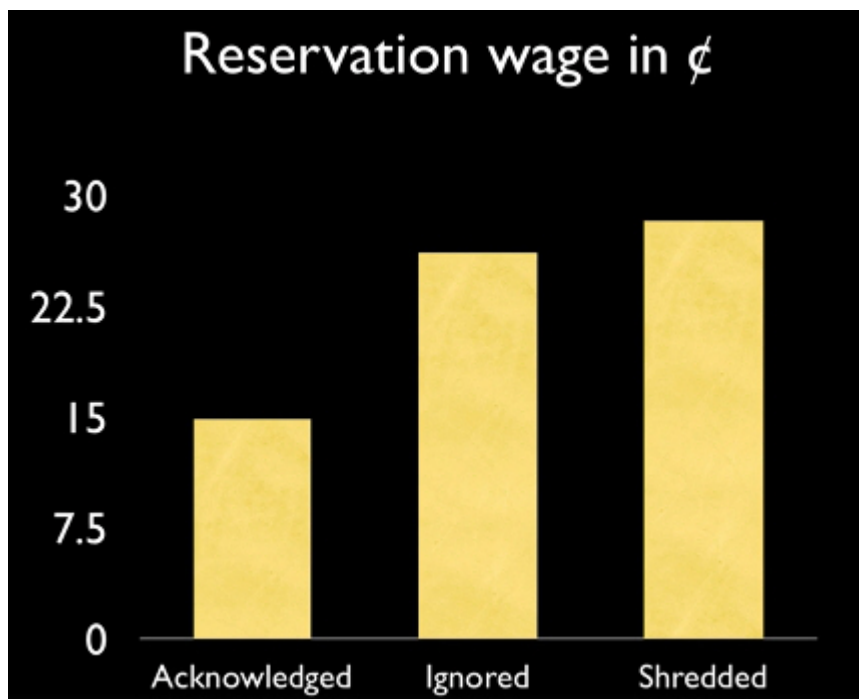
What makes us feel good about our work?

The excerpt below is from a TED Talk by Dan Ariely on work motivation.¹⁾

The transcript is at 09:43 into the talk discussing the details of an experiment measuring meaning and motivation.

We took a sheet of paper with random letters, and we asked people to find pairs of letters that were identical next to each other. That was the task. People did the first sheet, then we asked if they wanted to do another for a little less money, the next sheet for a little bit less, and so on and so forth. And we had three conditions. In the first condition, people wrote their name on the sheet, found all the pairs of letters, gave it to the experimenter, the experimenter would look at it, scan it from top to bottom, say “Uh huh,” and put it on the pile next to them. In the second condition, people did not write their name on it. The experimenter looked at it, took the sheet of paper, did not look at it, did not scan it, and simply put it on the pile of pages. So you take a piece, you just put it on the side. In the third condition, the experimenter got the sheet of paper, and put it directly into a shredder.

What happened in those three conditions?



In this plot I'm showing you at what pay rate people stopped. **So low numbers mean that people worked harder.** They worked for much longer. In the acknowledged condition, people worked all the way down to 15 cents. At 15 cents per page, they basically stopped these efforts. In the shredder condition, it was twice as much – 30 cents per sheet.

If you shred people's efforts, output – you get them not to be as happy with what they're doing. But I should point out, by the way, that in the shredder condition, people could have cheated. They could have done not so good work, because they realized people were just shredding it. So maybe the first sheet you'd do good work, but then you see nobody is really testing it, so you would do more and more and more. So in fact, in the shredder condition, people could have submitted more work and gotten more money, and put less effort into it. But what about the ignored condition? Would the ignored condition be more like the acknowledged or more like the shredder, or somewhere in the middle? It turns out it was almost like the shredder.

Now there's good news and bad news here. The bad news is that ignoring the performance of people is almost as bad as shredding their effort in front of their eyes. Ignoring gets you a whole way out there. The good news is that by simply looking at something that somebody has done, scanning it and

saying “Uh huh,” that seems to be quite sufficient to dramatically improve people's motivations. So the good news is that adding motivation doesn't seem to be so difficult. The bad news is that eliminating motivations seems to be incredibly easy, and if we don't think about it carefully, we might overdo it. So this is all in terms of negative motivation, or eliminating negative motivation.

¹⁾

https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_what_makes_us_feel_good_about_our_work