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Research Article

Feeling Capable, Remaining Demotivated: Revisiting Vroom's Expectancy Theory in a Public Service Organization

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Abstract

Employee demotivation remains insufficiently understood in public service organizations operating under persistent structural and financial constraints. In the Tunisian public transport sector, little is known about how employees experience motivation despite the sector's well-documented operational difficulties. This study aims to explore the determinants of employee demotivation and assess the explanatory power of Vroom's expectancy theory in this organizational context. A qualitative case study was conducted within a Tunisian public transport company using twelve semi-structured interviews involving three categories of employees. The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis informed by expectancy theory and interpreted in conjunction with self-determination theory, perceived organizational support, and the Job Demands-Resources model. The findings reveal that employees generally reported feeling competent while simultaneously expressing widespread demotivation, highlighting a tension between perceived self-efficacy and motivational outcomes. Instrumentality emerged as the weakest component of the expectancy process, as participants consistently referred to promotion opportunities whose allocation criteria were perceived as unclear or inconsistently applied. Promotion and professional recognition were valued more strongly than financial rewards, although this preference appeared to be influenced by the institutional constraints governing remuneration. Overall, the results indicate that expectancy theory provides a useful but incomplete explanation of employee motivation in this setting, as organizational support, autonomy, and working conditions also shaped employees' motivational experiences. The study therefore suggests that employee motivation in public organizations facing structural constraints should be understood from a multidimensional perspective rather than through expectancy theory alone. Although the findings are based on a small non-probability sample from a single organization and should not be generalized, they offer practical implications for human resource management by emphasizing the importance of transparent promotion systems, stronger organizational support, and improved communication to enhance employee motivation in public service organizations.

Keywords

Demotivation at Work, Vroom Theory of Expectations, Public Company, Qualitative Case Study, Thematic Analysis, Tunisian Public Sector

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1. Introduction

Only 21% of employees globally say they are truly engaged in their work, a rate that drops to 15% in the Middle East and North Africa, and this disengagement alone would cost nearly $438 billion in lost productivity each year globally [1]. In Tunisia, the public transport sector illustrates this reality in a particularly stark way: the six largest public companies under the supervision of the Ministry of Transport posted a cumulative net loss of 792 million dinars in 2021, for a debt of 6.5 billion dinars and a payroll of 953 million dinars supported by more than 21,500 employees [2]. However, these macroeconomic figures say nothing, by themselves, about the daily experience of the employees who make up these companies, nor about the way in which this experience translates, or not, into demotivation. It is this missing link between the sector's financial crisis and the concrete experience of work that this article seeks to document.

The literature on motivation at work offers, on this point, a set of theoretical tools that is already well constituted. Content theories have sought to identify the needs at the origin of behavior [3-6], while process theories, particularly Vroom's theory of expectations [7], have focused on the mechanisms by which an individual decides whether to try. More recent frameworks, focusing on perceived organizational support [8], self-determination [9, 10], and job demands-resources [11], have enriched this theoretical architecture. In the specific context of the public sector, two studies offer useful points of comparison: Zedini et al. [12] showed, based on a closed questionnaire administered to paramedical staff in a Tunisian hospital, that extrinsic levers of motivation, with remuneration in the lead, dominated the intrinsic levers; Suciu, Mortan, and Lazăr [13] found that the perceived clarity of performance evaluation directly influenced agents' expectations among Romanian local officials.

However, this literature leaves three grey areas. The first is methodological: the available studies on the public sector are almost all based on closed scales, which implicitly assumes that respondents' responses constitute a transparent measure of their real motivational state, a hypothesis rarely discussed as such. The second is sectoral: none of these studies concern public transport companies, whose institutional constraints, rigid salary scales, and inherited overstaffing are not necessarily comparable to those of a hospital or a local authority. The third is reflexive: the literature using Vroom's model rarely deals explicitly with the way in which the collection setting itself, in particular an interview conducted in an organizational context, can shape the discourse it only claims to collect, whereas this model is based precisely on the hypothesis of an individual capable of faithfully reporting his or her own internal calculations.

This double observation, a structural crisis documented at the macroeconomic level and a literature still poorly equipped to understand the microsocial mechanisms in this specific sector, leads to the following problem: how do the employees of a Tunisian public transport company live and give meaning to their own demotivation at work, and under what conditions does Vroom's expectancy model allow us to account for it? This question can be broken down into three research questions. The first is descriptive: how do the three components of Vroom's model, expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, manifest themselves in the discourse of the employees of this company? The second is explanatory: what organizational factors, working conditions, reward system, hierarchical relationship, contribute to weakening these components? The third is reflexive, and distinguishes this study from existing work: to what extent does the discourse collected in the interview, conducted in the very place where the hierarchical authority in question is exercised, allow access to these components, or does it rather give an image of them reconstructed for the needs of the survey situation?

The objective of this research is thus twofold: to propose a detailed qualitative reading of the drivers of demotivation in a Tunisian public transport company, and simultaneously to question the conditions of production of the discourse that serves as material for this reading. On the theoretical level, the study contributes to documenting the application of the Vroom model in an organizational context little covered by the existing literature, while explaining a methodological reflexivity that current research has long treated as secondary. From a managerial point of view, it offers managers of public service companies’ courses of action based on a detailed understanding of the meaning that employees themselves give to their work situation, rather than on the aggregated indicators of a traditional satisfaction survey.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section briefly traces the content theories of motivation, before developing Vroom's theory of expectations [7], retained as the main framework, by explicitly discussing its limits, and then situating it in relation to three contemporary extensions.

2.1. Content Theories of Motivation

Content theories assume that motivation results from the attempt to satisfy hierarchical or categorized needs. Maslow's pyramid of needs [3] distinguishes five levels, from physiological needs to needs for self-realization, and assumes that a higher-level need becomes mobilizing only once the lower needs have been satisfied, a strict hierarchy whose empirical validity remains, more than eighty years after its formulation, weakly established. Alderfer [5] proposed a simplified version with three categories (existence, relatedness, growth), without strict hierarchy, which makes it more compatible with the empirical observation that several needs can coexist in the same individual. Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman [4] and Herzberg [14, 15] distinguished between hygiene factors, the absence of which generates dissatisfaction without their presence being sufficient to motivate, and motivator factors, linked to the content of the work itself. This distinction, which is attractive from a managerial point of view, has however been criticized for the fragility of its original method, based on self-reported critical incidents and susceptible to attribution bias: respondents tend to attribute successes to themselves and failures to the environment, which artificially produces the distinction between motivator factors and hygiene factors. Finally, McClelland [6] emphasized three needs acquired through socialization, the need for achievement, the need for power, and the need for affiliation, the relative importance of which varies from one individual to another and whose standardized measurement itself remains contested.

These theories share a common limitation, beyond their respective weaknesses: they describe what motivates without explaining how an individual evaluates, at a given time, whether a particular effort is worth making, or how he adjusts this evaluation to the organizational context in which he finds himself. It is this question that has led to the development of process theories, and particularly Vroom's theory of expectations, retained here as the main framework, without this choice sheltering it from its own limits.

2.2. Vroom's Theory of Expectations

Vroom [7] proposes that motivation should no longer be understood as the simple pursuit of needs, but as the product of a calculation, largely implicit, that the individual makes before committing to an effort. This calculation combines three components. Expectancy refers to the subjective probability, estimated by the individual, that a given effort will result in a certain level of performance. It depends on perceived skills, accumulated experience, and the resources available to carry out the task. Instrumentality refers to the perceived probability that a given level of performance will be followed by a specific consequence, positive or negative. A reward system that is deemed opaque or disconnected from actual performance greatly weakens this component, regardless of the quality of the work provided. Valence refers to the value, positive, zero or negative, that the individual attributes to this consequence. The same reward, such as a bonus, can have a high valence for one employee and a low one for another, depending on their personal priorities at a given point in their career. These three components combine, according to Vroom, in a multiplicative rather than additive way: the motivational force F is modeled by the relation (1).

$$F = E \times I \times V \tag{1}$$

This property has a useful consequence for qualitative analysis: it only takes one component to be very weak for the overall motivation to collapse, even if the other two are high. But the model also calls for an important caveat, rarely formulated with the clarity it deserves it assumes an individual capable of consciously isolating these three judgments and combining them coherently, whereas research in the psychology of judgment has long shown that human evaluations are subject to systematic biases, limited rationality, and a strong dependence on the immediate context of enunciation. Used in an interview study, the Vroom model cannot therefore be tested in the strict sense, i.e., verified as a predictive equation; rather, it functions as a reading grid that helps organize verbal material, with the risk that the clarity of the grid masks the real confusion of the experience it claims to describe. It is this limitation, rather than the general validity of the model, that the present study assumes and attempts to neutralize by systematically confronting the theoretical categories with the areas of vagueness and contradiction in the respondents' discourse. Vroom's theory was extended by Porter and Lawler [16], who pointed out that performance itself depends not only on effort but also on the individual's abilities and perception of his or her own role, and by Locke [17] and Locke and Latham [18, 19], whose goal-setting theory shows that precise and sufficiently demanding goals, accompanied by regular feedback, reinforce both the expectancy and the instrumentality perceived by the individual.

2.3. Contemporary Extensions

Three contemporary frameworks make it possible to refine the analysis of the data collected in this field, without their juxtaposition resolving the limitations specific to each of them.

Perceived organizational support, defined by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa [8] as the employee's belief that his or her organization values his or her contribution and cares about his or her well-being, acts on instrumentality: an employee who feels supported more easily attributes his or her results to future recognition. However, this notion has the disadvantage of being largely circular when measured by interview rather than by a validated scale, since a favorable discourse towards the hierarchy can just as easily reflect really perceived support as a façade of caution in front of an interviewer associated, even indirectly, with the business world. Deci and Ryan's theory of self-determination [9, 10, 20] sheds light on the valence component, distinguishing between intrinsic motivation, linked to the satisfaction of the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, and extrinsic motivation, linked to external rewards. The job demands-resources model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti [11, 21], makes it possible to link material and relational working conditions to expectancy, but its scope here remains limited by the absence of any repeated measurement over time, which alone would make it possible to distinguish specific demands from structural constraints.

These three extensions do not replace the Vroom model; above all, they make it possible to name certain elements of the respondents' discourse more precisely, without removing the uncertainty about what this discourse really reveals about individual perceptions, as opposed to what it reveals in the context of an organizational interview.

2.4. Specificities of Public Service Companies

Public service companies, such as the company studied here, have organizational traits that influence the application of Vroom's model, without the available literature making it possible to decide in which precise direction. A descriptive study conducted among paramedical staff in a Tunisian university hospital, for example, showed that extrinsic levers of motivation, with remuneration and collaboration in mind, prevailed over intrinsic levers in this Tunisian public sector context [12]; but this study was based on a large-scale closed questionnaire, the results of which are not directly transposable to open interview material such as the one used here. Suciu, Mortan, and Lazăr [13] showed, using a sample of Romanian local officials, that the perceived quality of performance evaluation influenced agents' expectations, a result consistent with data collected in Tunisian fieldwork but obtained in a sufficiently different institutional context for the comparison to remain cautious. Filipova [22] reminds us that the explanatory power of the Vroom model remains, more than fifty years after its formulation, one of the most cited in the literature on motivation at work; being quoted extensively, however, does not guarantee that a model accurately reflects a particular terrain, and it is precisely this fit, rather than the general robustness of the model, that the study questions.

The contribution of the study therefore does not consist in confirming once again the relevance of Vroom's model, but in examining, based on dense qualitative material, the precise places where this model imperfectly accounts for the discourse of the employees of a public transport company, and what these differences reveal.

2.5. Conceptual Framework and Research Question

The conceptual framework chosen places Vroom's VIE model at the center of the analysis, by linking each of its three components to one of the three contemporary extensions presented above, and by placing them in the organizational context specific to a public service company. This framework guided the construction of the interview guide, presented in the next section, but it was treated throughout the analysis as a working hypothesis to be confronted with the data rather than as a mold into which to fit them.

On this basis, the study seeks to answer the following research question: how do the three components of the Vroom model, expectancy, instrumentality and valence, manifest themselves in the discourse of the employees of a public transport company, and to what extent does this discourse resist, or on the contrary lend itself too easily, to a reading organized by this model?

3. Materials and Methods

Answering a question about how employees perceive and interpret their work situation requires direct access to their discourse. However, this access is never neutral: the methodology used here is presented with precautions and presenting its identified limitations.

3.1. Research Design: Single Embedded Case Study

The study adopts the format of a single embedded case study, in the sense of Yin [23]: a single organizational case, the regional transport company, is examined through several nested units of analysis, corresponding to the three socio-professional categories present in the company (executives, management officers, enforcement agents). This choice makes it possible to verify whether the identified demotivation registers cross the entire staff or are, on the contrary, concentrated in a particular category, without transforming the study into an inter-case comparison, which would have required a different design altogether [24, 25].

The choice of a single case is justified by the depth of access obtained from the company studied. However, it has a cost that should be explicitly named: the analytical generalization sought by Yin [23] assumes that the case studied is sufficiently well understood in its institutional specificities for the reader to be able to judge for himself its transposability, which requires a more detailed description of the context than the format of an article allows, and constitutes in itself a limit of the exercise.

3.2. Field and Sample

Twelve semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with staff divided into the three socio-professional categories identified above. The sampling was reasoned rather than probabilistic, in a logic of diversification of profiles, in accordance with the usual recommendations for qualitative management research [26]. It should be acknowledged, however, that the actual selection of respondents probably passed, at least in part, through the company's hierarchy, which alone is in a position to authorize access to staff during working hours: this mode of access, common in organizational field research, introduces a selection bias that is difficult to discard completely, since employees most openly in conflict with their superiors may have been less willing, or less allowed in fact, to participate.

Each interview was conducted face-to-face, at the respondents' workplace, and lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and a half. This choice of location, dictated by practical constraints of access, has a direct impact on the nature of the data collected: an interview conducted in the very place where the hierarchical authority in question is exercised is not equivalent to an interview conducted in a neutral setting, and this proximity may have prompted some respondents to euphemize their criticisms of direct management while expressing themselves more freely on more peripheral elements such as equipment or material working conditions. The interviews were the subject of detailed notetaking, supplemented by a summary written immediately after each meeting, in the absence of audio recording, which constitutes an additional limitation returned to in the section devoted to the limitations of the study.

3.3. Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview differs from a free interview by the existence of a guide, composed of a starting instruction and non-strictly ordered themes, which the interviewer introduces only if the respondent does not approach them spontaneously. This form of interview was chosen because it makes it possible to systematically cover the three components of Vroom's model while leaving respondents a certain freedom of expression, a freedom that nevertheless remains limited by the fact that the proposed themes derive directly from the theoretical framework chosen: a respondent who might have organized his or her work experience around categories foreign to this framework had, in fact, few opportunities to make it appear in the corpus.

Each theme of the interview guide was constructed to correspond to a specific component of the theoretical framework chosen, to ensure that the data collected would be sufficient to document the model used. Table 1 presents this correspondence, which must be read bearing in mind that it organizes a priori what the analysis claims to discover a posteriori.

Table 1. *Correspondence between the topics of the interview guide and the theoretical framework.*

Interview Guide Theme	Question Asked (Open-Ended)	Theoretical Anchoring Mobilized
Theme 1: Expectancy	Do you feel capable of performing the tasks assigned to you?	Vroom [7], expectancy component; Bakker and Demerouti [11], available resources
Theme 2: Instrumentality	Tell me about the remuneration system (bonuses) and the system of monitoring and evaluation of work.	Vroom [7], instrumentality component; Eisenberger et al. [8], perceived organizational support
Theme 3: Valence	Tell me about what is valuable at work for employees.	Vroom [7], valence component; Deci and Ryan [10], self-determination
Theme 4: Working conditions	Tell me about your working conditions.	Bakker and Demerouti [11], job demands-resources; Herzberg [14], hygiene factors

3.4. Thematic Analysis of the Content

The data from the twelve interviews were subjected to a thematic content analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke [27, 28]: identification of recording units, corresponding to significant excerpts of each respondent's speech; grouping these units into codes that account for a common meaning; then grouping the codes into theoretical themes, aligned with the components of the Vroom model. This approach is inspired by the principles of rigour formulated by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton [29] and is in line with the recommendations of Miles, Huberman and Saldaña [30].

The coding was carried out manually by the three members of the research team, using a content analysis grid cross-referencing, for each unit of meaning, the twelve respondents and the theme to which it relates, which made it possible to establish an absolute and a relative frequency for each unit of meaning. Coding was then confronted during pooling sessions during which every coding gap was discussed until consensus was reached. Consistent with the reflexive thematic analysis tradition of Braun and Clarke [27, 28], this consensus process was treated as an interpretive, dialogic act rather than as a measure of statistical reliability: no inter-rater agreement coefficient was computed, since a numerical index of this kind presupposes a fixed, coder-independent "true" coding that reflexive thematic analysis explicitly does not assume. This choice has a cost that should be stated plainly rather than concealed: the three coders shared the same theoretical framework from the outset, so that the consensus reached may also reflect a common reading of the Vroom model rather than a fully independent rereading of the data, a limitation of a different nature than that of a simple coding disagreement, to which we return in section 7. Moreover, the frequency with which a unit of meaning appears in the corpus does not necessarily measure its real importance for the respondents: a theme may be frequently cited because it constitutes the only vocabulary available to describe a broader experience, as is probably the case for the bonus score, which dominates the register of instrumentality less because it concentrates all the reward issues than because it constitutes the only formal device that respondents know how to name precisely.

3.5. Criteria of Scientific Rigor

The scientific rigor of qualitative research is not evaluated according to the same criteria as that of quantitative research.

The criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba [31] offer a more suitable framework, the application of which to this work, as well as the points on which these criteria are only partially satisfied, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Application of Lincoln and Guba's [31] criteria of trustworthiness to the study.

Criterion	Procedure adopted in this study	Acknowledged limitation
Credibility	Collective coding by three researchers, with every disagreement discussed until consensus; theoretical triangulation across the Vroom model and its three contemporary extensions.	Coders shared the same theoretical framework from the outset (see section 7).
Transferability	Thick description of the organizational context, the sampling logic, and the three socio-professional categories (Table 3).	Single-case design; transferability to other public service companies remains a hypothesis, not an achievement.
Dependability	Reasoned interview guide (Table 1) applied consistently across the twelve interviews; detailed notetaking supplemented by a post-interview summary.	Absence of audio recording limits the possibility of an independent audit of the raw material.
Confirmability	Systematic confrontation of each theoretical reading with an alternative, more critical reading (sections 4 and 5); reflexive attention to the effect of the collection setting on the discourse produced.	Reflexivity reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk that the analysis over-fits the data to the chosen theoretical grid.

3.6. Profile of Respondents

The twelve respondents are divided into the company's three socio-professional categories. Table 3 presents an anonymized summary, the distribution of which between categories remains indicative in the absence of a probability sampling procedure.

Table 3. Profile (anonymized and indicative) of study respondents (n=12).

Socio-Professional Category	Workforce Surveyed	Typical Function
Executives	3	Coaching and supervision
Management officers	4	Administrative and management staff
Enforcement agents	5	Operational staff (operation, control, workshops)

4. Results

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis. Each register is first described, then systematically questioned rather than simply illustrated, insofar as the raw description of coding frequencies would risk passing off as an objective observation what remains an interpretation constructed from a collection device that is itself constrained.

4.1. Expectancy: A Feeling of Competence That Is Generally Present But Fragile

The first theme of the interview guide was respondents' sense of competence in the tasks assigned to them. Eleven of the twelve respondents said they felt capable of carrying out their tasks, a seemingly unequivocal result that deserves to be immediately put in tension with the rest of the corpus: many of these same respondents also described a climate of generalized demotivation. This coexistence of a very high declared expectancy and a discourse of disengagement raise a question of interpretation that the analysis cannot avoid. Two interpretations are possible. The first, in line with Vroom's model, consists in considering that expectancy is indeed the least problematic factor of motivation in this organization, demotivation being found elsewhere, in instrumentality or valence. The second, more critical, consists in observing that asserting one's competence is a socially inexpensive and rewarding response to an interviewer met in the workplace, whereas precisely documenting one's own limits is much less so; the figure of eleven out of twelve respondents could thus reflect, at least in part, a norm of self-presentation rather than a truly homogeneous expectancy. Nothing in the design adopted makes it possible to decide between these two readings, which constitutes a result, in the sense that it indicates a limit of the protocol rather than a lack of signal.

The only respondent to explicitly qualify his or her sense of competence, by associating it with a lack of experience, offers an indirect clue in favor of the second reading: if the declaration of competence were purely descriptive, more nuances of this type would be expected in a corpus of twelve people holding various positions and levels of seniority. Its almost general absence suggests that the register of competence was treated by most respondents as ground not conducive to the expression of doubt, which invites us to read expectancy, in this specific context, less as a stable fact than as a relatively homogeneous façade behind which more disparate experiences are lodged.

4.2. Instrumentality: A Perceived Disconnect Between Effort and Reward

The second register explored by the interview guide focused on instrumentality, i.e., the perceived link between individual performance and its consequences in terms of reward, objectives and control.

Almost all respondents spontaneously associate the reward system with the bonus score, an internal evaluation system presented as the main, if not the only, channel for recognizing individual performance. This convergence could be read as a positive indicator, that of a system well identified by all staff. More critical reading, however, leads to interpreting it in reverse: the diversity of criteria mentioned in isolation by some respondents to explain the attribution of this score, such as attendance, qualification or seniority, suggests that while the name of the scheme is shared, its actual operation is not. In other words, respondents converge on the existence of a single channel for recognition without converging on the rules that determine access to it, which is precisely the configuration most unfavorable to instrumentality in the sense of Vroom: a system perceived as unique but arbitrary weakens motivation more than a system perceived as multiple but predictable.

Regarding the control and evaluation of work, most respondents point to the direct line manager as the most present control body daily, far ahead of internal audit systems. This result must be interpreted with caution rather than mechanically related to the notion of perceived organizational support [8]: the centrality of the direct supervisor in respondents' discourse can just as easily signal a supportive relationship as a relationship of dependence and close supervision, two realities that the interview format, carried out on the company's premises, does not allow us to distinguish with certainty. The few explicit mentions of hierarchical tensions, although a minority in the corpus, are in this respect more informative than their raw frequency of occurrence suggests, insofar as they constitute the type of remark most likely to be withheld by a respondent anxious not to expose himself.

4.3. Valence: Promotion and Recognition Before Salary

The third theme focused on valence, the value respondents place on the different possible outcomes of their work. The answers obtained reveal a clear hierarchy: promotion is at the top of the list of valued elements, followed by recognition in the form of thanks expressed by the hierarchy, then by salary, mentioned by only a minority of respondents as a determining factor.

This hierarchy lends itself to a reading converging with self-determination theory [9, 10, 20], which would see in the pre-eminence of promotion and recognition over salary the expression of needs for competence and relatedness rather than strictly extrinsic motivations. But an alternative reading, less flattering for the theoretical model, deserves to be applied with the same rigor: in a company where salary scales are set by regulation and leave little room for individual negotiation, mentioning salary as a determining factor amounts to designating a lever over which neither the employee nor, to a large extent, his direct hierarchy has any hold. It is therefore possible that the low frequency of salary in responses does not reflect a genuine preference for non-financial levers, but a rational adjustment of the expectations expressed to what the institutional context makes concretely negotiable. The data collected do not make it possible to separate these two interpretations, which limits the explanatory scope that can be given to self-determination theory in this specific field, without invalidating it.

A few isolated but notable responses associate valence with more collective objectives, such as improving the service provided by the company or maintaining its public service mission. Their rarity in the corpus, more than their presence, is the most noteworthy result: in an organization whose raison d'être is precisely a public service mission, one might have expected this institutional dimension to irrigate more broadly the discourse of employees on what is valuable in their eyes. Its absence among most respondents suggests that identification with the company's mission, far from being given public status, should be treated as a variable to be explained rather than as a starting hypothesis.

4.4. Working Conditions: A Cross-Cutting Factor of Demotivation

The fourth theme of the interview guide, relating to the assessment of working conditions, reveals a more transversal register, which overlaps with the three previous components without being reduced to them. Respondents recurrently mention the obsolescence of equipment, workload, relationship tensions between long-serving and newly recruited employees, as well as difficulties specific to the passenger transport activity, such as traffic congestion or occasional conflicts with customers.

This register corresponds to job demands in the sense of Bakker and Demerouti's model [11, 21], but it must not be read too quickly as confirming the model: respondents may have been more critical on this register than on the other themes precisely because it does not call into question their own competence, unlike the theme of expectancy, nor direct hierarchy, unlike the theme of instrumentality. In other words, material working conditions constitute, in an interview conducted in the workplace, a relatively safe critical target, which could partly explain why this register appears proportionally more abundant in explicit criticism than the others, without it being possible to conclude that it objectively weighs more on employees' real motivation.

4.5. Summary of Main Results

Table 4 provides a summary of all the results, linking each theoretical theme to the main units of meaning identified and their relative frequency in the corpus. This summary should be read considering the caveats made above: the reported frequencies describe the structure of the collected discourse, not a direct, unbiased measure of employee motivation.

Table 4. *Summary of results by component of the Vroom model.*

VIE Component	Main Unit of Meaning	Relative Frequency	Illustration (Paraphrased Excerpt)
Expectancy	Perceived sense of competence	11/12	Indicates being able to perform the tasks assigned
Expectancy	Lack of experience	1/12	Feels capable but points to a lack of experience
Instrumentality	Bonus score as the dominant criterion	11/12	Associates reward almost exclusively with the bonus score
Instrumentality	Line manager as control body	9/12	Designates the direct supervisor as the primary evaluator of the work
Valence	Promotion	5/12	Cites promotion as the most valued element
Valence	Recognition / thanks	3/12	Mentions expressed thanks by the hierarchy
Valence	Salary	2/12	Cites salary as a determining factor
Working conditions	Obsolete equipment / harsh conditions	Multiple respondents	Evokes the obsolescence of the equipment and the tensions between long-serving and newly recruited employees
Expectancy	Perceived sense of competence	11/12	Indicates being able to perform the tasks assigned

5. Discussion

The results of this study do not simply confirm Vroom's model in a new setting. They also reveal its blind spots when confronted with qualitative material collected under constrained conditions. This critical reading is possible because the analytical process was rigorous: coding was collective and consensus-based, and reflexivity was documented systematically in Table 2. Two kinds of uncertain results structure the discussion that follows: results that are questionable because they are poorly established, and results that are deliberately left open because the data do not allow a single interpretation.

Regarding expectancy, the very high level reported in the sample (section 4.2) should not be read as proof that this factor is firmly established in the organization studied. Its coexistence with an otherwise demotivated discourse is an anomaly for the theoretical model. Two explanations compete: expectancy may be genuinely robust while demotivation stems from elsewhere, or the declared expectancy may partly reflect social desirability. The data do not allow a choice between these explanations with certainty. This limitation is accepted here rather than resolved by favoring the reading most flattering to the theoretical framework: doing so would produce a clearer result, but one less honest regarding the data collected.

Regarding instrumentality, the centrality of the bonus score, combined with a heterogeneous perception of the criteria that determine it (section 4.3), is the most robust result of the study. It rests on both a convergence and a divergence that reinforce each other independently of any flattering self-evaluation, and that resisted confrontation between the three coders. This result echoes Suciu, Mortan and Lazăr's work [13] on the role of perceived clarity in performance evaluation. However, an overly optimistic recommendation should not follow from it: making the bonus criteria more transparent will not restore instrumentality if that transparency reveals criteria that are themselves seen as illegitimate once made explicit, as often happens in this type of system. Recommending more transparency alone would be an incomplete reading; transparency can, in the first instance, aggravate the very problem it is meant to solve.

Regarding valence, the pre-eminence of promotion and recognition over salary (Section 4.4) can be read, with the reservations already noted, in light of self-determination theory [9, 10, 20]. This result contrasts with the findings of Zedini et al. [12] in the Tunisian hospital context, where extrinsic factors, led by remuneration, clearly dominated intrinsic factors. The contrast between these two fields of the Tunisian public sector is itself a contribution: it suggests that public status should not be treated as a homogeneous variable, contrary to a frequent tendency in the literature to group heterogeneous public organizations under the same label. The type of activity, career structures, and the socio-professional composition of staff appear to weigh at least as much as legal status on the hierarchy of motivational levers observed.

Finally, working conditions cut across all three components of the model (Section 4.5). This confirms that motivation cannot be fully understood without accounting for the material and relational resources available, in line with Bakker and Demerouti's model [11, 21]. However, the relatively prominent place of this theme in the corpus should also be read as a possible effect of its low-risk nature for respondents, rather than as proof that it is the main driver of demotivation. Set against the sector's financial crisis described in the introduction, these results point to a broader reading: a sector with a structural deficit rarely invests in renewing its equipment, which links macroeconomic constraint to microsocial demotivation without either being a simple cause of the other.

These results support four practical, cautious recommendations for the management of the company studied. They are formulated at a general enough level to be transposable to other public service companies facing similar constraints, though without the certainty a purely descriptive reading might suggest. First, clarify the criteria used for the bonus score. This clarification is necessary but not sufficient: if the criteria, once made explicit, are perceived as illegitimate, transparency could initially make previously only sensed inequalities more visible before it can restore confidence. Second, develop clear internal promotion pathways, since promotion is the element most valued by respondents, whether this reflects a genuine preference or an adjustment to limited room for maneuver; acting on this lever remains relevant either way. Third, support newly recruited agents, the only group to have explicitly qualified their sense of competence, without assuming that others feel no such need: a mentoring scheme offered broadly, rather than targeted only at employees who have already signaled difficulty, would limit the risk of reaching only the most exposed profiles. Fourth, improve available material resources. This more traditional recommendation should not be dismissed on the grounds that this theme may be over-represented in the corpus for reasons linked to the survey design: independently of that methodological caveat, equipment obsolescence is an objective constraint documented convergently by respondents in very different positions. Taken together, these four recommendations translate the study's findings into concrete, low-cost first steps that management can act on without waiting for a larger organizational reform.

This study has several limitations, some of which have already been noted during the analysis. The first concerns the conditions of data collection: interviews were not audio-recorded and were conducted in the workplace, most likely facilitated by the company's hierarchy. This choice was made partly to protect respondent confidentiality and encourage franker answers, given the sensitivity of discussing demotivation on company premises, but it carries a cost: reliance on handwritten notes rather than verbatim recordings, which may have reduced the completeness and accuracy of the data captured, in addition to the social desirability bias that the on-site setting likely encouraged and whose extent cannot be estimated after the fact. This bias probably did not affect all themes equally: low-risk topics, such as material conditions, were likely less affected than topics tied directly to hierarchy or to self-assessment of competence. The second limitation concerns the composition of the coding team. Although coding was carried out independently by three researchers and then reconciled until consensus, which limits the risk of an isolated judgment, all three coders shared the same theoretical framework from the outset. The consensus reached may therefore partly reflect a common reading of Vroom's model rather than the fully independent emergence of categories from the interview content alone; only coding blind to the theoretical framework could remove this limitation more fully. The third limitation concerns the monographic nature of the study, which focuses on a single company and a non-probability sample of twelve people. In line with the logic of analytical generalization specific to case studies [23], the results do not claim statistical generalizability, and even their transferability to comparable organizational contexts remains a hypothesis to verify rather than an established fact. Future research could reproduce this study while dissociating respondent recruitment from the company's hierarchy, for example through an independent third party, to isolate more clearly the effect of social desirability suspected here. It could also compare these results with those of a public service company in another sector of activity, to clarify what is specific to public transport and what applies more broadly to public service companies.

6. Conclusions

This article offered a qualitative analysis of the drivers of workplace demotivation in a public transport company, based on Vroom's expectancy model in dialogue with three contemporary extensions. Its contribution does not lie in confirming a model already validated elsewhere. Instead, it lies in exposing, through a collectively coded and reflexively scrutinized corpus, internal tensions that the analysis chooses to expose rather than resolve in favor of the theoretical framework: between an almost unanimously high declared expectancy and an otherwise demotivated discourse; between apparent convergence on the reward system and a fundamental divergence on its criteria; and between a hierarchy of motivational levers that can be read either as a genuine preference or as an adjustment to institutional constraints. Set against the financial crisis documented in the introduction, this qualitative reading gives concrete meaning to figures that would otherwise remain silent about the mechanisms they cover.

These tensions are not defects to be corrected in a later version of the study; they are results in their own right. They remind us that an interview conducted in an organizational context gives access to a situated discourse, shaped by the conditions of its own production, rather than to a direct and transparent measure of respondents' motivation. A more descriptive reading of this corpus could have concluded, wrongly, that expectancy poses no problem in this organization and that only instrumentality warrants managerial action; the critical approach adopted here aims to prevent exactly this kind of premature conclusion. In practice, this means managers should treat high expectancy scores with caution rather than as a green light, and should prioritize action on instrumentality and promotion pathways, where the case for concrete, low-cost intervention is strongest. It is on this condition, rather than despite it, that a rigorous qualitative approach can make a useful contribution to understanding demotivation in public organizations.

Abbreviations

VIE	Valence-Instrumentality-Expectancy (Vroom's Model)
POS	Perceived Organizational Support
JD-R	Job Demands-Resources

Author Contributions

Chiraz Gharbi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Imen Chaouch: Data curation, Investigation, Project administration

Rym Khanfir: Data curation, Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Chiraz Gharbi is a Professor of Higher Education at the Higher Institute of Technological Studies (ISET) of Bizerte, Tunisia, with extensive experience in teaching, professional training, and educational innovation. She holds an Agrégation in Economics and Management and has over 30 years of academic and professional experience in higher education. Alongside her teaching activities, she is a certified trainer in communication, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), behavioral recruitment, and soft skills development. Her research focuses on pedagogy, employability, career guidance, organizational change, motivation, and the integration of innovative teaching practices. She has authored and co-authored several scientific publications, educational books, and pedagogical resources, and has actively contributed to national and international research projects and academic initiatives. Through her work, she promotes innovative approaches to education, professional development, and lifelong learning.

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