

Motivation Theories and Human Resources

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Bott". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Jennifer" written in a larger, more prominent style than the last name "Bott".

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Abstract

Motivation is universal. It affects everyone and anyone who manages others' needs to make sure that they are using it appropriately. There are many different theories that managers need to have, at least, a basic understanding of. The review of these theories and application is important to obtaining and retaining a workforce that is both productive and happy. I am going to give an introduction to many of the different types of motivation theories and how they work. I am then going to analyze these to apply them to human resources and management in general and give my take on what I believe is the best approach to take towards motivation in today's workplace.

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Through this thesis I am going to educate the reader on different motivation theories that have developed through the past century. These motivation theories are useful to any manager or supervisor that has employees that they supervise. No matter what the workplace, motivation is most likely going to be necessary to meet goals and for the workplace to be a positive and successful place. After many of these motivation theories are discussed in detail, I am going to analyze some of them and relate motivation back to the field of Human Resources. I will also discuss some problems with implementing motivation theories and particular aspects of them that need evaluated further. This applies to me as a Human Resources Management major and this knowledge is useful for any Human Resources Management major.

“Motivation can be defined as ‘the degree to which an individual is personally committed to expending effort in the accomplishment of a specified activity or goal’” (Eisenberg 265).

As a Human Resources Management major, when I enter the world as a human resources professional I will need to have knowledge of motivation theories and how they are applied to make sure that employees are properly motivated to do their job well. Motivation is a very important aspect of any manager’s job. Keeping your workforce happy and retaining them is key to the success of any organization. Motivation can also be seen as a competitive edge and is “key for talent retention and performance” (Motivation 1). The goal of the organization is “to create a workplace that is engaging and motivational, where employees want to stay, grow and contribute their knowledge, experience and expertise” (Motivation 1).

Levy defines work motivation as, “a force that drives people to behave in a way that energizes, directs, and sustains their work behavior” (252). Motivation is something that can be difficult because it cannot really be measured and it is not something that can be observed such as a product being produced. Even though this is true, it is important for the success of any

organization to have the proper methods of motivation in place. Motivation theories are placed into three different groups. The first group includes the need-motive-value theories, of which there are four. The second group consists of the Cognitive Choice Theories. The third and final group is made up of Self-Regulation Theories.

Motivation theories are important guidelines for motivating employees:

“As HR professionals seek to support their organizations in attracting and retaining the best and brightest talent, motivational theories can offer insight into how to motivate employees, what is important and what the rewards may be—with the ultimate goal of improved and/or sustained performance by individual employees and the organization as a whole. Motivation is at the heart of performance, essential for success for both the organization and its workforce, as a group and as individuals” (Motivation 4).

Need-motive-value theories, “emphasize the role of personality traits, stable dispositions, needs, and values as the basis for behavioral differences” (Levy 253). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is the first of the four need-motive-value theories. This theory was quite popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The scientific community no longer values Maslow’s beliefs but the business world still studies it. Maslow has five different needs that he displays in a pyramid style. The bottom the pyramid starts with physiological needs then moves up to, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization tops it off.

Physiological needs are the basic needs such as food, shelter, and water. These must be maintained for existence. Once these have been met the individual can then move onto worrying about safety needs. Safety needs are the need to be out of the risk of threat or danger. After the safety need has been met, the individual focuses on their love need. Love needs (or social needs)

are the human's needs for affiliation, belongingness, and friendship. After these love needs are met the individual is motivated to meet esteem needs. Esteem needs are the need for respect from others, self confidence, and belief in oneself. After all four of the aforementioned needs have been met, the individual will begin to seek self-actualization. Self-actualization is the process of fulfilling what the individual believes to be their potential. (Levy 255)

The previously discussed, hierarchy of needs, applies to motivation because realizing this; the motivator knows that all employees are not going to be at the same level with their needs. So they need to be motivated differently because they all have different needs. This theory is one that has not been able to be tested or proved because needs are so abstract, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to see if this is true for individuals. (Levy 255)

Stemming from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Alderfer's ERG theory is a generated theory of motivation. ERG is an acronym for existence, relatedness, and growth. These are the three needs that make up Alderfer's theory. These three are, in essence, parallel to Maslow's five needs. The existence needs are equivalent to Maslow's physiological and safety needs. The relatedness needs corresponds to Maslow's need for love. Growth needs are the equivalent of Maslow's esteem and self-actualization needs. The main difference between Maslow and Alderfer is that in Alderfer's model, all three of the needs categories can be happening at the same time, whereas in Maslow's theory, one needs to be fulfilled before the individual can move onto the next.

Alderfer had an addition to his theory which was the frustration-regression hypothesis. This hypothesis addresses when the individual gets frustrated with maintaining the requirements to stay at the level that they are at and they will adjust their sights and put their energy towards a lower level need and maintaining that lower level need. Alderfer's theory has been researched

somewhat more than Maslow's but most of the research was conducted by Alderfer himself and had mixed results. Testing Alderfer's theory presents the same difficulties as testing Maslow's theory.

Another theory of motivation that relates to needs is Herzberg's two-factor theory. The two parts to his theory are motivators and hygienes. He defined motivators as, "things that lead employees to be satisfied with and motivated by their jobs—things like recognition, interesting work, responsibility, reinforcement for work well done, and potential advancement" (Levy 256). Hygienes are more related to the context of the job. The examples of hygienes that Levy lists on page 256 are, "supervisory problems, poor interpersonal relations at work, low salary, and poor working conditions. Herzberg ultimately studied what the reactions between the previously mentioned hygienes and motivators were."

A point that Herzberg made is that people could not have any of the hygienes present in their job but they could still only have a neutral attitude toward their job. They need to have motivators present to reach job satisfaction and be motivated to do a good job. The thought has been more investigated than the previous two but the results are still very mixed.

The job characteristics theory is a more updated version of the need-motive-value theories we have previously looked at in this paper. The job characteristics theory focuses on matching an individual to a job or even changing the position so that it is more suited to the individual. The job characteristics theory is presented by Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham. They used the work previously done by Herzberg and built off of it to come up with this theory. Their argument is that, "motivation is determined by the joint effects of individual differences in personality and characteristics of the job" (Levy 257).

The job characteristics model starts with five core job dimensions: Skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. These five dimensions lead to three critical psychological states which are experienced meaningfulness of the work, experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work, and knowledge of results. This all leads to personal and work outcomes, of which there are four: high internal motivation, high quality of work performance, high satisfaction with the work, and low absenteeism and turnover. This model interacts between the job and the individual to increase motivation and worker satisfaction. (Levy)

The aforementioned model for job characteristics relates to growth need strength (GNS) which is, “the extent to which individuals value or desire fulfilling higher-order needs” (Levy 259). This growth need strength is what controls and determines the reactions between the different variable in the model. There have been some studies done that support parts of the model presented by Hackman and Oldham but the model as a whole has not been purported. It is obvious thought that the characteristics of a job do play a role in how motivated the employee is to perform the job (Levy).

The next group of motivation theories that Levy covers are cognitive choice theories. These theories look behind the scenes at the, “cognitive processes involved in decision making and choice” (Levy 260). This group of theories focuses on the belief that humans are consciously making decisions in a rational manner.

The first of the cognitive choice theories is equity theory. Equity theory was proposed by J. Stacy Adams in the early 1960s. The idea for equity theory came from Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance, “explains how and why we change our behaviors or beliefs to be consistent with other behaviors or beliefs” (Levy 261). The equity

theory model of motivation theory believes that, “behavior is initiated, directed, and maintained by the attempts of individuals to preserve some internal psychological balance” (Levy 260). Simply stated, a person will compare what they bring to the organization to what the organization presents to them in the way of rewards for their performance. (Levy)

Equity theory has some interesting assumptions that accompany it. The one that the book mainly focuses on and I found interesting is the assumption that if a person feels that they are paid too much for their inputs into the job, they will adjust by putting in more or telling their superior that they are paid too much. I believe that most human beings will not act in this manner. They always want more than they have so the likelihood of an incumbent coming forth with an “issue” such as this is very unlikely. There is not research that indicates this and that a situation where a person would actually do this is rare. It is noted that there has been some support for the basis of equity theory but that it is still mixed. (Levy)

There is a newer version of equity theory called equity sensitivity that addresses the details behind equity theory. Equity sensitivity is, “an individual difference indicating the extent to which people are affected by over-reward or under-reward situations” (Levy 263). This theory has proven useful as an extension of equity theory. Employees can be evaluated and placed into a category according to equity sensitivity. There are three categories benevolents, entitleds, and equity-sensitives. Relationships between which category a person falls in and the factors of job satisfaction have been drawn and useful to study people. This is something that will continue to be studied in the future. (Levy)

Another new topic that has stemmed from equity theory is organizational justice. Organizational justice is, “the study of people’s perceptions of fairness in organizational contexts” (Levy 263). Organizational justice has to do more with the specific type of justice.

There are three types that are used in motivation theory. The first type is distributive justice which has to do with the fairness of the outcome of a situation. The second type is procedural justice which relates to how fair the procedures and processes in the workplace are perceived to be by the employees. The final aspect is interactional justice. Interactional justice has to do with the ways that decisions and procedures are communicated to the employees and if the employee perceives this method is fair. All of these are different aspects of the workplace and refer to how the employees view them based on fairness. Levy states that, “organizational justice is one of the most heavily researched topics in organizational psychology today” (263).

The second of the cognitive choice theories is expectancy theory. Expectancy theory is “an individual’s belief about the likelihood of achieving a desired performance level when exerting a certain amount of effort” (Levy 264). This is the theory created by Victor Vroom. He got the basis for his theory from the work of Edward Tolman.

The model that exemplifies this theory states that, “people’s behaviors result from conscious choices among alternatives and that these alternatives are evaluated with respect to valance, instrumentality, and expectancy” (Levy 264). All of this can be true if it is believed that people are rational and will make a rational decision (which is something that obviously cannot be proven).

The three components of expectancy theory determine a person’s reaction and the way that they evaluate alternatives. The first component is expectancy. Expectancy is, “an individual’s belief about the likelihood of achieving a desired performance level when exerting a certain amount of effort” (Levy 265). The second component is instrumentality which is, “the perceived relationship between the performance of a particular behavior and the likelihood that a certain outcome will result from that behavior” (Levy 265). The third and final component of

expectancy theory is valance. Valance “is the expected level of satisfaction to be derived from some outcome” (Levy 265). These three components work together to make motivation happen and to avoid negative consequences.

The next group of theories is the self-regulation theories. These theories involve goal setting by employees and those goals determining their behavior. Levy defines self regulation as, “the manner in which individuals monitor their own behaviors and make adjustments to those behaviors in the pursuit of goals” (267). Obviously, when reading the definition it can be inferred that this is a very motivational theory. If an employee has to work to meet goals that they have set there is definitely motivation involved. These theories differ from the types previously because it comes into play after the goals are set, whereas, the previously mentioned groups help determine how goals are set and choices that employees make.

The first of the self-regulation theories is goal-setting theory. Goal-setting theory was developed by Edwin Locke but it was based on the previous work done by Kurt Lewin. Goal-setting theory is, “the most researched and well-established theory of work motivation” (Levy 267). The theory is based on four ways that goals affect our behavior. The first of the four ways is that, “goals direct our attention to a particular task or element of a task” (Levy 267). The second is that, “goals mobilize on-task effort. In other words, they allow us to focus our effort appropriately to move toward their attainment.” (Levy 267). The third way that goals affect our behavior is that “goals enable us to be persistent as we strive toward their attainment. Without goals we would often give up and move on to something else” (Levy 267). The fourth and final way that goals affect us is that “goals help us to facilitate strategies that can be used at a higher cognitive level to move toward their attainment” (Levy 267).

This theory has been extensively researched and there have been some interesting conclusions formed from the research that was done. The first is that, “people tend to perform better when they are assigned or choose difficult, specific goals than when they are assigned or choose easy goals or no goals” (Levy 268). This is said to occur, “only when individuals accept and are committed to those goals” (Levy 268). The last part of the finding is that when the employee receives positive feedback in regards to the accomplishments related to the goal, this positively affects performance. All of these together have helped to make the goal-setting theory to become quite popular and one of the most studied. The key statement of the goal-setting theory is, “motivation is enhanced when employees accept and are committed to specific, difficult goals and when feedback about progress toward those goals is provided” (Levy 268). This statement simplifies the main points of the theory.

The second of the self-regulation theories is the social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theories, “stressed the interplay of both behavior and cognitive elements of motivation” (Levy 268). The idea for this theory came from the aggravation present with the current theories due to the fact that they failed to address the role that cognitive processes had with motivation. The main social cognitive theory was created by Albert Bandura. It involves three major components of self-regulation. The first of the three is self-observation; this “refers to the extent to which we pay attention to specific aspects of our behavior” (Levy 268). Self-observation relates to the fact that people are only able to process so many aspects of their behavior at once, they have to choose what they are going to focus on. This process is how we choose and monitor what we are doing and allow for motivation to take place and develop. The second component is self-evaluation. Self-evaluation “accounts for the attention that individuals devote to feedback processes” (Levy 268). In other words, it is how the individual evaluates their own performance

and effort that they put into a project. The third and final part of self-regulation is self-reactions. Self reactions “are the internal responses to self-evaluation” (Levy 268). The reactions can be of two types, affective or behavioral.

The second element of Bandura’s social cognitive theory is self-efficacy expectations. Self- efficacy expectations are, “individuals’ perceptions of their ability to successfully complete a task or attain a goal” (Levy 269). There are different ways in which this can be taken. The author, Bandura argues, “strengthening one’s self-efficacy enhances motivation to attain a particular goal” (Levy 269). I believe this to be true but it has also been argued that it is closer tied to the expectancy aspect of VIE theory. Through reading about self-efficacy, it is very obvious that it is closely tied with the individual’s capabilities and expectations. As a human, who “self-regulates” we will monitor ourselves on our goals and attempt to meet them in the time frame set. (Levy)

A final theory that I found through other research and is not associated with the three groups above is McClelland’s needs for achievement, affiliation, and power. I found this theory interesting and tied it back to many of the previously discussed theories. McClelland’s theory believes that people have three needs. The first need is achievement, the second is affiliation, and the third is power. His theory believes that people experience “these needs to varying degrees” (Motivation 4).

Ultimately, the responsibility for motivation needs to be split between the senior leadership, direct manager, and the employee. There are many factors that are involved in motivation including, “trust, engagement and values (individual and organizational) to job satisfaction, achievement acknowledgement and rewards” (Motivation 1). These all work together to create the complexity that lies behind motivating employees.

Rewarding an employee is the main type of motivation. When researching motivation in organizations I found a lot of information about how to motivate employees and specifically what type of rewards to use. There has been some very interesting discussion and research done on the different types of rewards and how much to reward an employee. There is also discussion of what the different types and amounts of rewards have led to in regards to performance.

The first discussion related to awards is about value-driven motivation. This is a model that, “helps them (employees) focus on productive work [and] on developing a high enough value to attract those desired rewards” (Tan). The article talks about how this theory is more useful from Maslow’s need-based model because Maslow’s model, “preoccupies the employees in unproductive behavior and activities in their plot towards chasing after attractive incentives and compensation” (Tan). The theory is based on motivating employees to perform better to increase their individual value and that this will, in turn, reward them financially and with knowledge, skills, and experience.

An important aspect of deciding what type of motivation theory to use with your workforce has to do with discovering what motivates them. Another approach that can be taken is looking at why they are no longer motivated if they previously were. The factors that are affecting the employees could have to do with the job content, their lack of knowledge, co-workers, or the manager. Many of these can be fixed through mediation or training. The best way to make sure that employees stay motivated is through communication with them and working together with them to solve issues. By actively participating in the motivation of your employees you will be able to reduce costly turnover and ensure a positive culture for all employees. (“On Leadership”)

A typical blame for a lack of motivation and high turnover rate in organizations is the compensation system. Related to this is the fact that, “many young people appear to be more motivated by money than by a rewarding career” (Tan). These are problems that human resource managers have faced and are going to have to face as the economy continues to improve. This leads to increased pay for employees who are not performing to a level that is expected for what they are being paid. They will continue to show a lack of motivation and be given a pay raise by the company who is hoping to see an increase in performance but in many cases this is not so. “The problem with money motivation is that it is superficial and does not quite sustain the motivation level of people once they get used to the increased salaries” (Tan). Another aspect of an organization this method of motivation affects is perceived fairness. Employees who stay and work hard but are not given pay raises will become discouraged and the culture at the organization will suffer.

The “What’s In It For Me” mentality is something that is important in all organizations and needs to be addressed “if organizations want to achieve a sustained motivation level in their staff” (Tan). Leaders of organizations have not taken a serious approach to motivation and need to begin to realize its importance in the organization. Motivators need to return to the root of the issue of motivation and focus on offering opportunities to improve knowledge, skills, and experience of employees and a more positive and motivated workforce will follow. The employees know they will be rewarded if they improve in these three factors because their work will improve and the organization looks favorably upon this.

Another issue facing organizations in regards to motivation is the striking differences between employees as people. This is an issue because, due to the fact that people are different, “motivating factors vary from person to person” (Gyopos). Everyone has different factors that

motivate them. This can pose many difficulties for any manager who is charged with the task of motivating employees. A method of motivation needs to be developed that can address the needs of as many of the employees as possible. The most important aspect in the planning of the motivation techniques is that the motivator “show(s) a genuine concern and respect [for] their people” (Gyopos).

“The role of HR and organizational leaders is to foster an environment for excellence” (Motivation 1). This statement clearly defines what needs to be done by the organization to foster a positive culture and keep employees motivated to do their best. By keeping employees motivated, the organization will be able to “successfully retain talent, meet goals, and go beyond expectations” (Motivation 1). These three objectives are or should be the objectives for any organization wanting to sustain itself.

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