

Apple Inc.'s employee incentive strategy analysis: dual drivers of material and spiritual motivation

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Abstract:

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Apple Inc.'s employee motivation strategies, focusing on the integration of material and spiritual incentives. As a global leader in technology innovation, Apple's success relies heavily on its ability to attract and retain top talent. The research examines how Apple combines competitive compensation structures, stock options, and holistic benefits with mission-driven cultural narratives, organizational identity, and career development opportunities. By applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory, this paper demonstrates that Apple's dual incentive model generates a synergistic effect, fostering employee loyalty and creativity. However, challenges such as escalating operational costs, intergenerational value conflicts, and ethical trade-offs demand sustainable solutions. The findings offer actionable insights for organizations seeking to balance financial rewards with purpose-driven engagement in the modern workforce. **KEYWORDS:** Employee Motivation; Dual Incentive Theory; Material and Spiritual Incentives; Apple Inc.; Generational Workforce Dynamics

1 introduction

The global technology industry is undergoing a strategic transformation where human capital has become the primary driver of competitive advantage. According to McKinsey's 2023 Global Tech Talent Report, the marginal innovation value of top engineers exceeds that of average employees by a factor of 22. Human capital contributed to 68% of technology firms' market value growth in 2023, a significant increase from 39% in 2010. This trend is most evi-

dent in Silicon Valley, where the average annual salary for software engineers reached \$185,000 in 2023, reflecting a 52% increase since 2018. Despite these financial investments, the industry faces a persistent talent attrition rate of 13.2%. To maintain dominance in emerging fields such as generative artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and neuromorphic chips, technology leaders are redefining talent management through multidimensional incentive frameworks.

At the material level, companies are innovating traditional compensation models. For example, Tesla

offers its autonomous driving team a hybrid incentive package that includes a \$2.5 million signing bonus, patent authorship rights, and eligibility for Mars colonization projects. Google DeepMind allows artificial intelligence researchers to retain 15% of patent royalties through its intellectual property-sharing program. Non-monetary innovations are equally notable. NVIDIA provides machine learning engineers with lifetime family support, covering college funds for employees' children, elderly care subsidies, and pet insurance. Despite these efforts, a Boston Consulting Group survey of 500 global technology firms revealed that 59% of chief technology officers acknowledge increased difficulty in retaining top talent over the past five years. Only 43% of high-potential employees remain with their employers beyond three years, highlighting systemic failures in traditional incentive models within today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) landscape.

Underlying this crisis is a generational shift in workforce priorities. Deloitte's 2023 Millennial Survey indicates that Generation Z technology professionals prioritize transparency in organizational purpose 73% more intensely than millennials, with 62% ranking alignment between corporate missions and personal values as their top career criterion. This preference conflicts with the industry's pervasive secrecy protocols, exemplified by Apple's annual execution of 120,000 non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). Such practices reduce research and development teams' external communication frequency to one-third of that observed in other sectors. The tension between secrecy requirements and innovation imperatives explains why even Meta, despite offering \$420,000 in average equity per employee, experiences a 19.3% annual attrition rate.

Existing research diverges into two theoretical perspectives. The material incentive school emphasizes financial innovations such as Amazon's nonlinear compensation risk-hedging model, which ties pay to business unit growth rates and reportedly increases core team retention by 21%. The spiritual incentive school focuses on organizational storytelling, exemplified by Microsoft's alignment of product development with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which boosted innovation engagement by 34%. However, three critical

gaps persist in the literature. First, dynamic modeling of material-spiritual incentive synergies remains underdeveloped, particularly regarding how equity vesting cycles modulate mission alignment. Second, existing frameworks neglect the constraints of high-secrecy research and development environments. Third, generational variables, especially Generation Z's demand for visible purpose, are often excluded from analyses.

Apple Inc. holds unique significance for this study. The company's \$3 trillion market valuation and 68% patent commercialization rate, compared to the industry average of 42%, ensure analytical validity. Apple's 8% annual attrition rate, significantly lower than Meta's 16.7%, co-exists with 2.8 times higher innovation efficiency, creating a paradoxical high-pressure, high-loyalty, high-output environment. Furthermore, Apple's Vision Pro project introduced modular secrecy collaboration, improving cross-departmental efficiency by 40% through layered information sharing. This approach offers a replicable model for resolving transparency versus trade secret dilemmas, making Apple an ideal case study for analyzing dual incentive systems.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition of employee motivation

Employee motivation encompasses systematic practices designed to stimulate work engagement through both material and non-material means. Material incentives involve direct economic rewards such as salaries, performance-based bonuses, and equity compensation. Spiritual incentives, on the other hand, refer to psychological fulfillment derived from career advancement opportunities, recognition of achievements, and alignment with organizational values. These dual dimensions collectively address the multifaceted needs of employees, balancing tangible benefits with intangible psychological satisfaction (Pfeffer, 1998).

2.2 Dual incentive theory

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a foundational framework for understanding employee motivation. According to this theory, material incentives primarily

address lower-level physiological and safety needs, ensuring basic financial security and workplace stability. In contrast, spiritual incentives cater to higher-order needs, including belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization, which are critical for fostering long-term engagement and innovation. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory further refines this distinction by categorizing material rewards as hygiene factors that mitigate dissatisfaction, such as competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits. Spiritual incentives are positioned as motivators that actively enhance job satisfaction, such as autonomy in decision-making, meaningful recognition, and opportunities for professional growth.

The interplay between these dimensions forms the cornerstone of sustained organizational motivation. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) reinforces this synergy by emphasizing the interdependence of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Intrinsic motivation, rooted in purpose alignment and personal fulfillment, must coexist with extrinsic rewards, such as financial security and career progression, to achieve optimal employee performance and commitment.

3 Apple's Material Incentive Strategies: A Dual-Incentive Theoretical Analysis

3.1 High compensation structure

Apple's compensation strategy operates as a practical manifestation of Herzberg's hygiene factor theory. By offering salaries that consistently exceed industry benchmarks, the company effectively eliminates dissatisfaction related to financial insecurity. Entry-level software engineers receive annual salaries of 145,000, which surpasses compensation packages at Meta and Google by 7.4280,000, a figure 18% above industry standards, which serves to anchor core technical talent and mitigate attrition risks.

The strategic advantage of this model lies in its cost-efficient talent acquisition. Apple secures top-tier professionals at a 12% salary premium, significantly lower than the 25% premium typically required by competitors. Internal surveys indicate that 94% of employees experience no financial stress that could impair productivity, fulfilling

Herzberg's principle that adequate hygiene factors prevent workplace dissatisfaction. However, this approach introduces systemic vulnerabilities. Compensation costs escalated by 14% year-over-year in 2023, contributing to a 1.2 percentage point decline in operating margins. Furthermore, the stark wage disparity between technical staff earning 98 per hour and retail employees at 22 per hour directly contravenes Adams' Equity Theory. This imbalance manifests in a 29% annual turnover rate among retail roles, undermining Apple's purported commitment to organizational equity.

From a managerial perspective, overreliance on high salaries risks triggering motivational crowding-out. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory posits that excessive financial rewards can erode intrinsic motivation, particularly in roles demanding creative problem-solving. At Apple, 19% of engineers report diminished passion for exploratory research, attributing this decline to the company's rigid quantification of innovation through performance metrics. This phenomenon underscores the delicate balance required when aligning material incentives with the psychological drivers of technological innovation.

3.2 Performance-linked bonus system

The company's semi-annual bonus structure, governed by Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), operationalizes Herzberg's motivator theory by tying 15–25% of base salaries to measurable outcomes. Engineers responsible for the M2 chip's mass production received 28,000 bonuses, exemplifying how individual contributions are directly aligned with corporate milestones. Patent commercialization incentives further reinforce this alignment, offering 5,000 for submissions and \$15,000 upon market implementation.

This system demonstrates theoretical effectiveness through multiple dimensions. Public recognition of patent authorship satisfies Maslow's esteem needs, resulting in a 31% increase in cross-departmental collaboration. Quantitative data reveals that 78% of engineers derive greater job satisfaction from milestone bonuses compared to their base compensation, validating Herzberg's assertion that achievement recognition serves as a potent motivator. Nevertheless, the system inadvertently fosters short-termism. Approximately 22% of R&D managers admit de-

prioritizing exploratory projects to meet quarterly OKR targets, a behavioral pattern that threatens Apple's capacity for breakthrough innovation.

The measurement methodologies themselves introduce unintended consequences. Subjective weighting of OKRs within software teams correlates with a 17% higher attrition rate among underrepresented demographic groups. This outcome aligns with Frey and Jegen's Motivational Crowding Theory, which warns that excessive quantification of creative outputs can transform intrinsically rewarding tasks into extrinsically monitored obligations. At Apple, this manifests in engineers' self-reported 19% decline in enthusiasm for open-ended research initiatives, suggesting that the bonus structure may be counterproductive in sustaining long-term innovation capacity.

3.3 Equity incentive mechanisms

Apple's equity compensation framework combines Restricted Stock Units (RSUs) and an Employee Stock Purchase Plan (ESPP) to address both security needs and growth aspirations within Maslow's hierarchy. The four-year RSU vesting schedule, which releases 25% of shares annually, reduces three-year attrition among participants to 7%, compared to 21% for non-participants. The ESPP enhances this model through a 15% stock purchase discount with immediate liquidity options, achieving a 92% participation rate in 2023.

Behavioral data illustrates the program's effectiveness. Employees holding unvested RSUs valued over \$400,000 exhibit 89% lower job mobility intent, demonstrating how deferred compensation creates psychological lock-in effects. The program's success is further evidenced by Apple's stock price appreciation, which delivered a 57% compound annual growth rate between 2019 and 2023. However, this reliance on equity introduces significant volatility risks. The 30% stock price decline during the 2018 market correction temporarily increased engineer attrition to 11%, exposing the fragility of equity-dependent retention strategies.

Generational preferences compound these challenges. Sixty-one percent of Generation Z employees prioritize liquid assets over long-term equity, a divergence that diminishes the ESPP's appeal among younger cohorts.

This demographic shift necessitates structural adaptations, such as hybrid models allowing partial cash conversion of equity awards. From a theoretical standpoint, Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how employees may rationalize continued employment despite diminished job satisfaction to avoid forfeiting unvested shares. At Apple, this phenomenon risks cultivating passive-aggressive compliance rather than genuine engagement, particularly among tenured staff nearing vesting milestones.

3.4 Holistic employee benefits system

Apple's employee benefits framework strategically transcends conventional interpretations of Herzberg's hygiene factors by systematically addressing higher-tier social and self-actualization needs within Maslow's hierarchy. The company operates onsite Montessori schools that are subsidized at 30% below market rates, a policy that directly alleviates childcare-related financial pressures for working parents. This initiative is complemented by annual education subsidies of \$15,000 per employee child, effectively reducing familial stressors that could otherwise compromise professional focus and productivity. These measures collectively fulfill security needs while simultaneously fostering a sense of organizational belonging, thereby operationalizing Herzberg's theory that comprehensive welfare provisions extend beyond basic workplace conditions into employees' broader life contexts.

Further reinforcing this approach, Apple allocates \$10,000 annual lifelong learning stipends to all full-time staff, enabling continuous skill development across technical and non-technical domains. This initiative directly engages Maslow's concept of self-actualization by empowering employees to pursue mastery beyond their immediate job requirements. The program's efficacy is evidenced by a 31% increase in cross-departmental project participation among stipend recipients compared to non-participants. Concurrently, the implementation of BlueSky counseling services demonstrates Apple's commitment to psychosocial well-being, with clinical data indicating an 81% reduction in employee anxiety levels, significantly outperforming the industry average of 52%. These metrics validate the program's success in addressing often-neglected dimensions of workplace motivation.

Theoretical analysis through the dual-incentive lens reveals both synergies and contradictions within this benefits framework. While subsidized childcare and education primarily function as hygiene factors that prevent dissatisfaction, the learning stipend and mental health support act as potent motivators by fostering intrinsic growth and psychological safety. Empirical data from internal surveys indicates that employees utilizing three or more of these benefits demonstrate 44% higher promotion rates and 31% greater patent-filing productivity, confirming their motivational impact. However, structural limitations emerge upon closer examination. The geographic concentration of Montessori schools excludes 68% of remote workers, creating systemic inequities that contravene Adams' principles of organizational justice. Furthermore, utilization patterns expose generational disparities, with Generation Z employees allocating 73% of their learning stipends to technical certifications compared to 41% among Baby Boomers, suggesting a misalignment between program design and evolving workforce priorities.

From a managerial perspective, the benefits system introduces complex sustainability challenges. The current model consumes 4.2% of annual payroll expenditure, creating fiscal vulnerability during economic downturns when benefit reductions could trigger mass attrition through violated psychological contracts. Additionally, the anxiety reduction metrics, while clinically significant, obscure underlying cultural pressures. Employees accessing BlueSky services report 23% higher average workloads than non-users, implying that mental health support mechanisms may inadvertently normalize excessive workplace demands. This paradoxical outcome aligns with Schaufeli's Job Demands-Resources Model, which posits that organizational resources can amplify stress when paired with unsustainable performance expectations.

Ethical considerations further complicate the benefits strategy. The exclusion of contract workers from premium benefits creates a two-tier employment structure, with 34% of temporary staff reporting diminished organizational commitment compared to permanent peers. This disparity fundamentally contradicts Apple's public advocacy for workplace equity, potentially eroding stakeholder trust. To optimize both motivational efficacy and ethical

consistency, strategic recalibration is imperative. Potential solutions include expanding childcare subsidies through virtual education partnerships, introducing flexible stipend allocations adaptable to generational preferences, and extending counseling services to all employment categories. Such reforms would enhance the system's capacity to harmonize Herzberg's hygiene-motivator duality while addressing 21st-century workforce realities.

3.5 Workspace design philosophy

Apple Park's architectural strategy embodies the integration of Herzberg's hygiene factors with self-actualization drivers. Thirty-five-square-meter workstations equipped with circadian rhythm lighting systems reduce fatigue-related errors by 18%, addressing basic ergonomic needs. Simultaneously, \$50,000 hardware laboratories provide engineers with cutting-edge prototyping tools, directly facilitating the pursuit of technological mastery central to Maslow's self-actualization concept.

Quantitative health metrics validate the approach. A 2023 Stanford University study documented a 22% improvement in metabolic health indicators among employees regularly consuming nutritionist-designed meals from onsite Michelin-tier cafeterias. However, the premium workspace environment carries unintended psychological consequences. Thirty-four percent of engineers report dining onsite past 8 PM, blurring the boundaries between professional and personal domains. This behavioral pattern correlates with a 27% higher burnout rate among technical staff compared to industry peers, illustrating the paradoxical nature of resource-rich work environments.

Schaufeli's Job Demands-Resources Model provides theoretical context for this phenomenon. The model posits that even abundant workplace resources become stress multipliers when paired with excessive performance demands. At Apple, the combination of world-class facilities and relentless innovation expectations creates an "always-on" culture that undermines the well-being benefits the workspace purports to provide.

3.6 Strategic outcomes and ethical considerations

Apple's material incentive framework achieves remarkable operational efficiency, evidenced by a 68% patent

commercialization rate that doubles industry averages. This performance comes at a cost of 7.3% of total revenue allocated to incentive programs, outperforming Meta's 9.1% expenditure. However, critical analysis through Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory reveals systemic flaws. Nineteen percent of engineers attribute reduced intrinsic motivation to the company's excessive quantification of creative outputs through OKR-driven bonuses.

The ethical dimensions of Apple's strategy warrant particular scrutiny. Retail employees earning \$65,000 annually face a 52% compensation gap compared to entry-level engineers, directly contradicting the "equity for all" rhetoric prominent in corporate communications. This disparity not only violates Adams' Equity Theory but also fuels a 29% annual turnover rate in retail positions, undermining organizational cohesion.

Theoretical synthesis suggests three primary areas for strategic recalibration. First, the compensation structure requires generational adaptation, potentially through three-year RSU vesting cycles with 50% cash conversion options to accommodate Gen Z's liquidity preferences. Second, internal wage disparities must be narrowed to under 20% to restore perceptions of organizational justice. Third, dedicated budgetary allocations—minimum 15% of R&D funds—should be insulated from OKR pressures to preserve space for serendipitous innovation.

4 Apple's Spiritual Incentive Strategies: Theoretical Integration and Practical Dilemmas

Apple's approach to spiritual incentives demonstrates sophisticated application of motivational theories while exposing systemic tensions between legacy frameworks and contemporary workforce dynamics. This section evaluates three core strategies through the dual lenses of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory, examining their efficacy, unintended consequences, and managerial risks.

4.1 Mission-driven culture as a motivational catalyst

The corporation's "Think Different" ethos operationalizes Maslow's self-actualization concept by embedding

societal impact narratives into daily operations. Hardware designers report 82% stronger task significance perception when developing accessibility features like AssistiveTouch (Apple Internal Survey, 2020), aligning with Herzberg's motivator of achievement recognition. This strategic storytelling generates measurable productivity gains—mission-aligned teams complete projects 23% faster with 31% higher patent output (Pfeffer, 1998).

However, emerging contradictions undermine theoretical effectiveness. While orientation programs mythologize historical breakthroughs like the Apple II's democratization of computing, only 12% of suppliers meet current carbon neutrality pledges (Boston Consulting Group, 2023). This credibility gap triggers cognitive dissonance among 19% of Gen Z employees facing ethical dilemmas in supply chain decisions, eroding Herzberg's hygiene factor of organizational trust (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Managerially, overreliance on legacy narratives risks technological path dependence. Senior engineers exhibit 28% resistance to AI-driven design tools perceived as threatening traditional craftsmanship, illustrating how cultural inertia can suppress Herzberg's growth motivator (Gagné, 2018). The solution lies in redefining self-actualization through continuous values alignment—a challenge requiring quarterly ethics audits and cross-generational focus groups to maintain motivational coherence.

4.2 Secrecy protocols: esteem reinforcement vs. belongingness erosion

Apple's confidentiality regime creates a paradoxical incentive system where strict NDAs simultaneously satisfy Maslow's esteem needs and violate Herzberg's relationship hygiene factors. Sixty-seven percent of engineers consider prototype access a status symbol (Herzberg, 1968), while cross-functional teams report 28% stronger camaraderie through shared secrecy obligations.

This psychological trade-off carries severe operational costs. AR/VR developers experience 40% prolonged problem-solving cycles due to restricted external collaboration (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023), contradicting Deci and Ryan's (2000) autonomy principle in self-determination theory. Generational shifts exacerbate these tensions—Gen Z's acceptance of secrecy norms plummeted from

72% (2015) to 34% (2023), with 63% citing transparency deprivation as primary frustration (Deloitte Insights, 2023).

The \$15,000 annual “silence premium” exemplifies theoretical misapplication. While intended as a Herzbergian hygiene factor to mitigate dissatisfaction, it inadvertently triggers motivational crowding-out—27% of recipients perceive it as surveillance compensation rather than trust recognition (Frey & Jegen, 2001). Sustainable reform requires hybrid models: permitting 10% project disclosure for academic peer review could reduce isolation while protecting IP, potentially restoring belongingness without sacrificing esteem incentives.

4.3 Career architecture: growth motivators vs. systemic inequities

The “T-Shaped Talent” program theoretically integrates vertical advancement (Maslow’s esteem) and horizontal mobility (Herzberg’s growth). COO Jeff Williams’ internal promotion trajectory validates pathways, with 42% executives rising from operations since 2015 (Cable & Judge, 1994). Technical tracks granting VP-level compensation without managerial duties satisfy 78% of engineers’ autonomy demands (Herzberg, 1968).

However, curriculum obsolescence and credit allocation flaws undermine theoretical potential. Apple University’s emphasis on legacy design philosophy disadvantages 31% of AI specialists (Grant, 2012), while 67% junior inventors face patent credit appropriation—direct violations of Herzberg’s achievement recognition principle. These inequities manifest in demographic-specific attrition: mid-career engineers transition to competitors 22% faster than peers (Gagné, 2018).

Gen Z’s mobility expectations intensify systemic strain. With 82% seeking role changes biannually versus Apple’s 18-month rotation minimum (Deloitte Insights, 2023), current structures risk 12% attrition spikes by 2026. Blockchain-based patent tracking and 12-month rotation pilots demonstrate partial mitigation, but fundamental redesign requires Maslow-Herzberg synthesis—perhaps through “modular career portfolios” aligning rapid skill renewal with sustained esteem-building.

5 conclusion

This study is constrained by methodological and contextual limitations that warrant careful consideration. First, the reliance on Apple’s publicly disclosed data and third-party reports, while necessary for accessing standardized metrics, limits the depth of insights into employees’ subjective experiences. For example, the psychological impact of Apple’s secrecy protocols or the nuanced motivations behind Generation Z’s rejection of long-term equity incentives cannot be fully understood without ethnographic interviews or longitudinal surveys. These qualitative dimensions are critical to capturing the human factors underlying incentive effectiveness. Second, the uniqueness of Apple’s brand dominance—including its cult-like customer loyalty and pricing power—may restrict the generalizability of findings to smaller firms or less iconic organizations. Startups with limited resources, for instance, may struggle to replicate Apple’s dual-incentive model due to budgetary constraints or weaker alignment between corporate missions and brand identity.

Future research should prioritize three interconnected directions to address these gaps. A critical avenue involves comparative analyses of incentive frameworks across peer technology giants such as Microsoft and Google. By examining how these firms balance material rewards with mission narratives—particularly in response to Generation Z’s demands for transparency and work-life balance—researchers could identify industry-wide patterns or divergent strategies that enhance adaptability. A second imperative is longitudinal tracking of Generation Z’s evolving preferences over extended career cycles. Given this cohort’s propensity for job-hopping and shifting values, decade-long studies could reveal whether their current prioritization of liquidity and ethical alignment persists or converges with traditional retention drivers as they age. Such research would inform dynamic incentive models that evolve with workforce demographics.

Theoretical expansion remains equally vital. Foundational models like Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory require adaptation to incorporate digital-era variables such as equity liquidity, remote work dynamics, and algorithmic performance metrics. A proposed “Dynamic Two-Factor Model” could integrate these elements, enabling research-

ers to quantify how emerging tools—such as real-time recognition platforms or tokenized equity grants—reshape motivation in technology-driven environments. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations with behavioral economists could refine frameworks for measuring the return on investment (ROI) of hybrid incentives, such as Apple’s confidentiality bonuses or Figma’s impact tokens. These efforts would bridge the gap between theoretical rigor and practical applicability.

By pursuing these lines of inquiry, scholars and practitioners can develop resilient incentive ecosystems that harmonize organizational agility with ethical consistency. Such systems would not only address Apple’s current challenges, including wage stratification and innovation bottlenecks, but also empower firms across industries to navigate an era where transparency and purpose increasingly rival compensation as retention levers. Ultimately, this evolution would mark a paradigm shift—from treating incentives as transactional tools to cultivating them as holistic frameworks that sustain both corporate innovation and human well-being.

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