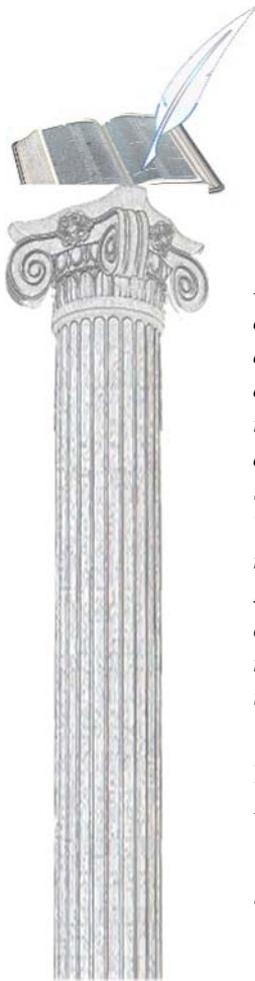


Unlocking the secrets of workplace motivation: exploring process theories and their implications for leaders



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Abstract. *In this article, we delve into the fascinating realm of motivation at work by exploring various process theories that shed light on why people do what they do. Imagine it as a behind-the-scenes peek into the gears that drive individuals in the workplace. We'll be unravelling three major theories—Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, and Locke and Latham's Goal Setting Theory. Each theory is like a unique lens offering insights into the intricate dance between thoughts, actions, and motivation. We'll stroll through the key concepts, principles, and, most importantly, how these theories can be real game changers for leaders and organizations. But, like any blockbuster, we won't shy away from discussing some critiques, pondering over their practicality, and exploring how they fit into the big picture of boosting employee motivation. So, buckle up for a journey into the psychology of workplace motivation!*

Keywords: *Process Theories, Motivation, Cognitive Mechanisms, Behavioural Mechanisms, Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, Goal Setting Theory.*

JEL: J20; J28.

1. Introduction

Motivation is a critical factor that influences employee behaviour and performance in the workplace. An essential component that forms the foundation of every business is motivation. The combination of intrinsic and environmental elements that influence how people act at work and determine the trajectory, severity, and persistence of these actions is referred to as work motivation. While motivation stands as just one element amid a multitude influencing work productivity, its pivotal role in enhancement cannot be understated (Benson, 2008).

Extensive scrutiny and analysis of individual needs, coupled with factors believed to instigate motivation, have yielded a plethora of motivation theories. These theories, with diverse recommendations for optimizing workforce performance, can be categorized in various manners (Karić, 2014). One prevalent classification of motivation theories involves their division into content and process theories, offering insights into the "what" and "how" of motivation, respectively. Process theories delve into the development of motivation concerning an individual's behaviour in the workplace, while content theories scrutinize the drivers behind employee actions, often tied to the fulfilment of needs. Herzberg and other content theorists explored reactions to intrinsic and extrinsic stimuli across contexts, asserting the intricate interplay of internal and external elements (Basset-Jones & Lloyd, 2005). In contrast, Victor Vroom's process theory focuses on the internal triggers causing various actions by individuals (Nyameh, et al., 2013).

1.1. Content Theories

Theories that focus on an individual's inherent motivators and guiding forces are termed content theories of motivation. Commonly referred to as "need theories," they are grounded in the satisfaction of essential requirements. These theories perceive motivation as stemming from internal forces that drive individuals to act or take measures to fulfil their personal desires. The emphasis is on understanding what individuals need and what drives them to satisfy those needs, with a focus on the intensity of motivation. Numerous scholars, including Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, Clayton P. Alderfer, David McClelland, Hackman, and Oldham, have explored these content theories (Serhan, et al., 2018).

Among the noteworthy contributors to need theories are Maslow and Herzberg, both renowned for their efforts in organizing the sources of motivation, whether through a pyramidal structure or philosophical contrast (Serhan, et al., 2018).

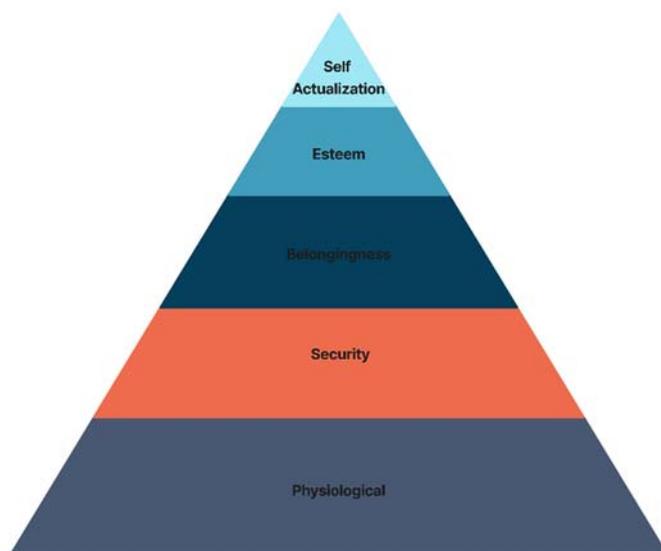
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's motivational theory, as outlined by (Nnabuo, et al., 2006). is based on certain premises regarding human behavior. According to Maslow:

1. Humans are inherently desirous beings, continually seeking to fulfill their needs. The fulfillment of one desire leads to the emergence of another, as individuals are never fully content and always aspire for more.
2. Human wants are structured in a hierarchy, and the satisfaction of more fundamental needs must precede the development of new desires. Until the basic needs at the foundation are met, individuals may not genuinely aspire to fulfill higher-level needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy, depicted as a pyramid, serves as a model for understanding human motivation and finds applications in various disciplines, particularly in psychology and commerce. The hierarchy encompasses physiological, security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs, arranged in a pyramid structure. *Figure 1.1* visually represents these needs and their hierarchical order.

Figure 1.1. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



Note. The figure created is an adaption by the author from select sources (Aruma & Hanachor, 2017).

Over the years, various theories have been proposed to understand and explain how individuals are motivated at work. One category of these theories is process theories, which focus on the cognitive and behavioural mechanisms underlying motivation. Process theories aim to comprehend the thought patterns and decision-making processes that individuals go through when deciding how to behave at work. This article discusses three prominent process theories of motivation: Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, and the Goal Setting Theory by Locke and Latham. These theories provide insights into how individuals perceive and respond to workplace conditions, rewards, and goals, and can be valuable for leaders and organizations in understanding and enhancing employee motivation.

2. Materials and Methods

The information presented in this article is based on a review of relevant literature and research on process theories of motivation. Various scholarly articles, books, and research papers were consulted to gather information on Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, and the Goal Setting Theory by Locke and Latham. The key concepts, principles, and practical implications of these theories were identified and summarized.

3. Results

Valence, Instrumentality, Expectancy Theory (VIE Theory)

In 1964, Victor Vroom introduced a hypothesis that highlights deliberate decision-making as the basis for people's actions, shifting focus from personal needs to workplace conditions as a primary motivator. Vroom posits that achieving objectives serves as the strongest incentive for optimal employee performance (Karić, 2014).

The theory introduces three key concepts—valence, instrumentality, and expectancy—that influence behaviour when choosing between options. Valence represents the importance individuals attribute to the benefits they receive, while instrumentality gauges the likelihood of their efforts producing intended effects.

Expectancy, rooted in past experiences, reflects the belief that one's efforts will lead to predetermined goals (Serhan, et al., 2018).

Valence is the importance that incentives have on a person and is dependent on their goals, wants and values. It can be thought of as the anticipated gratification of an incentive rather than a true indicator of contentment (Karić, 2014). Instrumentality, defined as the expectation of receiving rewards for expected behaviour, is influenced by factors such as confidence, influence, and adherence to policy. Expectancy, another component, is the belief that one's efforts will lead to achieving predetermined goals. It is shaped by factors like a sense of control, task complexity, and self-efficacy, being higher when self-efficacy is strong and lowered if objectives are overly challenging (Karić, 2014).

Leaders can enhance employee motivation by emphasizing flexible education, progression, appreciation, and incentive schemes (Greenberg & Baron, 2003). In conclusion, Vroom's Expectancy Theory posits that motivation hinges on valence, instrumentality, and expectancy. Valence reflects the significance individuals attribute to expected rewards, instrumentality is the perceived likelihood of performance leading to desired outcomes, and expectancy is the belief that efforts will result in successful performance. According to Vroom, individuals are motivated when they believe in the positive outcomes of their performance and possess the necessary skills to achieve their goals.

Adams' Equity Theory

The Equity Principle, formulated by John Stacey Adams in 1963, asserts that an individual's motivation is influenced by the circumstances of their peers. People constantly assess their contributions, such as education and effort, against the rewards they receive, like wages and advancements, by comparing themselves to others. If they perceive fairness in the input-output ratio compared to their peers, motivation is sustained. However, if they believe their peers receive more for similar contributions, they may seek to realign the ratios. The key factor in motivation is not just the input-output ratio itself but the comparison to others' ratios (Karić, 2014).

Herzberg emphasizes workplace equality as a crucial factor in addressing work dissatisfaction, urging superiors to prioritize it (Miner, 2005). Despite the equity

theory's importance, critiques highlight practical challenges in its application, including limited knowledge about others' incentives, varying interpretations of fairness, and differing time frames for fairness evaluation (Karić, 2014).

The theory underscores the significance of incentives in employee satisfaction, asserting that dissatisfaction arises when employees invest effort but receive minimal benefits (Webb, et al., 2015). Essentially, the theory suggests that individuals gauge the equity of their inputs (efforts, contributions, and skills) to outputs (rewards, recognition, promotions) in comparison to peers. Perceived equity motivates and satisfies employees, while perceived inequity leads to feelings of unfairness, impacting motivation and job satisfaction.

The Goal Setting Theory

Locke and Latham introduced the goal-setting theory, a widely examined concept in motivation. According to them, workers are more motivated to excel when presented with challenging, specific, and achievable goals as opposed to vague instructions. The authors advocate for providing constructive feedback and establishing clear objectives to inspire employees (Serhan, et al., 2018).

The theory underscores the importance of striving for objectives as a key motivator, intensifying drive. Employee involvement in goal setting is crucial to fostering a sense of ownership in the company's aims. However, the theory has limitations, particularly when goals are excessively challenging, basic objectives are insufficient to drive employees, or there is a weak desire for fulfilment among individuals (Serhan, et al., 2018).

The goal-setting theory presented by Locke and Latham highlights the performance disparities in individuals' private and professional roles. Grounded in human nature's inclination towards goal-directed behaviour, the theory asserts that explicit, challenging, and achievable targets enhance employee performance. Individuals with higher aspirations tend to achieve better results than those with lower standards for their goals. (Clements & Kamau, 2018).

Since 1990, Locke and Latham have further developed their idea, incorporating additional research to substantiate their findings. The research indicates that the difficulty level and precision of goals are crucial factors in the goal-setting concept. Efficiency increases with the challenge until the individual's capacity is reached.

The theory's effectiveness is influenced by five key aspects: clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback, and task complexity.

The goal-setting theory, as outlined by (Saijanen, 2017) incorporates key components for optimizing employee performance. Clarity, emphasizing the specificity of objectives, enhances efficiency and provides greater satisfaction through tangible accomplishments. Challenge, addressing the complexity of goals, influences both contentment and motivation. Commitment is vital, as workers must feel engaged and dedicated to a target for optimal effort, even in the presence of external incentives or penalties. Feedback plays a crucial role in clarifying expectations and correcting behaviours, especially when objectives are not clearly communicated. Lastly, task complexity acknowledges that certain goals may require a higher level of intricacy and breaking them into smaller tasks can increase employee motivation by making the process more manageable.

The goal-setting hypothesis, as outlined by Locke and Latham in 2012, takes into account various factors such as aptitude, temperament, limitations, and funding. If a task exceeds an individual's capabilities, the effort is likely to fail. Workers with traits ill-suited to the job may encounter obstacles, impeding optimal performance. Additionally, environmental factors, including financial constraints and contextual limits, must be considered, as they can hinder the achievement of the goal. (Locke & Latham, 2012). While numerous researchers support the notion of using financial rewards to motivate public sector employees, studies, including one by (Karić, 2014), indicate its inappropriateness in this context. This is attributed to the unique nature of the public sector, where budget constraints often impose limitations on the feasibility of utilizing financial incentives (Durant, et al., 2006).

Despite the multitude of theories on motivation, there is a substantial body of literature reflecting diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the relationship between various factors and motivation. However, recent research has witnessed a significant increase in efforts to understand the correlations between these factors and motivation. Notably, there is a growing number of studies dedicated to exploring the connection between employee motivation and organizational performance. This evolving theory underscores the importance of challenging, specific, and attainable goals in motivating employees. It suggests that individuals are more motivated when presented with clear and specific goals that

are both challenging and achievable. Goal setting is identified as a key strategy to help employees concentrate their efforts, enhance persistence, and elevate performance. Furthermore, involving employees in the goal-setting process and providing feedback on their progress is emphasized to further boost motivation and performance.

4. Discussion

Process theories of motivation, such as Vroom's Expectancy Theory, provide valuable insights into how individuals perceive and respond to different aspects of their work environment, such as rewards, fairness, and goals. These theories emphasize the importance of factors such as valence, instrumentality, expectancy, equity, and goal setting in influencing employee motivation.

Vroom's Expectancy Theory proposes that employees are motivated when they believe that their efforts will lead to desirable outcomes (valence), when they perceive a clear link between their performance and desired outcomes (instrumentality), and when they believe that they are capable of achieving the desired performance level (expectancy). Leaders can use this theory to understand how employees perceive the relationship between their efforts, performance, and outcomes, and design strategies to enhance employee motivation.

In addition, equity theory suggests that employees are motivated when they perceive fairness in the distribution of rewards and resources. Leaders can use this theory to ensure that employees perceive fairness in their treatment and rewards and create a work environment that promotes a sense of equity and justice.

Goal-setting theory also plays a crucial role in employee motivation. The findings of this study support the idea that setting specific, challenging, and achievable goals can enhance employee motivation and performance. Leaders can use this theory to set clear and challenging goals for their employees and provide the necessary support and resources to help employees achieve these goals.

Furthermore, the discussion of self-determination theory in this study highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in influencing workplace motivation. Leaders can use this theory to create a work environment that fosters

employee autonomy, provides opportunities for skill development, and promotes positive relationships among team members.

Overall, these process theories of motivation offer valuable insights into the underlying cognitive and behavioural processes that drive employee motivation. Leaders and organizations can use these theories to better understand and enhance employee motivation in the workplace by designing strategies that align with the principles of these theories, ultimately leading to increased employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, process theories of motivation, such as Vroom's Expectancy Theory, equity theory, goal-setting theory, and self-determination theory, provide important frameworks for understanding how employees perceive and respond to different aspects of their work environment and how motivation can be enhanced in the workplace. By considering factors such as valence, instrumentality, expectancy, equity, and goal setting, leaders and organizations can design strategies to effectively enhance employee motivation, ultimately leading to improved employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance. It is important for leaders to continually evaluate and adjust their motivational strategies based on the principles of these process theories to create a positive and motivating work environment that fosters employee productivity and success.

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