

COMMENTARY

## Less stressed minds are creative minds: How basic income can increase employee creativity

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Basic income (BI) may strike some as a utopian concept, but the proposal of standard and consistent government payments to all citizens is gaining more support in recent years all over the world. In their focal article, Hüffmeier and Zacher (2021) discuss important information pertaining to BI, especially as it pertains to the industrial-organizational (I-O) community. Although the article addresses the implications of BI for organizations, such as whether people will continue to work if they receive a BI and how the workplace could potentially change if BI is implemented, this commentary seeks to expand the ideas that are presented by Hüffmeier and Zacher by specifically addressing how the implementation of BI could help increase employee creativity.

Creativity is a valued attribute among employees for particular job fields, especially in our current time where innovation is necessary to maintain a competitive advantage. Although Hüffmeier and Zacher (2021) present the notion that BI may decrease innovation in companies, I make the argument that with proper guidance from educated I-O practitioners, organizations may be able to receive a creativity bump from implementing BI. In particular, by reducing stress among workers, they can receive cognitive freedom to assist with creative thoughts. This commentary begins with a discussion of how BI indirectly relates to increased creativity through stress reduction and ends with guidelines for practitioners hoping to assist organizations.

### Workplace stress and creativity

Workplace stress has been found to have strong negative associations with work abilities, and professional workers are likely to experience tension and time pressure from stress (Yong et al., 2013). A lot of academic interest has been given to occupational stress because of its large potential negative effects on employees and subsequently organizations. Although there are many job characteristics and organizational circumstances that can lead to stress, employees are also likely to experience stress from external factors, such as needing more money to comfortably provide for themselves or their families. For instance, research suggests that low-income married couples tend to experience more psychological distress and lower marital satisfaction than middle-income married couples (Dakin & Wampler, 2008). With BI in addition to a fair salary, organizations can expect their employees to be less stressed and experience subsequent increased positive outcomes in other parts of their lives.

Hüffmeier and Zacher (2021) do assert that BI provides a safety net for those with less financial resources, which can increase creativity and innovation. However, the argument was made that this would mainly benefit self-employed individuals or newly opened companies. This may be true for organizations that primarily motivate their employees with a paycheck, but even if the

necessity for financially compensated work is reduced by implementing BI, organizations can motivate their employees in many other ways. Employees can be motivated by additional, performance-based rewards, managerial recognition, and a culture that values the individual (Milne, 2007). Thus, organizations can motivate their employees to stay committed to their companies even in this lower stress environment where they have the financial freedom to leave. Therefore, rather than taking risks in a new business endeavor on their own or with a new company, they can stay within the organization and provide creative thoughts in house.

Overall, individuals who are less stressed have more cognitive capacity, and in addition to benefiting other areas of performance, this reduction of stress can improve creativity. Meta-analytic findings support the notion that, in general, low-stress environments are better for creativity, and although some stressors can increase creativity, social-evaluative threats and uncontrollability are both negatively related to creative performance (Byron, et al., 2010).

### **Theoretical implications**

For academics, the implementation and reduction of financial stress among employees has several theoretical implications that should be explored. First, even if BI is not implemented, what types of other governmental programs are already in place that can help reduce stress among workers? If there are resources that can provide psychological benefits for employees, their empirical benefits should be explored. Second, because stress has a complex relationship with creativity and innovation, it should continue to be studied in the academic space. If we can understand what types of stressors are motivating rather than hindering, we can further explain the benefits of particular circumstances in a work environment. Last, it is important to explore how stress and creativity relate in different demographic categories. Underprivileged groups (e.g., women, racial minorities, older workers) may be more sensitive to particular stressors that may make other individuals thrive in a creative setting. Diversity on teams is often associated with increased creativity but only under controlled group processes (Mannix & Neale, 2005). Scholars should attempt to understand and explain what factors help ensure that diverse teams can be as beneficial to the creative process as possible, especially when stress is not a significant factor.

### **Practical implications**

With potential BI implementation or similar social structures, it is especially important for practitioners to be prepared to advise organizations in the event of large external changes. Practitioners should advise organizations on various motivation theories and especially identify ones that do not rely solely on fixed financial motivations (e.g., work design theory; goal-setting theory). Organizations may do better to provide bigger but less frequent incentives to make it worth their employees' efforts. However, practitioners should also focus on the stress-reducing effect that BI can have on employees. If employees no longer feel stressed, there needs to be a stronger focus on what else can motivate them to mentally show up and bring their best creative minds to work. Interventions can be designed for organizations that do not already have strong cultures in place and/or need differential ways to motivate their employees. Last, practitioners should focus on diversity and inclusion in the organization, because diverse teams are likely to increase creativity. Once financial necessity to work is gone, employees who feel that they have experienced discrimination or any unfair treatment in the organization are likely to leave. If an organization has an equity problem in their organization, they are unlikely to thrive, let alone survive, in a new societal system.

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