Abstract

Activities vary by the extent to which they deliver immediate benefits that are internal to pursuing the activity and delayed benefits, which are external to the activity. Based on self-control research and research on the empathy gap, we predict and find a shift in the weight given to these incentives: people find external incentives to be more important when planning to pursue an activity than during actual pursuit and they find internal incentives to be more important in pursuing than planning. Specifically, we find that people give more weight to external incentives in applying for a job or college than in pursuing a job or a college degree and the opposite holds for internal incentives (Studies 1 & 2). Because of the shifts in the weight of incentives, people choose to pursue activities that they are less likely to persist on. Thus, using tasks that pose a tradeoff between internal and external incentives, we observe that people often choose based on external incentives, although it is the presence of internal incentives rather than external ones, which motivates them to follow through, slack less, complete a task and collect both external and internal incentives (Studies 3-5).