

## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

# THE FUTURE OF WORK MOTIVATION THEORY

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The topic of employee motivation plays a central role in the field of management—both practically and theoretically. Managers see motivation as an integral part of the performance equation at all levels, while organizational researchers see it as a fundamental building block in the development of useful theories of effective management practice. Indeed, the topic of motivation permeates many of the subfields that compose the study of management, including leadership, teams, performance management, managerial ethics, decision making, and organizational change. It is not surprising, therefore, that this topic has received so much attention over the past several decades in both research journals and management periodicals.

Whereas several recent articles have examined how far we have come in researching work motivation, this special forum focuses on where we are going.<sup>1</sup> That is, we ask the questions: What is the future of work motivation theories? What are the critical questions that must be addressed if progress in the field is to be made? What is the future research agenda? How can we extend or modify current models of work motivation so they continue to be relevant in the future? And where are entirely new models of motivation needed to further our understanding of employee behavior and job performance in contemporary organizations?

To understand where the field is going, however, we must first understand where it has

been. This introduction represents an overview of the field of work motivation from a theoretical standpoint and lays the foundation for the articles that follow.<sup>2</sup>

The term *motivation* derives from the Latin word for movement (*movere*.) Building on this concept, Atkinson defines motivation as “the contemporary (immediate) influence on direction, vigor, and persistence of action” (1964: 2), while Vroom defines it as “a process governing choice made by persons . . . among alternative forms of voluntary activity” (1964: 6). Campbell and Pritchard suggest that

motivation has to do with a set of independent/dependent variable relationships that explain the direction, amplitude, and persistence of an individual's behavior, holding constant the effects of aptitude, skill, and understanding of the task, and the constraints operating in the environment (1976: 63-130).

These and other definitions have three common denominators. They are all principally concerned with factors or events that energize, channel, and sustain human behavior over time. In various ways, contemporary theories of work motivation derive from efforts to explicate with increasing precision how these three factors interrelate to determine behavior in organizations.

### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN MOTIVATION THEORY

The earliest approaches to understanding human motivation date from the time of the Greek philosophers and focus on the concept of hedo-

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<sup>1</sup> For recent reviews of the research literature on work motivation, see Kanfer (1990), Mitchell (1997), Ambrose and Kulik (1999), and Mitchell and Daniels (2002).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed examination of the evolution of work motivation theories, see Pinder (1998) and Porter, Bigley, and Steers (2003).

nism as a principle driving force in behavior. Individuals were seen as focusing their efforts on seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. This principle was later refined and further developed in the works of philosophers like Locke, Bentham, Mill, and Helvetius, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the issue of motivation began to migrate from the realm of philosophy to the newly emerging science of psychology. Challenges immediately arose over the use of hedonism as the basis for the study of motivation. As Vroom explains, hedonism had

no clear-cut specification of the type of events that were pleasurable or painful, or even how these events could be determined for a particular individual; nor did it make clear how persons acquired their conceptions of ways of attaining pleasure or pain, or how the source of pleasure or pain might be modified by experience. In short, the hedonistic assumption has no empirical content and was untestable (1964: 10).

As a result, behavioral scientists began searching for more empirically based models to explain motivation.

Among these early models were instinct theories, such as those proposed by James, Freud, and McDougall. Instead of viewing behavior as highly rational, these theorists argued that much behavior resulted from instinct, defined by McDougall as

"an inherited or innate psychological predisposition which determined its possessor to perceive, or pay attention to, objects of a certain class, to experience an emotional excitement of a particular quality upon perceiving such an object, and to act in regard to it in a particular manner (1908: 4).

James identified a list of such instincts that included locomotion, curiosity, sociability, fear, jealousy, and sympathy.

Beginning around the 1920s, however, as increased limitations of the theory began to emerge, instinct theories began to be replaced by models based on drive or reinforcement. Led by such psychologists as Thorndike, Woodworth, and Hull, drive theorists introduced the concept of learning in motivated behavior and posited that decisions concerning present or future behaviors are largely influenced by the consequences of rewards associated with past behavior. Allport (1954) referred to this as *hedo-*

*nism of the past*. Past actions that led to positive outcomes would tend to be repeated, whereas past actions that led to negative outcomes would tend to diminish. Thorndike (1911) referred to this as the *law of effect*, while Hull (1943) suggested that effort or motivation was largely determined by *drive × habit*.

Skinner (1953) and others later built on these principles with the introduction of operant conditioning (referred to by some as *reinforcement theories*), arguing that, over time, individuals learn contingent relationships between actions and their consequences and that these contingencies guide future behavior. Reinforcement models continue to thrive today as explanatory vehicles for understanding work motivation and job performance, as well as in the workplace in various performance management programs (e.g., Komaki, 2003).

While psychologists were focusing on instincts and drives, managers were focusing on more pragmatic issues. A key development here was the work of Frederick Taylor and his colleagues in the scientific management movement. Coming from an industrial engineering background, Taylor (1911), along with many of his associates, focused his attention on the inefficiencies of factory production in an increasingly industrialized age. These colleagues proposed a new and paternalistic approach to managing workers that relied on a combination of job training, pay-for-performance incentive systems, improved employee selection techniques, and job redesign, including the introduction of ergonomics. Far from being exploitative in intent, Taylor and his associates saw scientific management as an economic boon to both workers and management through the use of improved manufacturing techniques, increased operating efficiency, and shared rewards. However, the subsequent rise of an increasingly sophisticated workforce, coupled with company efforts to maximize productivity without simultaneously increasing employee rewards, eventually served to discredit this system, leading to the widespread rise of unionization efforts in the 1930s.

Meanwhile, social scientists and managers began to consider the role of social influences on behavior in the 1930s. The role of group dynamics and the need to view employees as complex beings with multiple motivational influences were recognized as powerful influences

on performance. Best noted among these research endeavors are Mayo's (1933) and Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) works. Bendix summarized the principle contribution of this human relations movement by observing that the "failure to treat workers as human beings came to be regarded as the cause of low morale, poor craftsmanship, unresponsiveness, and confusion" (1956: 294). McGregor (1960) later built on this in his classic early work, *The Human Side of Enterprise*.

By the 1950s, several new models of work motivation emerged, which collectively have been referred to as *content theories*, since their principal aim was to identify factors associated with motivation. Included here is Maslow's (1954) need hierarchy theory, which suggests that, as individuals develop, they work their way up a hierarchy based on the fulfillment of a series of prioritized needs, including physiological, safety and security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow argued that the first three needs on the list represent deficiency needs that people must master before they can develop into a healthy personality, while the last two represent growth needs that relate to individual achievement and the development of human potential. Alderfer (1972) later adapted this model to encompass just three needs: existence, relatedness, and growth.

A second need theory of the same era, first introduced by Murray (1938) but more fully developed by McClelland (1961, 1971), ignored the concept of a hierarchy and focused instead on the motivational potency of an array of distinct and clearly defined needs, including achievement, affiliation, power, and autonomy. McClelland argued that, at any given time, individuals possess several often competing needs that serve to motivate behavior when activated. This contrasts with Maslow's notion of a steady progression over time up a hypothetical hierarchy as individuals grow and mature. By far, most of the attention in McClelland's model focused on the needs for achievement (defined as behavior directed toward competition with a standard of excellence) and power (defined as a need to have control over one's environment). McClelland's conceptualization offered researchers a set of clearly defined needs as they related to workplace behavior, in contrast to Maslow's more abstract conceptualizations (e.g., need for achievement versus need for self-actualization)

and, thus, has found considerable popularity in research on individual factors relating to work motivation.

While Maslow and McClelland and their colleagues focused on the role of individual differences in motivation, Herzberg (1966; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959) sought to understand how work activities and the nature of one's job influence motivation and performance. In his motivation-hygiene theory, Herzberg argued that work motivation is largely influenced by the extent to which a job is intrinsically challenging and provides opportunities for recognition and reinforcement. Herzberg saw the context surrounding a job (which he referred to as *hygiene factors*) as being far more temporal in terms of leading to satisfaction and future motivation. Herzberg deserves credit for introducing the field to the role of job design—specifically, job enrichment—as a key factor in work motivation and job attitudes. In subsequent work, Hackman and Oldham (1976) and others have extended this line of research as it relates to work design, motivation, and job performance, while others, including Deci (1975; Ryan & Deci, 2000), have articulated theories focusing specifically on task-based intrinsic versus extrinsic factors in motivation (e.g., self-determination theory).

### THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF WORK MOTIVATION THEORIES

Beginning in the mid 1960s, a new approach to the study of work motivation emerged, which focused on delineating the processes underlying work motivation. Process theories contrast sharply with the earlier content theories, which focused on identifying factors associated with motivation in a relatively static environment. Process theorists view work motivation from a dynamic perspective and look for causal relationships across time and events as they relate to human behavior in the workplace.

Central to the process theory genre is a series of cognitive theories of motivation that collectively attempt to understand the thought processes that people go through in determining how to behave in the workplace. In our view, the theories generated during the late 1960s and early 1970s make this period something of a "golden age" of work motivation theories. Never before and, some would argue, never since has

so much progress been made in explicating the etiology of work motivation.

Perhaps best known of the cognitive theories is expectancy (or expectancy-valence) theory. Expectancy theory derives from the early work of Lewin (1938) and Tolman (1959), who saw behavior as purposeful, goal directed, and largely based on conscious intentions. Vroom (1964) presented the first systematic formulation of expectancy theory as it related to the workplace. He argued that employees tend to rationally evaluate various on-the-job work behaviors (e.g., working harder) and then choose those behaviors they believe will lead to their most valued work-related rewards and outcomes (e.g., a promotion). Thus, the attractiveness of a particular task and the energy invested in it will depend a great deal on the extent to which the employee believes its accomplishment will lead to valued outcomes.

Porter and Lawler (1968) expanded Vroom's initial work to recognize the role of individual differences (e.g., employee abilities and skills) and role clarity in linking job effort to actual job performance. Porter and Lawler also clarified the relationship between performance and subsequent satisfaction, arguing that this relationship is mediated by the extent and quality of the rewards employees receive in exchange for good job performance. Finally, Porter and Lawler incorporated a feedback loop to recognize learning by employees about past relationships. That is, if superior performance in the past failed to lead to superior rewards, future employee effort may suffer as incentives and the reward system lose credibility in the employee's eyes.

Since its initial publication, a number of scholars have worked to extend or further refine the basic cognitive expectancy framework to reflect emerging research findings and new theoretical developments (e.g., Kanfer, 1990; Mitchell, 1997). For example, expectancy theory has been used to study forms of work behavior other than job performance, including employee absenteeism, turnover, and organizational citizenship behavior (Mobley, 1977; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Organ, 1988; Porter & Steers, 1973; Steers & Rhodes, 1978). Researchers have also linked group expectations and social influences to individual work motivation decisions (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975). Finally, basic expectancy principles have been incorporated into

several emerging models of cross-cultural influences on work motivation and job performance (Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982; Earley, 1997; Steers & Sanchez-Runde, 2001; Triandis, 1995).

In addition to expectancy theory, a number of other important cognitive theories of work motivation have been developed since the 1960s, each with its own focus. Adams (1963), for example, introduced equity theory to explain how employees respond both cognitively and behaviorally to perceived unfairness in the workplace (see also Mowday & Colwell, 2003, and Weick, Bougon, & Maruyama, 1976). Adams argued that both conditions of underpayment and overpayment can influence subsequent behavior. Recent work on procedural and distributive justice further develops this area using the fundamental concept of equity and its consequences (Cropanzano & Rupp, 2003; Folger, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1993).

Goal-setting theory also emerged in the late 1960s, as researchers began to discover that the simple act of specifying targets for behavior enhanced task performance (Locke, 1968, 1996; Steers & Porter, 1974). Research in this arena showed that goal specificity, goal difficulty, and goal commitment each served to enhance task performance. Based on numerous empirical studies, Locke and Latham (1990) subsequently proposed a formal theory of goal setting. Earley and Erez (1991) later added a time dimension to this topic by examining the role of cognitive processing on motivation, while Crown and Rosse (1995) examined the role of group goals, in addition to individual goals, on performance. Applications of goal-setting theory in the form of individual and team management-by-objectives programs are now used widely throughout industry (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999).

Finally, this period saw significant developments focusing on the role of social cognition and self-efficacy on behavior and performance by such leading researchers as Bandura (1977a,b, 1997). Bandura proposed a social cognitive theory, suggesting that self-confidence lies at the heart of an individual's incentive to act or to be proactive. Indeed, after a major review of the research literature on social cognition and self-efficacy, Stajkovic and Luthans (1998, 2003) found considerable support for the role of self-efficacy in determining work-related performance, particularly as moderated by task complexity and locus of control.

Based on this research, Luthans (2001) has proposed extending this concept into the workplace through a model labeled *positive organizational behavior*.

### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN WORK MOTIVATION

Many of the ideas emerging from the 1960s and 1970s have subsequently been extended and further developed to reflect an expanded pool of research findings and more sophisticated research methods. Indeed, the 1980s witnessed a series of refinements and extensions of existing theories. For example, researchers made great strides in conceptual developments and empirical work focusing on social learning theory, as they did in new work focusing on goal-setting theory, job design, reward systems, punishment, procedural justice, innovation and creativity, and cross-cultural influences on work behavior.

However, by the 1990s, intellectual interest in work motivation *theory*—at least as measured by journal publications—seemed to decline precipitously. As evidence of this, consider the number of theoretical (as opposed to empirical) articles published in leading behavioral science journals over the past decade (e.g., see Ambrose & Kulik, 1999, or Mitchell & Daniels, 2002). You will find few articles that focus on genuine theoretical developments in this area. Instead, you will see minor extensions, empirical tests, or applications of existing theories. While clearly helpful, this hardly leads to breakthrough developments in our understanding of the principles underlying work motivation. At the same time, a review of the most recent editions of textbooks in the field of management and organizational behavior reveals that most of the theories discussed date from the 1960s and 1970s, with only fleeting references to more recent work. (It is also curious that some early motivation theories that have subsequently been widely discredited continue to permeate such texts.) In short, while other fields of management research (e.g., leadership, decision making, negotiations, groups and teams, and organization design) continue to develop conceptually, substantive theoretical developments focusing on work motivation have not kept pace.

An outside observer might conclude from this situation that either we have lost interest in the subject of work motivation (perhaps because it is no longer a pressing issue in organizations) or that we solved the work motivation problem long ago, thereby eliminating the need for additional work. Neither of these conclusions seems very plausible. On the contrary, in the new economy, replete with its dot.coms, e-commerce, and increased globalization (as well as the more traditional manufacturing and service firms), a motivated workforce is frequently cited as a hallmark of competitive advantage. Indeed, MIT economist Lester Thurow (1992) observed over a decade ago that successful companies (and countries) will compete in the future based principally on the quality of both their technology and their human resources. A motivated workforce becomes a critical strategic asset in such competition.<sup>3</sup> Why, then, has there been so little intellectual activity focusing on this important topic? Perhaps we have yet to develop the breakthrough ideas that can push us to the next level of understanding.

While theoretical developments on work motivation may have declined in recent years, the world of work has changed dramatically. Indeed, one can argue that the past decade has witnessed greater workplace changes than any other decade in memory. Companies are both downsizing and expanding (often at the same time, in different divisions or levels of the hierarchy). The workforce is characterized by increased diversity with highly divergent needs and demands. Information technology has frequently changed both the manner and location of work activities. New organizational forms (such as those found in e-commerce) are now commonplace. Teams are redefining the notion of hierarchy, as well as traditional power distributions. The use of contingent workers is on the rise. Managing knowledge workers continues to perplex experienced managers across divergent industries. And globalization and the challenges of managing across borders are now the norm instead of the exception.

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<sup>3</sup> See a special issue of *Harvard Business Review* (January 2003) focusing on the importance of employee motivation as a key strategic asset in competition and corporate performance.

These changes can have a profound influence on how companies attempt to attract, retain, and motivate their employees. Yet we lack new models capable of guiding managerial behavior in this new era of work. As Cappelli notes, "Most observers of the corporate world believe that the traditional relationship between employer and employee is gone, but there is little understanding of why it ended and even less about what is replacing that relationship" (1999: 1). We believe that the time has come to redirect our intellectual energies into discovering new models—and research toward new models—of work motivation and job performance commensurate with this new era.

### THE ROAD AHEAD

With this in mind, in 2001 *AMR* issued a call for papers on the topic of the future of work motivation. A special seminar was held at the 2001 annual meeting of the Academy of Management to stimulate interest and discussion in the topic. In response to the call, researchers submitted fifty-six papers, which were subsequently reviewed. In view of space limitations of the journal, many worthy papers could not be accommodated. However, following multiple review cycles, six papers emerged that seem to offer new and useful ideas and insights into future directions for the theoretical development of the topic.

What these papers have in common is a genuine effort to build on existing theories of work motivation by adapting and extending them to fit the realities of the changing contemporary workplace. Today's workplace is characterized by an increasingly short-term focus, time as a critical performance variable, increasing interdependence among employees (often manifested in some form of team organization), evolving affective responses to the workplace experience, increasing value and motive conflicts on the part of employees, and a clear recognition of the transitory nature of careers.

The six papers appearing in this special issue address a variety of issues critical to advancing our understanding of motivation theory and motivation in the workplace. The first paper, by Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, focuses on the development of metatheories on work motivation. These authors present six recommenda-

tions for developing more complex theories of work motivation that are more valid, more complete, broader in scope, and, by implication, more useful to practitioners than existing theories.

In the second, Yitzhak Fried and Linda Haynes Slowik examine ways in which time factors can influence goal-setting processes and job performance in work organizations. They argue that the addition of time as a key variable in goal-setting theory adds to its dynamism and validity in helping explain employee behavior in increasingly complex, continually evolving work environments.

Next, Myeong-Gu Seo, Lisa Feldman Barrett, and Jean M. Bartunek draw on both psychological and neurobiological theories of core affective experiences to identify a set of direct and indirect paths through which work-related affective feelings can influence three dimensions of behavioral outcomes: direction, intensity, and persistence. In addition to direct influence, affective experiences can also influence behavior indirectly, through their effects on goal level and goal commitment, as well as on the key judgment components of motivation relating to expectancy, utility, and progress.

Ruth Kanfer and Phillip L. Ackerman then use life-span and adult development theories to facilitate an understanding of the implications of aging on workplace motivation. Although aging is generally viewed as leading to declining cognitive and intellectual capabilities, these authors argue that this view may be overly simplistic. Instead, they argue that aging is a more complex process, in which declining cognitive abilities are accompanied by growth in other intellectual abilities, reorganization of motives and goals, and changing personality traits. Fully understanding how aging influences motivation, therefore, requires a comprehensive understanding of the different and often compensatory changes taking place.

Following this, Naomi Ellemers, Dick de Gilder, and S. Alexander Haslam use self-categorization theory and social identity processes to examine the ways in which individual and group processes interact to determine work motivation. The fact that work in organizations is increasingly organized around teams suggests it is important to understand how groups influence work motivation. Their paper explores how participation in groups can have a power-

ful influence on motivation above and beyond what can be understood by focusing exclusively on individual-level effects.

Finally, Hugo M. Kehr synthesizes several lines of research on motivation by examining the influences of explicit and implicit motives and perceived abilities on motivation in the workplace using a compensatory model. Kehr's model helps answer some intriguing, unresolved questions concerning individual goal attainment and why self-set goals may sometimes be nonmotivating.

Throughout, these papers contribute to the long tradition of substantive research and theoretical development in the field of work motivation that benefit both organizational researchers and practicing managers alike.

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