

Motivational Research



Introduction

It is widely accepted that motivation has the potential to influence three aspects of our behaviour - choice, persistence and effort. Put simply, motivation determines what we do, how long we are willing to do it for and how hard we are willing to work on it. In the past, these forces were considered as trait i.e. what motivates us is 'hard-wired', fairly stable and enduring over time. More recently however, motivation has been thought of as more changeable, something Dörnyei refers to as a 'changing cumulative arousal'. The variable nature of this more recent conception of Motivation suggests it is open to influence from the environment, or Climate, and can be impacted therefore by the behaviour of other individuals.

Motivation has been heavily researched, particularly over the latter half of the past century. Indeed, one third of the space in published industrial-organisational psychology journals was occupied by motivation research by the end of the 20th century¹. Many theories have been proposed, some with little success, but several core themes have received consistent support. Each of these will be discussed in turn followed by the key levers we can identify from this research for improving motivation at work. It will become more obvious over the next section that motivation is not all about money! The themes can be broadly divided into two categories - content theories, or what motivates, and process theories, or how/why the 'whats' motivate.

The Research - Content Theories

Early motivation theories proposed the importance of needs to individuals in determining behaviour. Charles Murray defined needs as "a potentiality or readiness to respond in a certain way under certain given circumstances"². Building upon Murray's work, David McClelland proposed that people were driven, to varying degrees, by three socially learned motives, the Need for Achievement, The Need for Power and the Need for Affiliation. Murray and McClelland's work formed the basis for many of the subsequent theories of needs, perhaps the most well known being Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two Factor theory.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow³ claimed that motives are arranged in a hierarchy from basic to high order needs, the highest of all being self-actualisation. The levels of the hierarchy are moved through in stages, beginning at the lowest order. Maslow argued we must satisfy the lower order needs before we begin to see the higher order needs as motivational. In other words, if food, water and basic security are a struggle it is unlikely we are going to arrive at work driven to succeed against a standard of excellence.

Maslow's theory has received criticism over the years, not least of which questioning the hierarchy itself and the need to move through it in stages. Artists, for instance, spend a great deal of time striving for and indulging in self-actualisation but basic physiological and safety needs often go unsatisfied. The importance of needs should not be discounted but it is perhaps necessary to treat them more flexibly than the hierarchy suggests.

Maslow's theory is relatively simple to apply to the working environment. If organisations help its employee satisfy their basic needs, for example, ensure that equipment is regularly maintained and serviced and therefore safe, (whether or not the hierarchy is valid) those individuals can spend more time focusing on performance, achieving success and enhancing skill rather than worrying about injury.

Two-Factor theory

Herzberg⁴ focused on the working environment on the premise that having a satisfied workforce means having a motivated workforce; if the environment breeds satisfaction, self motivation will grow. Herzberg identified two sets of factors, those that satisfy individuals, for example, feedback, recognition, task variety, autonomy [parallel with Maslow's higher order needs] and those that have the potential to dissatisfy, for example line managers, colleagues, remuneration and physical working conditions [parallel with Maslow's lower order needs].

¹ Cooper, C.I. and Roberston, I.T. (1986) Editorial foreword, *International Review of Industrial and Organisational Psychology* (pp ix-xi), Chichester, England: Wiley

² Murray, H.A. (1938). *Explorations in Personality*. New York: Oxford University Press

³ Maslow A.H. (1943) *A theory of human motivation*. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396

⁴ Herzberg, F., Mausner, B. & Snyderman, B.B. (1959) *The motivation to work*. New York: Wiley

The second set of factors is called 'hygiene factors'. As in a kitchen or hospital, say, they are not necessarily noticeable until removed. When absent or incorrectly set up, there are potentially serious, negative consequences. In work, their

absence means a job will be less satisfying to carry out. In other words these factors do not themselves satisfy, but they do dissatisfy when not there.

The Research - Process Theories

Reinforcement

Behaviourists also believed that the environment was important, finding that motivation could be increased, or indeed decreased, by manipulation of the environment. Reinforcement, i.e. the introduction of a positive experience or the removal of a negative condition as a consequence of a certain behaviour, increases motivation for that behaviour where as punishment decreases motivation. Extinction i.e. a lack of positive consequence for behaviour [including the removal of a negative condition], was also identified as lowering motivation, all of which point to the importance of reinforcement.

In contrast to the research which had gone before, the latter half of the 20th century brought the onset of a cognitive revolution, that is, research became concerned with the mind of workers. Before that, as mentioned above, psychologists believed that changing the environment would result in a change in motivation and thus a change in behaviour. Now however, psychologists began to see individuals as 'thinkers' - the environment influenced motivation on the basis that it influenced thoughts and beliefs which served to increase/decrease motivation and drive behaviour.

Expectancy theory

Vroom⁵ pointed to the importance of three perceptions or expectancies:

1. Increasing the effort invested in a task - working harder - will lead to a higher level of performance of that task
2. Performing that task to a higher level will affect the outcome of the task - working smarter
3. The potential outcomes of the task have positive valence, i.e. the outcomes are valued and directly/indirectly satisfy needs

The absence of any of these perceptions, for example, an individual believing that no matter what they do they cannot perform to a higher standard, means that motivation suffers. This suggests that high self-efficacy, i.e. belief in one's ability to achieve, and individual values are vital for motivation.

Equity theory

John Stacey Adams⁶ maintained that if an employee perceived what they gained from doing a task was reflective of what they put into it, they would be motivated. Imbalance was found to result in demotivation. Individuals make their judgement of equity with reference to comparable colleagues and peers, so called referent others. Discovering a peer experiences a higher input-output ratio - receiving greater return for what they invest in a task - can create a feeling of inequity making a previously satisfied individual dissatisfied. This theory was the beginning of what is today thought of as organisational justice and perceiving fairness in the workplace.

Goal theory

Research carried out by Locke and several other collaborators identified the setting of specific, challenging goals as leading to higher performance than situations where goals were not set or those goals that were set were not specific. A host of confirmatory research formalised the theory that based on the correct conditions, goal-setting is motivational. These conditions are often referred to by the well known acronym, SMART, or our variation, C-SMAART, that is, goals should be Challenging, Specific, Measureable, Actual, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. Relevance is a key part - if goals are not personally relevant they are unlikely to be motivational. In addition to SMAART, goals need to be challenging (to increase performance) and followed with feedback.

If this brief review has whetted your appetite for more a comprehensive account of the theories, please take a look at the readings referenced in the footnotes. These seminal papers incorporate the core motivational theories from a century of research.

Given the breadth and complexity of the research, it is not surprising there are differences in the proposed theories - attempting to explain how and why humans think and behave

⁵ Vroom, V.H. (1964) *Work Motivation*. New York: Wiley & Sons

⁶ Adams, J.S. (1963) *Toward an understanding of inequity*. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 422-436

as we do is not without complication! Nevertheless, the considerable support for the above theories suggests that as a group they give us a reliable understanding, both of what motivation is, and more importantly, how to think about motivating others. The points below summarise the key levers of motivation that can be drawn from the literature.

1. Needs are individual and should be treated as so
2. An individual's environment plays an important role in their motivation. Positive behaviour should be reinforced and elements that have the potential to dissatisfy should be removed
3. A feeling of justice must exist so that individuals are fairly recognised for their work with recognition based on what is individually valued
4. Individuals need to feel that an increase in the effort and persistence they invest in a task will bring about an

improvement in performance and an increased chance of success or a higher level of it

5. An individual's goals must be C-SMAART and accompanied by feedback
6. Importantly, an individual needs to feel they are capable of being successful. They need to believe that they can achieve

These points all have two things in common. Firstly, they are all under the influence of the leader. It is leaders' primary responsibility to forge a Climate in which their people feel fully engaged and motivated to help achieve organisational goals. Secondly, they all emphasise the importance of individuality. When we consider how we can motivate individuals, we need to think about their individual needs.





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