

Moving Goalpost Phenomenon and Its Psychological and Behavioural Responses among Corporate Employees – An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies and describes the Almost-Enough Phenomenon (AEP) as a cumulative psychological experience that develops when employees repeatedly demonstrate competence but receive little or no recognition. The Moving Goalpost Phenomenon (MGP), in which performance standards shift selectively and without transparency after being met, is proposed as the primary trigger. Repeated exposure to MGP produced a sequence of internal responses in participants, namely Learned Helplessness, the Impostor Phenomenon, Effort Adjustment, and eventual Turnover Intention. Using a qualitative, interpretivist, phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 entry- to mid-level corporate employees across industries. Thematic analysis revealed AEP as a complete, harmful experience. Key contributions include extending MGP to macro-structural influences (for example, AI-driven change), identifying managers as mediators, highlighting self-concept strength as a moderator, and noting cognitive reframing as a disruption mechanism. Prolonged AEP exposure also fostered more transactional workplace relationships. Naming this experience shifts the focus from individual inadequacy to organisational accountability, suggesting directions for practice and future research.

Keywords: Almost-Enough Phenomenon, Moving Goalpost Phenomenon, Learned Helplessness, Effort Adjustment, Turnover Intention

The rise of artificial intelligence has intensified competition in the labour market, yet the human workforce continues to outperform even the most advanced algorithms in adaptability and judgment. Despite this, organisations often fail to recognise and reward human contributions in practice. Merit pay and performance evaluation systems, although presented as objective, are structurally subjective (Woodhams et al., 2015). This recurring pattern, referred to in this study as the Moving Goalpost Phenomenon (MGP), describes the selective and non-transparent shifting of performance standards after employees meet them, keeping recognition out of reach despite demonstrated competence.

Siegrist's Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory argues that individuals expect rewards to match their invested effort (Siegrist, 2012). Building on this framework, this study assumes that when this balance is disrupted, adverse psychological effects, such as Learned Helplessness (LH) and the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) may emerge, often accompanied by Effort Adjustment (EA) and increased Turnover Intention (TI). While these constructs have been widely studied, the literature has usually treated them as dispositional traits rather than situational responses shaped by organisational systems (Gullifor et al., 2024; Tewfik et al., 2025), with interventions addressing them only after they develop rather than targeting the systems that produce them (Para et al., 2024). As a result, this cumulative experience of repeated unrecognised effort remains unnamed and understudied.

The present study introduces the Almost-Enough Phenomenon (AEP) to capture this experience of the interplay between an external systemic barrier (MGP) and sequential internalised responses (LH, IP, EA, TI). Distinguishing AEP from legitimate criterion elevation, where standards rise due to genuine environmental change such as inflation or technological advancement, is critical to clarifying its systemic nature. Naming AEP externalises the problem for employees, provides organisations with a framework for reducing TI, and opens new prevention pathways for the field.

Accordingly, this study investigates AEP as a distinct experiential construct through a qualitative, interpretivist

research design using semi-structured interviews with corporate employees. Specifically, it examines whether the MGP functions as an external systemic barrier giving rise to LH and IP as psychological responses, and EA and TI as behavioural outcomes, thereby shifting the interpretation of the problem from individual inadequacy to systemic accountability.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The theoretical foundation of this study is Siegrist's (1996, as revised 2012) Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, based on the principle of social reciprocity where employees expect their contributions to be matched by appropriate rewards; when this balance is disrupted, psychological strain and negative emotional outcomes are more likely to follow.

While the ERI model captures the psychological consequences of the imbalance on employees, it does not examine the systemic conditions created by organisations that produce the persistent imbalance and how it is absorbed and experienced by different employees.

Colquitt (2001) addressed this gap through a four-dimensional model of organisational justice: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational, establishing that fairness perceptions are multidimensional rather than a single discrete evaluation. The following decade traced how such imbalances become internalised and structurally sustained. Tayfur (2012) found that organisational culture plays a crucial role in either fostering or alleviating learned helplessness, particularly in centralised, low-autonomy environments. Liu and Wang (2012) provide an opportunity-based fairness conceptualisation of perceived overqualification (POQ), introducing a multi-level model of its antecedents and consequences. Although POQ shares AEP's concern with unrecognised employee value, it addresses a mismatch between qualifications and role rather than the shifting of performance standards after criteria have already been met.

Subsequent research extended this line of inquiry into structural mechanisms and behavioural consequences. Woodhams et al. (2015) found that merit pay systems, although presented as objective, are inherently subjective, allowing pre-existing biases to influence outcomes. Contrary to expectations, results showed only a small positive effect on wage growth for disadvantaged groups, with pay gaps closing disproportionately slowly. The researchers themselves caution against interpreting these findings as a rejection of the broader critical literature on merit-based systems. For the present study, merit pay's subjective architecture is significant as the structural mechanism through which repeated unrecognised effort is not only produced but legitimised. Vaamonde et al. (2018) found that justice perceptions are negatively related to turnover intention, an effect mediated by burnout and job satisfaction. Most recently, Feenstra et al. (2020) reframed the impostor phenomenon, traditionally treated as an individual trait, as a response to environmental and contextual conditions within organisations, shaped by factors at societal, institutional, and interpersonal levels.

METHOD

Design

A qualitative, phenomenological research design grounded in an interpretivist philosophy was adopted to capture employees' lived experiences of the AEP. An abductive reasoning process guided the study, allowing the AEP framework to be refined through empirical data rather than tested as a fixed hypothesis.

Participants

20 corporate employees (entry-level to mid-level) were recruited using purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling. This approach was appropriate given that AEP is not formally recorded in organisational settings.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-to-one, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and transcribed for analysis. To maintain confidentiality, participants are referred to throughout using codes assigned

during data collection (MP1–MP20). Five pilot interviews were used to refine question clarity and adjust sequencing for the interview guide, and finalise the inclusion criteria. These were excluded from the final analysis.

Materials

An interview guide comprising 18 questions across seven sections, covering all AEP components, was developed from existing literature and reviewed by four doctoral academics.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis in a theory-informed manner, guided by the AEP framework while remaining open to emergent patterns. Thematic analysis was preferred over Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) given the sample size of 20 participants, as IPA's idiographic focus is better suited to smaller datasets.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Almost-Enough Phenomenon (AEP) emerged as a consistent and sequential experiential pattern across the dataset, starting with the Moving-Goalpost Phenomenon (MGP) as its external systemic barrier and progressing through Learned Helplessness (LH), Impostor Phenomenon (IP), Effort Adjustment (EA), and Turnover Intention (TI) as its internalised responses.

Moving-Goalpost Phenomenon

MGP was identified as the foundational external condition of the AEP sequence, operating through interpersonal, structural, and collective mechanisms. At the interpersonal level, managers functioned as primary agents of standard shifting, selectively withholding recognition and crediting employee contributions to themselves or to the organisation.

Previously acknowledged contributions were withdrawn at reward delivery, rendering them meaningless. At the structural and collective level, demonstrated competence consistently triggered greater demands rather than recognition, captured most clearly in MP9's account of strong performance being immediately converted into a mandatory standard for all employees. A related structural mechanism, the public calling out of mistakes alongside the private delivery of praise, created a recognition asymmetry in which the psychological cost of failure consistently outweighed the benefit of success, making self-doubt a near-inevitable outcome. As MP11 stated, "No matter how much I delivered, I was always behind," reflecting a recognition environment in which effort and reward remained structurally disconnected. This extends Siegrist's (1996, as revised 2012) ERI model by identifying the specific organisational mechanism, the selective and non-transparent shifting of standards, through which effort-reward imbalance is actively maintained rather than incidentally produced.

Learned Helplessness

LH emerged as the first internalised psychological response to sustained MGP exposure, appearing across three analytically distinct forms. The most prevalent was stabilised effort-outcome disconnection, in which participants developed a settled and sustained belief that effort no longer influences outcomes. As MP9 stated, "I have learned that effort leads to more work rather than reward", a formulation that not only captures the effort-outcome link but the MGP mechanism itself, where demonstrated competence produces higher standards rather than recognition. A theoretically significant finding was anticipatory LH, where participants reduced efforts before non-recognition occurred because they had internalised the outcome well enough to predict it. This extends the existing literature, which frames LH as a reactive response, by showing it can become preventive once the MGP pattern is sufficiently recognised. In contrast, several participants showed transient LH interrupted by cognitive reframing, reinterpreting non-recognition as organizational reality or growth signal rather than evidence of a broken effort-outcome link, which prevented LH from stabilising. LH within AEP is not inevitable; it arises only under sustained, non-transparent non-recognition consistent with MGP.

Impostor Phenomenon

IP was identified as the second internalised psychological response, emerging when sustained MGP exposure produced a stable distortion of self-perceived competence. Participants described persistent self-doubt, questioned their right to recognition, and internalised a sense of unworthiness despite clear evidence of capability. The most severe case involved repeated demeaning managerial language, remarks such as “you don’t have any brain” delivered without corrective guidance, producing sustained self-blame that continued even after the participant identified the behaviour as abusive. A recognition asymmetry mechanism, in which mistakes were publicly visible while praise remained private, further embedded IP by structurally controlling the visibility of success and failure. A theoretically significant moderating variable was self-concept strength, which interrupted the progression from LH to IP in several participants. Those with a stable, internally grounded sense of competence absorbed non-recognition without treating it as evidence of unworthiness, preventing IP from forming rather than recovering from it after it developed. This extends Vergauwe et al. (2015), who identified self-efficacy as the strongest predictor of impostor tendencies, by showing that self-concept strength functions as a pre-IP moderator rather than a post-IP buffer.

Effort Adjustment

EA was identified as the first behavioural consequence within the AEP sequence, appearing across a range of forms that reflected different ways participants adapted to, resisted, or were constrained by their recognition environments. Withdrawal-type EA was most frequently reported, with participants reducing investment as a direct response to sustained non-recognition. A more theoretically distinct finding was competence suppression, in which participants deliberately limited visible performance to avoid triggering new standards, as MP9 noted, “I have learned that doing good work only brings more work.” This is qualitatively different from disengagement because it reflects active awareness of the MGP pattern and a deliberate protective adaptation to it, not a loss of motivation. At the opposite end of the EA spectrum, autonomy-driven EA appeared among participants whose investment was maintained through intrinsic motivation and personal values rather than organizational recognition, confirming that not every change in EA is AEP-driven and that the distinction between MGP-consequent and personally motivated EA is a meaningful boundary condition of the framework. This extends Tayfur (2012), who identifies decreased performance as a general consequence of helplessness, by specifying the distinct behavioural forms of EA within an evaluative sequence.

Turnover Intention

TI was identified as the final behavioural consequence of the AEP sequence, ranging from active MGP-driven exit to suppressed intention constrained by external factors. Participants with active TI linked their intention to leave directly to unrecognised effort, shifting standards, and the psychological responses these produced. One participant’s decision to move toward freelancing rather than another corporate role is analytically significant, as it suggests that sustained AEP exposure can produce not only exit from a single organisation but a broader rejection of corporate recognition systems. A common and theoretically important finding was suppressed TI, in which participants clearly intended to leave but were held back by multiple conditions rather than genuine organizational commitment. This extends Vaamonde et al. (2018), who find that justice perceptions are negatively related to TI, by showing that remaining in an organisation does not indicate the absence of TI. Practical constraints can keep an employee in place while their psychological investment is completely gone.

Synthesis

Taken together, the findings establish the Almost-Enough Phenomenon as a distinct, sequential experiential construct grounded in empirical data. The consistency of the MGP → LH → IP → EA → TI sequence across participants working independently across different industries supports its conceptualisation as a separate psychological experience rather than a general form of workplace dissatisfaction. The findings extend Siegrist’s (1996, as revised 2012) ERI model by identifying the moving goalpost as the structural process that sustains effort-reward imbalance, and extend Feenstra et al.’s (2020) contextual reframing of IP by showing that specific evaluative conditions, not just broad environmental factors, produce IP in sequence with LH. Critically, the findings also identify the conditions that interrupt the AEP sequence, including self-concept strength, cognitive

reframing, managerial transparency, and functioning recognition environments, shifting the locus of intervention from the individual to the system.

CONCLUSION

The present study conceptualises the Almost-Enough Phenomenon as a distinct, sequential psychological experience in which the Moving-Goalpost Phenomenon produces Learned Helplessness and Impostor Phenomenon as internalised responses, generating Effort Adjustment and Turnover Intention as behavioural outcomes. By naming this phenomenon, the study shifts responsibility from individual inadequacy to systemic accountability, offering organisations a framework to address recognition-withholding practices before their psychological and behavioural costs accumulate.

The findings suggest that interventions targeting LH or IP individually are insufficient without addressing the evaluative systems that produce them. The study is limited by its exploratory, qualitative design, which does not permit generalisation. Future research should examine AEP across cultural contexts, test its components quantitatively, and investigate the time threshold beyond which MGP exposure produces irreversible motivational decline.

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