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An Analysis of Factors Affecting Frontline Employee Motivation in the Nankang Furniture Sector

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Abstract

This study examines the Nankang furniture industry in Jiangxi Province, using stratified random sampling to collect data from 395 frontline production workers across 15 large-scale enterprises. It systematically investigates the influence of demographic variables, economic-occupational factors, and personality traits on job motivation. The results indicate that: (1) Age, gender, marital status, and education level significantly affect job motivation, with married employees and those in the 26-30 age group demonstrating higher motivation levels; (2) Individual and household annual income are important economic factors influencing job motivation, exhibiting a non-linear relationship; (3) Among the Big Five personality traits, conscientiousness and extraversion have the strongest positive effects on job motivation, while neuroticism shows a significant negative impact. This research fills an empirical gap in understanding motivation formation mechanisms among frontline workers in county-level specialized industrial clusters, providing theoretical foundations and practical implications for furniture manufacturing enterprises to implement differentiated incentive strategies and enhance human resource management.

Keywords: Job Motivation, Nankang Furniture Industry, Frontline Production Employees, Demographic Variables, Economic-Occupational Variables, Personality Traits

Introduction

Research Background and Significance

The Nankang furniture industry, as a typical representative of China's labor-intensive manufacturing sector, relies heavily on frontline production workers whose motivation directly affects production efficiency and sustainable development. According to the "Outline

of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035," promoting high-quality development in manufacturing is a core task in building a manufacturing powerhouse. However, China's labor-intensive manufacturing industries continue to face challenges of low profit margins and dependence on low-skilled labor, with motivation issues among frontline employees in the Nankang furniture industry being particularly prominent. Despite frontline employees being the core force in value creation, existing research has predominantly focused on knowledge workers and management, with insufficient attention paid to this group. Under the influence of traditional management thinking, enterprises often rely on singular economic incentive measures, neglecting employees' intrinsic needs and individual differences, resulting in limited motivational effectiveness.

Frontline employees in the Nankang furniture industry generally face issues such as high labor intensity, monotonous work environments, and limited promotion opportunities, which significantly reduce their work and life satisfaction, thereby weakening job motivation. As a key factor affecting employee performance, job motivation has a complex formation mechanism involving demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, education level), economic-occupational variables (e.g., income, tenure), and personality traits (e.g., the Big Five personality traits) (Judge et al., 2001). However, systematic analysis of how these three types of variables jointly influence the job motivation of frontline employees remains insufficient in existing research. Therefore, this study, set against the backdrop of the Nankang furniture industry and focusing on frontline employees, explores the impact of demographic, economic-occupational variables, and personality traits on job motivation. This not only helps fill academic gaps but also provides theoretical foundations for enterprises to formulate differentiated incentive strategies.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to systematically explore key factors influencing job motivation among frontline production employees in the Nankang furniture industry, with particular focus on analyzing the mechanisms through which demographic characteristics, economic-occupational variables, and personality traits affect motivation levels. By constructing a multi-level analytical framework, this research seeks to answer the following questions: first, whether demographic variables such as gender, age, marital status, education level, and number of children significantly impact employee motivation; second, the extent to which spouse employment status, income level, and job tenure as economic-occupational backgrounds influence motivation; and third, whether personality dimensions including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness can effectively predict individual motivational differences. This research expects to empirically validate three hypotheses: that demographic variables, economic-occupational variables, and personality traits all have significant effects on job motivation, thereby providing theoretical support and practical reference for manufacturing enterprises to formulate more targeted human resource management strategies.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations and Research Progress on Job Motivation

job motivation is a crucial area of study in organizational behavior, with numerous classic theories providing rich interpretive frameworks. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's

two-factor theory, and McClelland's achievement motivation theory each reveal the basic composition of human motivation from different perspectives. Modern motivation theories such as Vroom's expectancy theory, Adams' equity theory, Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, and Locke and Latham's goal-setting theory further emphasize the roles of cognitive assessment, subjective perception, and goal setting in driving behavior. In manufacturing contexts, the formation of employee motivation is influenced not only by internal psychological mechanisms but also by job characteristics and organizational environment. Related research indicates that frontline employees often prioritize income, job stability, and life security, challenging the applicability of traditional incentive approaches for this group. Therefore, it is necessary to construct multidimensional motivation analysis models that consider industry-specific characteristics.

Influence Mechanisms of Demographic Variables

Demographic variables have complex and significant impacts on the job motivation of manufacturing employees. Gender differences exist in motivational preferences, with women valuing interpersonal relationships and recognition more, while men place greater emphasis on material rewards (Lašáková et al., 2023). Age affects motivation sources, with Wu et al. (2020) finding that younger employees prioritize compensation and promotion, while middle-aged employees focus more on work meaning and stability. Marital status is also a key factor, with Meng and Yang (2023) pointing out that married employees demonstrate significantly higher job motivation than unmarried employees. Educational level influences motivation types, with higher-educated individuals emphasizing autonomy and growth opportunities more strongly (Mat et al., 2017). Additionally, employees with childcare responsibilities are more easily driven by economic incentives due to family obligations (Nur Utomo et al., 2023). These differences indicate that enterprises should implement precise incentive mechanisms tailored to employees' demographic characteristics in order to effectively enhance job motivation and organizational performance.

Mechanisms of Economic-Occupational Variables

Economic and occupational variables also significantly impact the job motivation of manufacturing employees. The employment status of both spouses influences employees' emphasis on job stability and development, with dual-career employees focusing more on growth and work-life balance (Mura et al., 2021). Income level affects motivation differently across various age groups and career stages; low-income groups prioritize salary, while higher-income individuals tend toward intrinsic motivation (Tuo et al., 2024). Factory tenure shows an inverted U-shaped relationship with motivation, as long-term employment without growth opportunities can lead to burnout (Wu et al., 2020). Industry experience also exhibits non-linear characteristics, with motivation peaking at 5-10 years of experience and declining after 15 years, moderated by personality and industry type (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Mazzetti et al., 2023). Enterprises need to design precise incentive strategies that consider employees' economic backgrounds and career stages.

Differential Influence of Personality Traits

The Big Five personality traits theory provides a powerful tool for understanding individual differences in job motivation. In labor-intensive environments like the Nankang furniture industry, conscientiousness correlates most strongly with job motivation among the Big Five traits; highly conscientious individuals possess strong goal orientation and execution

capabilities, easily deriving intrinsic motivation from task completion (Huo & Jiang, 2021). Highly conscientious employees maintain stable quality output even in repetitive work, which aligns with the predictions regarding personality trait influences in hypothesis H3 of this study. Extraverted employees tend to gain motivation from social interaction and team recognition, with their motivation more dependent on organizational climate and interpersonal relationships (Brandt et al., 2021). Individuals high in openness maintain curiosity and exploratory interest in new tasks, demonstrating stronger motivation in challenging positions, while employees with high agreeableness prefer harmonious environments and are easily driven by team recognition but respond less strongly to performance-oriented incentives. Neurotic employees, due to emotional instability, more easily experience decreased motivation from negative experiences (Sowunmi, 2022). Additionally, personality traits can moderate the relationship between satisfaction and motivation; highly conscientious employees effectively convert job satisfaction into sustained motivation, while highly neurotic individuals are easily disrupted by negative emotions. These research findings provide a theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis of the moderating effects of personality traits.

Research Gaps and Contributions of This Study

This research focuses on factors influencing job motivation among frontline employees in the Nankang furniture industry, aiming to explore in depth the formation mechanisms of job motivation in this specific group. Existing research has three limitations that urgently need addressing: first, there is a scarcity of research targeting frontline employees in county-level specialized industrial clusters (such as the Nankang furniture industry); second, there is a lack of in-depth discussion on the synergistic mechanisms of demographic characteristics, economic-occupational variables, and personality traits; third, empirical research specifically focusing on frontline employees in traditional labor-intensive industries like furniture manufacturing is notably insufficient. By constructing a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates these three types of variables, this study systematically examines the influencing factors and mechanisms affecting job motivation among frontline employees in the Nankang furniture industry. This not only helps deepen the understanding of employee motivation patterns in labor-intensive industries but also provides theoretical support for human resource management practices in the context of industrial transformation and upgrading. The findings will provide empirical evidence for formulating employee incentive strategies suited to the characteristics of county-level industrial clusters while offering new research perspectives for the sustainable development of traditional manufacturing industries.

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Research Method

This study employed stratified random sampling to select participants from 15 provincial-scale furniture enterprises across Jingba Town, Dongshan Street, Longling Town, and Longhui Town in the Nankang furniture industrial cluster of Jiangxi Province. Based on production processes (such as cutting, edge banding, drilling, etc.), 2-3 frontline production employees were randomly selected from each process. A total of 480 questionnaires were distributed, with 395 valid questionnaires ultimately recovered, meeting the sample size calculation standards of Krejcie & Morgan (1970) (confidence level 95%, margin of error 5%). Data

collection was conducted through electronic questionnaires designed to cover demographic variables, economic-occupational variables, job motivation (IMI scale), and personality traits (IPIP-NEO50), comprising 86 items with an estimated completion time of 15-20 minutes. Research assistants provided on-site guidance for respondents to answer independently, excluding management personnel from participation to reduce bias.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software. First, descriptive statistics analyzed the mean and standard deviation of each variable, with mean line graphs describing motivation levels. Second, inferential statistics employed one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the impact of demographic variables (such as age), economic-occupational variables (such as income), and personality trait dimensions on job motivation (JM), while independent samples t-tests analyzed significant differences in JM across dichotomous variables (such as gender, marital status). Additionally, multiple regression analysis was used with JM as the dependent variable to screen for significant predictors, with testing criteria including significance level $p < 0.05$ and variance inflation factor VIF < 5 to avoid multicollinearity.

Reliability tests showed Cronbach's α values greater than 0.7 for all scales, meeting reliability standards. Regarding validity, content validity was ensured through expert review of item accuracy, with factor loadings for each dimension exceeding 0.7. Furthermore, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, performing KMO tests (>0.6) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p<0.05$) to verify the reasonableness of the questionnaire's factor structure. This study adhered to ethical standards, with all data processed anonymously and informed consent obtained from participants. Due to the cross-sectional research design, this study cannot infer causal relationships, and since the sample is limited to the Nankang furniture industry, caution is needed when generalizing the research conclusions.

Research Results and Analysis

Analysis of the Impact of Demographic Variables on Job Motivation

The results indicate significant differences in job motivation among frontline production employees in the Nankang furniture industry across multiple demographic variables. Age significantly impacts job motivation ($F(7, 387) = 4.643$, $p < 0.05$), with the 26-30 age group showing the highest job motivation, the 21-25 age group the lowest, and employees over 51 years old exhibiting a rising trend in motivation levels. Gender also significantly influences job motivation, with males ($M = 4.0322$) showing significantly higher job motivation than females ($M = 3.8928$) ($t(393) = 2.192$, $p = 0.029$). Marital status similarly has a significant effect on job motivation ($F(1, 393) = 5.179$, $p = 0.023$), with married employees demonstrating higher job motivation than unmarried employees. Education level is also significantly associated with job motivation ($F(4, 390) = 3.198$, $p = 0.013$), though the relationship is not linear: employees with primary and high school/vocational education exhibit higher job motivation, while those with middle school and undergraduate education show relatively lower motivation. This may reflect differences between career expectations and actual working conditions across employees with different educational backgrounds. Notably, the number of children being raised did not have a statistically significant impact on job motivation ($F(3, 391) = 0.958$, $p = 0.413$), indicating that family support burdens are not a key factor affecting job motivation among Nankang furniture industry workers.

These findings have important implications for human resource management in the Nankang furniture industry. Enterprises should consider factors such as employee age, gender, marital status, and educational background when formulating incentive policies, adopting differentiated motivational measures to improve employee job motivation and production efficiency.

Table 1
Summary of Job Motivation Based on Demographic Variables

Demographic Variable	Statistical Value	df	F/t Value	Sig.(p)
Age	Between Groups Sum of Squares=10.747 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=127.962 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(7, 387)	4.643	0.000*
Gender	Male Mean=4.0322, SD=0.57502 ; Female Mean=3.8928, SD=0.62203	t(393)	2.192	0.029*
Marital Status	Between Groups Sum of Squares=1.804 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=136.905 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(1, 393)	5.179	0.023*
Level of Education	Between Groups Sum of Squares=4.405 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=134.304 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(4, 390)	3.198	0.013*
Number of Dependent Children	Between Groups Sum of Squares=1.012 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=137.697 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(3, 391)	0.958	0.413

Note: *Significant value p<.05

Analysis of the Impact of Economic-Occupational Variables on Job Motivation
The research shows that economic variables have a significant impact on the job motivation of frontline production employees in the Nankang furniture industry, while the influence of occupational variables is not significant. Individual annual income significantly affects job motivation ($F(5, 389) = 2.636$, $p = 0.023$), with income level and job motivation generally showing a positive correlation, reflecting the sensitivity of frontline employees in the Nankang furniture manufacturing industry to material incentives. Notably, there is a temporary decline in job motivation within the 120K-150K RMB income range, followed by a rebound among groups with incomes above 150K RMB, which may be related to the work responsibilities and pressures of high-income employees.

Household annual income also significantly influences job motivation ($F(3, 391) = 5.212$, $p = 0.002$), exhibiting a non-linear relationship: the job motivation of low-income families (10K-30K) is highest, possibly driven by basic survival needs; middle-income families (60K-150K) also show relatively high job motivation, reflecting the positive attitude of this segment of Nankang furniture industry workers in maintaining family living standards.

The research indicates that the employment status of both spouses does not have a significant impact on job motivation ($F(3, 391) = 1.995$, $p = 0.114$), suggesting no significant difference in

job motivation between dual-career households and single-earner households among Nankang furniture industry workers. Similarly, the effects of current factory tenure (F(4, 390) = 1.701, p = 0.149) and years of experience in the furniture industry (F(3, 391) = 1.954, p = 0.120) on job motivation are also not significant, meaning that in the Nankang furniture industry, the accumulation of work experience has not translated into higher job motivation.

Table 2
Summary of Job Motivation Based on Economic and Occupational Variables

Economic/Occupational Variable	Statistical Value	df	F Value	Sig.(p)
Employment Status of the Couple	Between Groups Sum of Squares=2.092 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=136.617 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(3, 391)	1.995	0.114
Personal Annual Income	Between Groups Sum of Squares=4.546 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=134.163 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(5, 389)	2.636	0.023*
Annual Household Income	Between Groups Sum of Squares=5.333 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=133.375 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(3, 391)	5.212	0.002*
Years of Working in Current Factory	Between Groups Sum of Squares=2.379 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=136.33 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(4, 390)	1.701	0.149
Years of Experience in the Furniture Industry	Between Groups Sum of Squares=2.049 ; Within Groups Sum of Squares=136.66 ; Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(3, 391)	1.954	0.12

Note: *Significant value p<.05

Analysis of the Impact of Personality Traits on Job Motivation
Research results indicate that all five dimensions of personality traits among frontline production employees in the Nankang furniture industry significantly impact job motivation, though with distinct patterns of influence.

Neuroticism demonstrates a negative impact on job motivation ($F(2, 392) = 8.985$, $p < 0.001$). Employees with low and moderate levels of neuroticism exhibit similar job motivation, while those with high neuroticism show significantly decreased job motivation. This suggests that higher neuroticism traits are more likely to lead to reduced job motivation among Nankang furniture industry workers, possibly because such employees more easily develop negative emotions and anxiety when facing work pressure and challenges, thereby affecting their work enthusiasm.

Extraversion shows a clear positive correlation with job motivation ($F(2, 392) = 31.650$, $p < 0.001$), displaying a gradient change: employees with high extraversion demonstrate significantly higher job motivation than those with moderate extraversion, who in turn show significantly higher motivation than those with low extraversion. This indicates that in the

Nankang furniture industry environment, outgoing employees with strong social skills more easily maintain higher job motivation.

Openness also has a significant impact on job motivation ($F(2, 392) = 10.424$, $p < 0.001$), though significant differences exist only between employees with high openness and those with moderate openness, with no significant differences between the low openness group and the other two groups. This suggests that employees with highly open attitudes toward new experiences demonstrate stronger job motivation in the Nankang furniture industry.

The influence of agreeableness on job motivation also reaches significant levels ($F(2, 392) = 8.558$, $p < 0.001$), with employees high in agreeableness showing significantly higher job motivation than those with low and moderate agreeableness, between whom no significant differences exist. This reflects that in the Nankang furniture industry environment, which requires teamwork, employees with harmonious interpersonal relationships and strong cooperative abilities often maintain higher job motivation.

Conscientiousness has the most significant impact on job motivation ($F(2, 392) = 39.154$, $p < 0.001$), with highly conscientious employees demonstrating significantly higher job motivation than those with moderate and low conscientiousness, between whom no significant differences exist. This indicates that workers who are rigorous, responsible, detail-oriented, and self-disciplined exhibit higher job motivation and engagement in the Nankang furniture industry.

Table 3
Summary of Job Motivation Based on Personality Characteristics Dimensions

Personality Characteristic	Statistical Value	df	F Value	Sig.(p)
Neuroticism	Between Groups Sum of Squares=6.080 Within Groups Sum of Squares=132.629 Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(2, 392)	8.985	<0.001*
Extraversion	Between Groups Sum of Squares=19.284 Within Groups Sum of Squares=119.424 Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(2, 392)	31.65	<0.001*
Openness	Between Groups Sum of Squares=7.004 Within Groups Sum of Squares=131.704 Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(2, 392)	10.424	<0.001*
Agreeableness	Between Groups Sum of Squares=5.803 Within Groups Sum of Squares=132.906 Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(2, 392)	8.558	<0.001*
Conscientiousness	Between Groups Sum of Squares=23.095 Within Groups Sum of Squares=115.613 Total Sum of Squares=138.709	F(2, 392)	39.154	<0.001*

Note: *Significant valu p<.05

Discussion

This study, set against the backdrop of the Nankang furniture industry, systematically explores the influence of demographic variables, economic-occupational variables, and personality traits on the job motivation of frontline production employees. The research results confirm that job motivation is affected by the interaction of multiple factors, with different variable categories exhibiting distinct pathways of influence. This not only validates the applicability of existing motivation theories in labor-intensive manufacturing scenarios but also provides a basis for differentiated incentives in local enterprise human resource management.

First, from a demographic perspective, age, gender, marital status, and education level all significantly impact job motivation. Consistent with previous research, married employees and middle-aged groups show higher motivation, reflecting the dual driving forces of family responsibilities and career development needs on incentive mechanisms. The existence of gender differences also suggests that managers should consider gender role differences when formulating incentive measures, as female employees may be more concerned with work atmosphere and sense of recognition. Notably, the relationship between education level and motivation is not linear; employees with undergraduate and middle school education show relatively lower motivation, possibly related to the gap between their career expectations and job content, a point worth further exploration in subsequent research.

Second, personal and household annual income significantly influence job motivation among economic-occupational variables, while spousal employment status and job tenure show no obvious impact. This finding reveals that although traditional views emphasize how skills and loyalty gained through tenure may enhance motivation, in the Nankang furniture industry environment characterized by repetitive work content and limited promotion opportunities, tenure does not necessarily translate into higher work willingness. Conversely, income as a short-term explicit incentive factor remains key in driving employee behavior. The non-linear influence of household annual income also reflects that low-income groups are driven by "survival-type motivation," while high-income groups may be motivated by needs related to quality of life and self-actualization.

Finally, all five dimensions of personality traits significantly impact job motivation, with conscientiousness and extraversion as the dominant variables. Conscientious individuals, due to their goal-oriented and self-disciplined characteristics, more easily generate intrinsic motivation in manufacturing environments with high repetition and fast work pace, closely aligning with the "sense of achievement" factors in Herzberg's two-factor theory. The positive effects of extraversion, openness, and agreeableness traits also indicate that in production processes emphasizing teamwork and on-site communication, positive personality characteristics help employees gain motivational support from social connections. Comparatively, individuals high in neuroticism experience decreased motivation due to their negative responses to pressure, suggesting that enterprises should consider emotional stability in employee selection and support mechanisms.

Despite achieving relatively systematic findings, this study has several limitations. First, it employs a cross-sectional survey method, unable to reveal causal relationships between variables; future research could adopt longitudinal tracking designs to verify dynamic mechanisms of motivational change. Second, the sample is limited to the Jiangxi Nankang

region, restricted by geography and industrial structure, requiring further verification of the findings' applicability in broader manufacturing sectors. Third, although the five major personality dimensions were introduced, the study does not deeply explore interactions between personality traits and external incentive factors; future research could use methods such as structural equation modeling (SEM) to construct more complex analyses of mediating and moderating effect pathways. Additionally, as artificial intelligence and automation technologies gradually penetrate traditional manufacturing, job content and position requirements are changing. Future research should further focus on structural changes in frontline employee motivation against the backdrop of technological transformation, particularly the influence pathways of increased skill requirements and changes in work pressure on individual motivation, better serving the practical needs of industrial upgrading and human capital optimization.

Conclusion

Using the Nankang furniture industry as a case study, this research systematically explores the factors influencing the job motivation of frontline production workers from three dimensions: demographic characteristics, economic and occupational variables, and personality traits. The findings reveal that: (1) demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, and educational attainment significantly affect job motivation; (2) among economic variables, personal and household income levels are the most critical, whereas years of work experience and spousal employment status do not show significant effects; (3) among the Big Five personality traits, conscientiousness and extraversion are the strongest positive predictors of job motivation, while neuroticism has a significant negative impact.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating classical motivation theories with the real-world context of frontline workers in the manufacturing sector, thereby addressing a gap in empirical research on motivational mechanisms within county-level industrial clusters. By constructing a multidimensional analytical framework, this research enhances our understanding of motivational drivers among employees in labor-intensive industries.

On a practical level, the study offers targeted recommendations for improving human resource management in furniture manufacturing enterprises. These include: (1) designing motivation strategies that account for individual differences, such as varying career expectations associated with age and education levels, and implementing stratified and categorized management; (2) enhancing the fairness and incentive effectiveness of compensation systems, with particular attention to the basic needs and motivational requirements of low- and middle-income employees; (3) introducing personality assessment tools to identify high-potential employees—especially those high in conscientiousness and extraversion—and providing them with developmental roles and promotion pathways; and (4) offering psychological support and emotional management interventions for employees with high neuroticism to foster a more inclusive working environment.

In conclusion, understanding and enhancing the job motivation of frontline employees is a critical pathway for promoting the sustainable development of enterprises, particularly in the context of industrial upgrading in the Nankang furniture sector. Future research should

continue to iterate between theoretical refinement and practical feedback to elevate the overall human resource management capacity within county-level manufacturing industries.

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