

Why do people work? Respect trumps money in South Africa case study

October 1 2018, by Christine Jeske



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In South Africa, [more than](#) 50% of working age adults don't have jobs. But is the country asking the right questions when it comes to understanding what drives people's employment-related decisions? Research on unemployment mostly [focuses on](#) getting wages right. But there are also many non-monetary reasons that motivate South Africans'

work-related decisions.

[My research](#), conducted over the period of a year in KwaZulu-Natal province, sought to understand these decisions. My work included interviews and observations with 77 South Africans who were either unemployed, self-employed or earning low [wages](#), as well as owners and managers of 25 businesses.

I found that while pay and profit are not irrelevant in employees' decisions about work, overemphasising monetary factors hid important motivators. Relationships were often a more significant factor than wages for decisions to accept, keep, or quit jobs.

This brings to South Africa questions being asked by researchers in the US, who have found that workers [cared less](#) about pay. Often [labour legislation](#) is focused on wages, and the means of negotiating wages is often so bureaucratic and impersonal that it breaks down relationships.

These findings lead to a new way of thinking about employment that moves beyond minimum wage adjustments, job creation incentives, and skills training for would-be workers. This is important: a simplistic understanding of worker motivations among South African policymakers can produce policies that rely too much on wage manipulation to shape employment outcomes, and management styles that run counter to what keeps workers engaged.

Importance of relationships

Of 77 people I interviewed about work, 39 mentioned quitting a job they disliked. Often people did not offer reasons for leaving jobs; of those who did give reasons, the most common involved relationships.

Fifteen people cited poor treatment by an employer, including five

mentions of racism and one of sexual assault. Eight mentioned coworker problems, including backstabbing, false accusations, and jealousy. Only three people included too little pay as a reason for leaving.

In every case when pay was mentioned, people talked about pay in the context of human valuation:

"I was not paid enough to put myself in that danger."

or

"only the old people will take that kind of pay, because they don't know about the changes happening in the world, and they don't have a [relationship](#) with the boss to speak up."

The factors that job-seekers said influenced their decisions had less to do with wages than with good relationships in the workplace. These factors included their employer's demeanour, workers' inclusion in decision-making and leadership, perceived social distance between employees and employers, and the overall level of trust between employees and employers.

Relationships among coworkers also affected whether employees stayed in jobs. Conflicts often arose because people were promoted to higher positions than others who were seen as having culturally higher status because of age, gender or experience.

For instance, middle-level black managers – especially when young or female – were especially likely to worry about coworker relationships as they navigated a middle place between gaining favour with higher (often white) managers and not "acting above" other employees. Such jealousy and disdain often prompted various forms of mistreatment that could cause people to quit.

Relationships at home were another significant reason affecting employment. The work opportunities available to low-skilled workers often prevented them from spending time with children, partners and parents. This often caused conflict that could lead them to quit.

Relationships at home were often further strained because, as the breadwinner, low wages had to be spread too thinly among dependants. Aside from changing their relationship with relatives, several interviewees spoke of the predicament of needing to earn money while knowing they would keep little of their wages. One interviewee went as far as switching to a lower-paying job because the timing of paydays allowed her to better manage family members' financial requests.

Ideal work situation

People often focused on the word "respect" (*inhlonipho* in isiZulu) when describing ideal work relationships – even in low-wage jobs. Respectful relationships were demonstrated through: rotating all workers into leadership roles, paying a portion of the employees' children's school fees, expressing gratitude, having employees at all levels share lunch rooms, offering training and hiring primarily from the families and acquaintances of current employees. In some cases, they created jobs specifically for relatives of employees, signalling trust.

This is not to say that pay doesn't matter. In listing their reasons for starting [jobs](#), employees nearly always cited pay-related reasons, but the reasons were often tied to shifts in relationships – like the loss of a breadwinning relative. But once in a job, when relationships went badly, money was not enough to keep people in [jobs](#).

In a country with a long history of painful employment experiences systematically delineated along racialised lines, black people have long been treated as holding a lower value, not only as workers but as humans.

This study has shown how dehumanising treatment defies a relational morality that is central to many black people's work-related decisions.

This is a signal to policymakers that measures to improve relationships must be considered – and often these are too little or no cost. These include; flattening institutional hierarchies, building gratitude into workplace routines, improving policies for handling workplace disputes, and otherwise improving trust and communication between managers and employees.

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