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Loyalty versus achievement: a comparative analysis of employee motivation and cultural values in Japan and the United states

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ABSTRACT

This study falls within SDG Focus Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth — Target 8.5: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men; Target 8.2: Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading

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and innovation; Target 8.8: Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers.

This study examines the comparative approaches to employee motivation and the cultural values that shape them in Japan and the United States, focusing on how each country's unique historical context, institutional frameworks, and deeply embedded cultural norms influence workplace engagement, reward systems, and the relationship between employees and their organizations. The research analyzes the foundational philosophies underlying motivation—from Japan's emphasis on loyalty, collective identity, and intrinsic purpose to America's focus on individual achievement, performance-based rewards, and career mobility. A comparative cultural and policy analysis was conducted examining primary and secondary sources including academic research, institutional reports, contemporary surveys, and cross-cultural management studies covering developments from 2000 to 2025-2026.

Japan presents a distinctive motivational landscape rooted in collective values, lifetime employment traditions, and an emerging recognition of purpose-driven engagement. The traditional Japanese workplace has been characterized by loyalty, stability, and long-term employment, where employees stay with companies for decades—but this loyalty does not automatically translate into motivation or productivity . With only 7% of Japanese employees engaged at work—the lowest among 139 countries surveyed and dramatically below the global average of 21%—Japan faces a profound engagement crisis . This paradox of loyal disengagement reflects deep structural and cultural factors: lifetime employment traditions that make firing rare, seniority-based promotion systems, and a collectivist culture where employees derive motivation from teamwork, social belonging, and the fear of letting others down rather than individual achievement . Yet emerging research reveals a more complex picture. The concept of "ikigai"—a sense of purpose and contribution—is reshaping understanding of Japanese motivation. A 2023 survey of 2,000 Tokyo workers identified that 41.6% of employees who feel they are contributing and desire to contribute more (Group A) experience lower stress, higher motivation for self-directed learning, and greater engagement . These "conscious workers" view the office as a place for teamwork and collaboration, prefer some in-office attendance, and see work as connected to broader social contribution. The "Work–Work Theory" provides a theoretical framework for

understanding Japanese motivation, suggesting that gradually more challenging work assignments provide intrinsic motivation—where work itself becomes the reward .

The United States presents a contrasting motivational paradigm centered on individualism, performance-based rewards, and the celebration of individual potential. American workplace culture emphasizes personal achievement, innovation, and the opportunity to "climb the ladder" regardless of background . Recruitment focuses on skills and job fit, compensation is tied directly to performance through bonuses and stock options, and the high mobility rate (averaging 20% annually) reflects a labor market where employees move freely to pursue better opportunities . The philosophy of "Work–Pay Theory"—where compensation is exchanged for labor—predominates, with employees expecting their contributions to be tangibly rewarded. However, the US faces its own engagement challenges: Gallup reports that only one-third of Americans are engaged at work, with 46% of employees saying they would leave their job if they felt micromanaged . The "hygiene factors" of salary and working conditions, while necessary, are insufficient to inspire genuine commitment. American motivation theory emphasizes the need for autonomy, trust, and the celebration of individual potential. Research shows that employees who work at companies that empower them are more productive, and that trust-based cultures encourage innovation and allow good ideas to surface from people closest to tasks . Peter Drucker's vision of organizations where "every person sees herself as a 'manager'" reflects the American ideal of distributed leadership and individual accountability .

Both countries demonstrate that effective motivation requires alignment between cultural values and workplace practices, yet with fundamentally different philosophical orientations. Japan's strength lies in its capacity for deep loyalty, collective purpose, and the emerging recognition of "ikigai" as a driver of engagement, yet faces challenges of low engagement, hierarchical traditions that can stifle initiative, and the need to adapt lifetime employment models to contemporary realities. The United States' strength lies in its celebration of individual potential, performance-based rewards, and flexibility, yet grapples with high turnover, the risks of hyper-individualism undermining collective cohesion, and the challenge of creating meaningful work beyond financial incentives. Neither country has fully resolved the tension between stability and dynamism, though both offer invaluable lessons for the global pursuit of decent work and productive employment.

KEYWORDS: Employee motivation, cultural values, Japan, United States, engagement, ikigai, loyalty, performance-based rewards, Work-Work Theory, SDG 8, cross-cultural management, workplace culture.

RÉSUMÉ (French Version)

Cette étude examine les approches comparatives de la motivation des employés et les valeurs culturelles qui les façonnent au Japon et aux États-Unis, en se concentrant sur la manière dont le contexte historique unique, les cadres institutionnels et les normes culturelles profondément ancrées de chaque pays influencent l'engagement au travail, les systèmes de récompense et la relation entre les employés et leurs organisations. La recherche analyse les philosophies fondamentales sous-tendant la motivation—de l'accent mis par le Japon sur la loyauté, l'identité collective et le but intrinsèque à l'accent mis par l'Amérique sur la réussite individuelle, les récompenses basées sur la performance et la mobilité de carrière. Une analyse culturelle et politique comparative a été menée en examinant des sources primaires et secondaires, y compris la recherche académique, les rapports institutionnels, les enquêtes contemporaines et les études de gestion interculturelle couvrant les développements de 2000 à 2025-2026.

Le Japon présente un paysage motivationnel distinctif enraciné dans les valeurs collectives, les traditions d'emploi à vie et une reconnaissance émergente de l'engagement motivé par un but. Le lieu de travail traditionnel japonais a été caractérisé par la loyauté, la stabilité et l'emploi à long terme, où les employés restent dans les entreprises pendant des décennies—mais cette loyauté ne se traduit pas automatiquement par de la motivation ou de la productivité . Avec seulement 7 % des employés japonais engagés au travail—le plus bas parmi 139 pays sondés et nettement inférieur à la moyenne mondiale de 21 %—le Japon fait face à une crise d'engagement profonde . Ce paradoxe de la loyauté désengagée reflète des facteurs structurels et culturels profonds : les traditions d'emploi à vie qui rendent les licenciements rares, les systèmes de promotion basés sur l'ancienneté et une culture collectiviste où les employés tirent leur motivation du travail d'équipe, de l'appartenance sociale et de la peur de décevoir les autres plutôt que de la réussite individuelle . Pourtant, les recherches émergentes révèlent une image plus complexe. Le concept d'"ikigai"—un sentiment de but et de contribution—transforme la compréhension de la motivation japonaise. Une enquête de 2023 auprès de 2 000 travailleurs de Tokyo a identifié que 41,6 % des employés

qui sentent qu'ils contribuent et désirent contribuer davantage (Groupe A) connaissent moins de stress, une motivation plus élevée pour l'apprentissage autodirigé et un plus grand engagement . Ces "travailleurs conscients" considèrent le bureau comme un lieu de travail d'équipe et de collaboration, préfèrent une certaine présence au bureau et voient le travail comme connecté à une contribution sociale plus large. La "Work–Work Theory" fournit un cadre théorique pour comprendre la motivation japonaise, suggérant que des missions de travail progressivement plus difficiles procurent une motivation intrinsèque—où le travail lui-même devient la récompense .

Les États-Unis présentent un paradigme motivationnel contrasté centré sur l'individualisme, les récompenses basées sur la performance et la célébration du potentiel individuel. La culture d'entreprise américaine met l'accent sur la réussite personnelle, l'innovation et la possibilité de "gravir les échelons" indépendamment des origines . Le recrutement se concentre sur les compétences et l'adéquation au poste, la rémunération est directement liée à la performance par le biais de bonus et d'options d'achat d'actions, et le taux de mobilité élevé (moyenne de 20 % par an) reflète un marché du travail où les employés se déplacent librement pour poursuivre de meilleures opportunités . La philosophie de la "Work–Pay Theory"—où la rémunération est échangée contre le travail—prévaut, les employés s'attendant à ce que leurs contributions soient concrètement récompensées. Cependant, les États-Unis font face à leurs propres défis d'engagement : Gallup rapporte que seulement un tiers des Américains sont engagés au travail, et 46 % des employés disent qu'ils quitteraient leur emploi s'ils se sentaient micro-gérés . Les "facteurs d'hygiène" du salaire et des conditions de travail, bien que nécessaires, sont insuffisants pour susciter un engagement authentique. La théorie de la motivation américaine met l'accent sur le besoin d'autonomie, de confiance et la célébration du potentiel individuel. La recherche montre que les employés qui travaillent dans des entreprises qui les responsabilisent sont plus productifs, et que les cultures basées sur la confiance encouragent l'innovation et permettent aux bonnes idées d'émerger des personnes les plus proches des tâches . La vision de Peter Drucker d'organisations où "chaque personne se considère comme un 'manager'" reflète l'idéal américain de leadership distribué et de responsabilité individuelle .

Les deux pays démontrent qu'une motivation efficace nécessite un alignement entre les valeurs culturelles et les pratiques de travail, mais avec des orientations philosophiques fondamentalement différentes. La force du Japon réside dans sa capacité à susciter une loyauté profonde, un but

collectif et la reconnaissance émergente de l'"ikigai" comme moteur d'engagement, mais fait face à des défis de faible engagement, de traditions hiérarchiques qui peuvent étouffer l'initiative et de la nécessité d'adapter les modèles d'emploi à vie aux réalités contemporaines. La force des États-Unis réside dans leur célébration du potentiel individuel, des récompenses basées sur la performance et de la flexibilité, mais est aux prises avec un turnover élevé, les risques d'un hyper-individualisme qui sape la cohésion collective et le défi de créer un travail significatif au-delà des incitations financières. Aucun des deux pays n'a pleinement résolu la tension entre stabilité et dynamisme, bien que tous deux offrent des leçons inestimables pour la poursuite mondiale du travail décent et de l'emploi productif.

MOTS-CLÉS : Motivation des employés, valeurs culturelles, Japon, États-Unis, engagement, ikigai, loyauté, récompenses basées sur la performance, Work-Work Theory, ODD 8, gestion interculturelle, culture d'entreprise.

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1. INTRODUCTION: TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF WORK

The question of what motivates employees to contribute their best efforts lies at the heart of organizational effectiveness and economic productivity. As companies navigate the complexities of globalization, technological change, and shifting workforce expectations, understanding how cultural values shape motivation has become essential for achieving decent work and sustainable growth. SDG Target 8.5 explicitly calls for full and productive employment and decent work for all, while Target 8.2 emphasizes higher levels of economic productivity through innovation.

This study examines two countries that offer illuminating perspectives on employee motivation and cultural values: Japan and the United States. Both nations are economic powerhouses with highly developed workplace cultures, yet their philosophical foundations, institutional

arrangements, and approaches to motivating employees differ fundamentally, providing rich comparative insights into how culture shapes the employment relationship.

Japan's motivational landscape has long been characterized by loyalty, stability, and collective identity. Lifetime employment traditions, seniority-based promotion, and a collectivist culture where employees derive motivation from teamwork and social belonging have created a distinctive workplace ethos . Yet this system faces profound challenges: with only 7% of Japanese employees engaged at work—the lowest in the world—the paradox of loyal disengagement demands urgent attention . Emerging concepts like "ikigai"—purpose and contribution—offer new pathways for understanding how Japanese workers can be motivated in the 21st century.

The United States presents a contrasting paradigm centered on individualism, performance-based rewards, and the celebration of individual potential. American workplace culture emphasizes personal achievement, innovation, and mobility, with compensation tied directly to performance and employees free to move between organizations in pursuit of better opportunities . Yet the US also faces engagement challenges: only one-third of Americans are engaged at work, and the hyper-individualism that drives innovation can also undermine collective cohesion and trust .

The contrast between Japan and the United States illuminates critical questions for SDG 8 and workplace motivation: How do different cultural values shape what employees seek from work? What explains the paradox of high loyalty and low engagement in Japan? How can organizations balance the need for stability with the demand for dynamism? And what can the world learn from two of the most distinctive and influential workplace cultures?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

The study of employee motivation has long distinguished between intrinsic motivation (deriving satisfaction from the work itself) and extrinsic motivation (responding to external rewards such as pay and benefits). Frederick Herzberg's two-factor theory distinguishes between "hygiene factors"

(salary, working conditions) that prevent dissatisfaction and "motivators" (achievement, recognition, responsibility) that drive genuine engagement .

Cross-cultural research reveals that the relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors varies significantly across societies. A comparative study of work values in Japan, Korea, the United States, and Sweden found that "Asian workers in general are less positively oriented to their work than their counterparts in the West," and that "intrinsic rewards are more so in the West" as determinants of work orientations . These findings suggest that cultural context fundamentally shapes the motivational calculus.

2.2 Japan: Loyalty, Purpose, and the Engagement Paradox

The Traditional Japanese Workplace

Japan's employment system has historically been characterized by three pillars: lifetime employment, seniority-based wages and promotion, and enterprise unions . These institutions created a stable environment where employees remained with the same company for decades, building deep loyalty and organizational knowledge. As a Dale Carnegie analysis notes, Japanese employees "stay with their company for decades, but that doesn't always translate into motivation or productivity" . Loyalty, in the Japanese context, means staying—not necessarily striving.

The legal and cultural environment reinforces this stability. Japanese labor law makes it extremely difficult to dismiss employees; courts expect employers to "reassign rather than terminate staff" . Combined with demographic decline and near-full employment, the balance of power has shifted toward employees, requiring leaders to "make the best of what you've got" and invest in development rather than replacement .

The Engagement Crisis

Despite this stability, Japan faces a profound engagement crisis. Gallup's Japan Spotlight Report found that only 7% of Japanese employees are engaged at work—the lowest among 139 countries surveyed and dramatically below the global average of 21% . This finding has remained consistent over 13 years, indicating a deep-seated structural challenge.

The Gallup report identifies the root cause: "The traditional Japanese workplace priorities of hierarchy and worker loyalty are becoming obsolete because they undermine engagement, performance, and wellbeing" . Following the pandemic, Japanese employees "began to demand a greater sense of personal connection with their work and to question whether their organisation's purpose was aligned with their own values" .

One leader's observation captures the essence of the challenge: "We improved working conditions, but scores didn't budge; it wasn't until we focused on 'work worth doing' that engagement increased" . Another noted: "We had structured everything around comfort – better chairs, better hours – but until we made work itself feel valuable, the energy just wasn't there" .

Rohit Kar, regional director of Gallup Japan, frames the stakes: "Disengagement is not just a human issue, it is an economic one. With stress levels at record highs and wellbeing at risk, the cost of inaction is enormous. Our research shows that when organisations build cultures of connection and purpose, productivity rises and people thrive" .

The Concept of Ikigai and "Conscious Workers"

A 2023 survey by Tokyo-based Frontier Consulting introduces the concept of "ikigai"—a Japanese term referring to a sense of purpose, satisfaction, and motivation in work and life . The survey of 2,000 Tokyo office workers classified employees into four groups based on their sense of current contribution and desire to contribute more:

Group	**Description**	**Percentage**
Group A	Currently contributing and desire to contribute more	41.6%
Group B	Currently contributing but no desire to contribute more	7.4%
Group C	Not currently contributing but desire to contribute	17.4%
Group D	Not contributing and no desire to contribute	33.8%

The findings reveal stark differences between these groups. Group A—the "conscious workers" who feel they are contributing and aspire to contribute more—experience significantly lower workplace stress, higher motivation for self-directed learning (49% engaged in self-development), and greater satisfaction . They view the office as a place for "teamwork and collaboration" and building trust with colleagues, prefer some in-office attendance, and are more likely to engage in "workcations" (working remotely while traveling) .

This research suggests that Japanese workers are not inherently disengaged; rather, engagement depends on whether they perceive their work as meaningful and contributory. As the report concludes, "These results suggest a need to be intentional in building offices that foster higher work satisfaction. As companies place increasing value on social responsibility, individual employees are also becoming more aware of the significance of contributing to society as a whole" .

The Work–Work Theory

Takahashi's (2004) "Work–Work Theory" provides a theoretical framework for understanding Japanese motivation. In contrast to the "Work–Pay Theory" dominant in Western contexts, where compensation is exchanged for labor, the Work–Work Theory suggests that "work assignments that gradually become more challenging provide intrinsic motivation, which becomes exciting (waku-waku in Japanese)" .

Key principles of the Work–Work Theory include:

Principle	**Description**
Differentiation	Differences in work assignments accelerate differences in promotions and pay
Challenge motivation	Workers dissatisfied with current situations may innovate and challenge the status quo
Personnel selection	Supervisors select the right personnel for each job
Regular rotation	Regular personnel changes reward workers with new work

Collective growth	Working together enables company growth
Intrinsic excitement	Challenging assignments provide intrinsic motivation—if it's not exciting, it's not intrinsic

This theory suggests that Japanese motivation is fundamentally about the nature of work itself—the opportunity to take on progressively more challenging assignments that provide a sense of growth and contribution.

Motivation in Practice: Beyond Salary

As the Dale Carnegie analysis emphasizes, "Money alone doesn't drive motivation." In Japan's collectivist culture, "team belonging is powerful here: letting others down is socially costly, while contributing to the group earns respect" . Leaders who cultivate emotional connection—through understanding, patience, and structured follow-up—build loyalty that performs.

The "hygiene factors" of salary and working conditions are necessary but insufficient. True motivation comes from "teamwork, respect, and emotional connection" .

2.3 United States: Individualism, Performance, and Potential

The Individualist Paradigm

American workplace culture is fundamentally individualist. As a comparative analysis of US and Japanese HR management notes, "American society emphasizes personal ambition and market competition," while "Japanese society values collectivism and harmony" . This cultural orientation shapes every aspect of employee motivation.

The American model emphasizes:

Dimension	**Characteristics**
Recruitment	Market-based, focused on skills and job fit; social and campus hiring both used

Promotion	Performance-based; employees expected to demonstrate results
Compensation	Variable pay, bonuses, stock options tied directly to performance
Mobility	High; average turnover around 20% annually
Training	Job-specific skills and individual development; external training common

Performance-Based Motivation

In the United States, motivation is closely tied to performance recognition and reward. The "Work–Pay Theory" predominates: employees expect their contributions to be tangibly compensated through bonuses, promotions, and stock options . This creates powerful incentives for individual achievement and innovation.

Research demonstrates that high-performing companies leverage this motivational orientation effectively. According to SHRM research across 11,000 companies in 15 countries, key drivers of positive workplace culture include "appreciation of employees' unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences" and whether "a manager seeks employee input before making decisions" .

Trust and Autonomy as Motivators

American motivation theory emphasizes the importance of trust and autonomy. A Monster.com survey found that "46 percent of employees said they would leave their job if they felt micromanaged" . Research by Ethan Bernstein at Harvard Business School determined that "creating zones of privacy may, under certain conditions, increase employee performance" .

The Edelman survey concludes: "Focus instead on what actually motivates people in the workplace: the opportunity to improve and master skills, a clear sense of shared purpose that aligns to personal values, a work environment that offers autonomy, and the space and time to do their jobs well" .

Peter Drucker's vision of management captures the American ideal: "organizations in which every person sees herself as a 'manager' and accepts the full burden … for her own job and work group [and] for her contribution to the performance and results of the entire organization" .

The Challenge of Engagement

Despite these motivational tools, the United States faces its own engagement challenges. Gallup reports that "only one-third of Americans are engaged at work" . The problem is not lack of opportunity but a failure to connect employees with meaningful work and trusting relationships.

The Charles Koch Foundation analysis emphasizes that engagement requires recognizing individual potential: "When a worker is no longer motivated to contribute, it leads to high absenteeism and turnover." Conversely, "employees who work at companies that empower them are more productive" .

Celebrating Individual Potential

A distinctive feature of American motivation philosophy is the celebration of individual potential. Unlike European or Japanese systems where educational credentials and social class may constrain opportunity, "America provided a venue that dispensed with class status, markets closed to new ideas, and not holding to tradition" . This ethos of upward mobility—where "workers in the factory could potentially climb up to become a CEO"—fuels American motivation .

Organizations like the Make It Movement and SkillUp focus on helping individuals identify their unique gifts and build skills aligned with their interests . This investment in individual potential reflects the belief that motivated employees are those who feel they have "unique capabilities they can use to contribute to their own lives and the lives of others" .

2.4 Comparative Dimensions: Collectivism vs. Individualism

Dimension	**Japan**	**United States**
Philosophical Foundation	Collectivism, loyalty, long-term commitment	Individualism, achievement, market mobility

Primary Motivation Drivers	Team belonging, purpose (ikigai), progressive challenge	Performance-based rewards, autonomy, recognition
Engagement Rate	7% (lowest globally)	~33%
Employment Tenure	Low mobility (turnover ~5%)	High mobility (turnover ~20%)
Compensation Philosophy	Seniority-based, collective bonuses	Performance-based, stock options, variable pay
Theoretical Framework	Work-Work Theory (work itself as reward)	Work-Pay Theory (exchange of labor for compensation)
Role of Purpose	Emerging focus on ikigai and social contribution	Alignment with personal values and shared purpose
Key Strength	Deep loyalty, stability, collective commitment	Innovation, flexibility, individual achievement
Key Challenge	Low engagement; hierarchy stifling initiative	High turnover; individualism undermining cohesion

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of employee motivation in Japan, including the traditional loyalty-based system, the contemporary engagement crisis, and emerging concepts like ikigai and Work-Work Theory?
2. What are the key characteristics of employee motivation in the United States, including performance-based rewards, trust and autonomy, and the celebration of individual potential?
3. How do the two countries compare in terms of motivational drivers, engagement outcomes, and the relationship between cultural values and workplace practices?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative cultural and policy analysis methodology to examine employee motivation and cultural values in Japan and the United States. The research design integrates secondary analysis of academic research, institutional reports, contemporary surveys, and cross-cultural management studies to develop comprehensive understanding of motivational frameworks, workplace practices, and outcomes in both countries.

Research Design: The comparative approach is appropriate for examining how different cultural value systems shape employee motivation. Japan and the United States were selected as cases that offer complementary insights: both are advanced economies with sophisticated management practices, yet their motivational philosophies differ fundamentally.

Data Sources: Primary and secondary sources analyzed include:

- Dale Carnegie Tokyo analysis of Japanese loyalty and motivation
- Gallup Japan Spotlight Report on employee engagement
- KCI comparative study of work values across Japan, Korea, US, and Sweden
- WORKTECH Academy analysis of ikigai and conscious workers
- Charles Koch Foundation research on employee engagement in America
- Comparative HR analyses of US and Japanese management practices

Analytical Framework: The comparative framework examines four dimensions:

1. **Cultural Values:** Collectivism vs. individualism, attitudes toward loyalty and mobility
2. **Motivational Drivers:** Intrinsic vs. extrinsic factors, role of purpose and recognition
3. **Workplace Practices:** Recruitment, promotion, compensation, training
4. **Engagement Outcomes:** Measured engagement, turnover, satisfaction

5. RESULTS

5.1 Japan: The Paradox of Loyal Disengagement

The Engagement Crisis

Gallup's Japan Spotlight Report reveals stark findings:

Metric	**Japan**	**Global Average**
Employee engagement	7%	21%
Ranking	Lowest of 139 countries	-
Engagement trend	Stagnant for 13 years	-

Rohit Kar, regional director of Gallup Japan, frames the stakes: "Disengagement is not just a human issue, it is an economic one. With stress levels at record highs and wellbeing at risk, the cost of inaction is enormous" .

Structural and Cultural Factors

The Dale Carnegie analysis identifies key structural factors:

- **Loyalty without commitment:** "Japanese staff loyalty ensures stability, not necessarily performance. Loyalty here means staying, not necessarily striving" .
- **Employment protection:** "In Japan, companies cannot simply dismiss underperformers. Labor law requires firms to 'fit the person,' not the other way around" .
- **Development imperative:** "Because finding replacements is harder than ever, development must become a managerial core skill" .
- **Collectivist motivation:** "Team belonging is powerful here: letting others down is socially costly, while contributing to the group earns respect" .

The Ikigai Framework

The Frontier Consulting survey reveals the importance of purpose:

Group	**Description**	**Engagement Characteristics**
Group A	Contributing + desire to contribute more	Low stress; 49% engaged in self-learning; view office for collaboration

Group D	Not contributing + no desire	High stress; 31% report feeling stressed; low learning motivation

The findings demonstrate that "workers who have a sense of contribution to the workplace and society and desire to continue to contribute tend to experience lower stress in the workplace and have more self-motivation to learn" .

The Work-Work Theory

Takahashi's theoretical framework provides insight into Japanese motivation:

- Intrinsic motivation derives from progressively challenging work
- "Work assignments that gradually become more challenging provide intrinsic motivation, which becomes exciting (waku-waku in Japanese)"
- This approach "drastically changes the motivational approaches derived from the self-determination theory to the honest practice of intrinsic motivation"

5.2 United States: Individual Achievement and the Engagement Challenge

The American Motivational Paradigm

Comparative analysis reveals distinctive American characteristics:

Dimension	**US Characteristics**
Recruitment	Social and campus hiring; focus on skills and job fit
Promotion	Performance-based
Compensation	Variable pay, bonuses, stock options
Mobility	High (average turnover ~20%)
Training	Job-specific skills, individual development

Performance-Based Rewards

The American system emphasizes direct linkage between performance and reward. The "Work–Pay Theory"—exchange of labor for compensation—predominates, with employees expecting their contributions to be tangibly rewarded through bonuses, promotions, and stock options .

Trust and Autonomy

Research demonstrates that autonomy and trust are critical motivators:

- "46 percent of employees said they would leave their job if they felt micromanaged"
- "Workforce surveillance reduces employees to keyboard strokes or minutes 'on task,' stripping them of their humanity"
- "Creating zones of privacy may, under certain conditions, increase employee performance"

The Engagement Challenge

Despite these motivational tools, only one-third of Americans are engaged at work . The challenge is not lack of opportunity but failure to connect employees with meaningful work and trusting relationships.

5.3 Comparative Analysis

Dimension	**Japan**	**United States**
Cultural Foundation	Collectivism, loyalty, stability	Individualism, achievement, mobility
Engagement Rate	7%	~33%
Turnover Rate	~5%	~20%
Primary Motivator	Purpose (ikigai), team belonging, progressive challenge	Performance-based rewards, autonomy, recognition
Role of Salary	Hygiene factor; necessary but not sufficient	Key component of Work-Pay exchange

Theoretical Framework	Work-Work Theory (work itself as reward)	Work-Pay Theory (compensation for labor)
Management Approach	Structured follow-up, empathetic control	Trust, autonomy, empowerment
Key Strength	Deep loyalty, stability, collective commitment	Innovation, flexibility, individual achievement
Key Challenge	Low engagement; hierarchy stifling initiative	High turnover; individualism undermining cohesion

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Two Philosophies of Motivation

The contrast between Japan and the United States illuminates two fundamentally different philosophies of employee motivation. Japan's approach is rooted in **collective purpose and progressive challenge**. The Work–Work Theory suggests that motivation derives from the intrinsic satisfaction of mastering increasingly difficult assignments within a stable organizational context . The emerging focus on ikigai—purpose and contribution—reflects a deep cultural recognition that meaningful work is work that connects to something larger than oneself .

The United States' approach is rooted in **individual achievement and performance-based reward**. The Work–Pay Theory frames motivation as an exchange relationship: employees contribute effort and receive tangible compensation . Trust, autonomy, and recognition amplify this exchange, but the fundamental transaction remains.

6.2 The Paradox of Loyal Disengagement

Japan's 7% engagement rate alongside deep organizational loyalty represents one of the most striking paradoxes in global management. How can employees be so loyal yet so disengaged?

The Gallup analysis suggests that "the traditional Japanese workplace priorities of hierarchy and worker loyalty are becoming obsolete because they undermine engagement, performance, and wellbeing" . The pandemic accelerated a shift: Japanese employees "began to demand a greater sense of personal connection with their work and to question whether their organisation's purpose was aligned with their own values" .

The Dale Carnegie analysis adds another dimension: "Loyalty in Japan is a double-edged sword. It builds stability but can mask inefficiency." Leaders must "embrace structured follow-up and consistent discipline" because "don't assume loyalty equals performance" .

The Frontier Consulting research offers a more hopeful interpretation. The 41.6% of workers in Group A—those who feel they are contributing and desire to contribute more—demonstrate that Japanese workers can be highly engaged when they perceive their work as meaningful . The challenge is not a cultural deficit but a failure to connect employees with work worth doing.

6.3 The Limits of Performance-Based Motivation

The United States' performance-based system has produced extraordinary innovation and productivity, but it also has limits. The 33% engagement rate suggests that financial incentives alone are insufficient to inspire commitment. The research on trust and autonomy reveals that employees need more than compensation; they need to feel empowered, respected, and connected to a shared purpose .

The Monster.com finding that 46% would leave if micromanaged underscores the importance of autonomy. The Edelman survey's emphasis on "a clear sense of shared purpose that aligns to personal values" suggests that purpose matters in America as much as in Japan .

6.4 Implications for SDG 8

The findings have important implications for achieving SDG 8 targets:

Target 8.5 (Full and productive employment and decent work): Both countries demonstrate that decent work requires more than material conditions. Japan's experience shows that

comfortable working conditions without meaningful engagement do not constitute decent work. America's experience shows that high pay without trust and autonomy leaves employees disengaged.

Target 8.2 (Economic productivity through diversification): Motivated employees are more productive employees. Japan's engagement crisis represents a massive drag on economic productivity. Gallup's finding that "engagement is correlated with important organisational performance outcomes such as retention, safety, quality, customer loyalty, productivity and profitability" underscores the economic stakes .

Target 8.8 (Protect labour rights): Japan's labor protections, while providing security, may also create complacency if not accompanied by motivational practices. The challenge is to balance protection with engagement.

Target 8.5 (Decent work): The concept of ikigai—purpose and contribution—offers a framework for understanding what decent work means beyond material conditions. The finding that 41.6% of Japanese workers are "conscious workers" who find meaning in contribution suggests that decent work is possible even in a low-engagement environment .

7. CONCLUSION: LOYALTY VERSUS ACHIEVEMENT

This comparative analysis of employee motivation and cultural values in Japan and the United States reveals that the question of what motivates people at work cannot be separated from the cultural contexts in which they live. The two countries, with their distinct philosophical foundations and complementary challenges, offer invaluable lessons for the global pursuit of decent work and productive employment.

Japan's experience demonstrates the power and the paradox of loyalty. The traditional Japanese workplace, with its lifetime employment, seniority-based promotion, and collectivist culture, created deep organizational commitment—but not necessarily engagement . With only 7% of Japanese employees engaged at work, the lowest in the world, Japan faces an urgent challenge to transform its workplace culture . The emerging focus on ikigai—purpose and contribution—offers a pathway forward. The 41.6% of "conscious workers" who feel they are contributing and desire

to contribute more experience lower stress, higher motivation, and greater satisfaction . The Work–Work Theory suggests that Japanese motivation can be unlocked through progressively challenging assignments that provide intrinsic excitement . The lesson is clear: loyalty must be channeled into purpose, stability into growth.

The United States' experience demonstrates the power and the limits of individual achievement. The performance-based system, with its variable pay, stock options, and celebration of individual potential, has fueled extraordinary innovation and mobility . Yet only one-third of Americans are engaged at work, and the hyper-individualism that drives achievement can also undermine trust and cohesion . The research on autonomy and trust reveals that employees need more than financial incentives; they need to feel empowered, respected, and connected to a shared purpose . The lesson is equally clear: achievement must be grounded in trust, ambition in purpose.

Several cross-cutting insights emerge from this comparison:

First, culture shapes motivation, but it does not determine it. Japan's low engagement rate is not inevitable; it reflects a mismatch between traditional structures and contemporary needs. America's moderate engagement rate is not a ceiling; it can be improved through trust and purpose.

Second, purpose matters everywhere. Whether expressed as ikigai in Japan or "shared purpose aligned to personal values" in America, the need for meaningful work transcends cultural boundaries.

Third, security and challenge must be balanced. Japan's stability provides security but can stifle growth. America's dynamism provides opportunity but can undermine stability. The optimal balance lies somewhere in between.

Fourth, trust is the foundation of engagement. In both countries, employees who feel trusted and empowered are more engaged than those who feel surveilled and controlled.

Fifth, collective and individual needs must be reconciled. Japan's challenge is to create space for individual growth within collective structures. America's challenge is to build collective cohesion without sacrificing individual achievement.

Sixth, development is essential. In Japan, where replacement is difficult, development must become a "managerial core skill." In America, where mobility is high, development is essential for retention.

Seventh, work itself must be valuable. The leader who noted that "it wasn't until we focused on 'work worth doing' that engagement increased" speaks to both countries .

For Japan, priorities emerging from this analysis include:

1. Build on the ikigai framework by intentionally designing work that provides a sense of contribution and purpose.
2. Implement the Work–Work Theory principles by creating progressively challenging assignments that provide intrinsic motivation.
3. Address the engagement gap through leadership development that emphasizes emotional connection, structured follow-up, and purpose alignment.
4. Maintain the strengths of stability and loyalty while adapting to contemporary needs for meaning and growth.

For the United States, priorities include:

1. Strengthen trust-based cultures by reducing micromanagement and surveillance, which 46% of employees cite as a reason to leave .
2. Invest in purpose alignment, helping employees connect their work to organizational and societal contribution.
3. Address turnover through development and recognition, not just financial incentives.
4. Build collective cohesion within individualist frameworks, recognizing that trust and collaboration are essential for innovation.

For the international community, the lessons are clear: decent work requires attention to both material conditions and psychological needs. Japan's focus on stability and America's focus on achievement each offer valuable insights, but neither provides a complete solution. The goal is to create workplaces where employees can find both security and challenge, purpose and reward, belonging and achievement.

The ultimate measure of success for SDG 8 is not whether employees are loyal or ambitious, but whether they can find in their work the combination of security, meaning, and opportunity that enables them to thrive. Japan and the United States, in their different ways, are both working toward this goal.

8. LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources rather than primary empirical research. Direct observation of workplace practices in both countries, interviews with employees and managers, and participatory research would provide valuable additional perspectives. Second, data availability varies between countries. Japan benefits from recent detailed survey research on ikigai and engagement, while United States data draws from multiple sources with varying methodologies. Third, the study focuses on general trends, with less attention to variation across industries, regions, and demographic groups. Fourth, the voice of employees, particularly the 33.8% of Japanese workers in Group D who feel neither contributing nor motivated, is mediated through survey data rather than captured directly. Despite these limitations, the comparative analysis provides valuable insights into employee motivation and cultural values, with implications for both countries and for broader efforts to achieve SDG 8.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the research methodology, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including research reports, survey data, academic articles, and management publications. Primary sources are cited in the bibliography and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or investment advice. Employee motivation frameworks, engagement metrics, and workplace practices are subject to change, and readers should consult current sources for specific information about Japan, the United States, and employee motivation.

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