

Self-Determination Theory and Employee Motivation: An Overview

by Jack McDaniel

Workplace Productivity Theories

Maximizing employee productivity has long been a major concern for organizational leaders. In the early 1900s, Frederick Taylor introduced the theory of Scientific Management: workers are primarily motivated by pay, and the main job of leaders is to set and enforce work standards. His theory, though flawed in its oversimplification of motivational dynamics, set the standard for rigorous workplace study.

B.F. Skinner made an important advancement in the middle of the 20th century with his concept of behaviorism, in which rewards motivate good behavior and punishment discourages bad behavior. Although recognizing what would become the well-known “Hierarchy of Needs” put forth by Abraham Maslow in the 1960s, Skinner and his adherents maintained that motivation originates exclusively *outside* of the employee, thus necessitating tight control of employee behavior from leaders.

Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, and others shifted the focus by showing that once the lower orders of needs have been met (physiological needs like food, shelter, and safety), all people want to realize their potential—a process Maslow called “self-actualization.” Fulfilling these higher orders of needs relies upon the action of *intrinsic* motivators—those arising from within the employees themselves.

Self-Determination Theory

Over the last 40 years, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, Daniel Pink, and many others have shed new light on intrinsic motivation. Their work has led to and supports Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

Their research found that employees are intrinsically motivated to perform work-related tasks efficiently and effectively. Thus, the task of leaders is to create conditions in the work environment that are conducive to optimal employee motivation.

The key to SDT is recognizing that there are two different types of motivation:

- *Autonomous* motivation – Doing a job because it is either intrinsically interesting or is consistent with the employee’s deep and abiding personal values.
- *Controlled* motivation – Doing a job because the employee feels pressured by external or internal forces to do it.

Studies have shown that the *type* of motivation that employees have is more important than the *amount* of motivation when predicting how they will perform and feel in the workplace.

One very controversial and important early finding of SDT research was that when people are offered contingent monetary



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rewards for doing activities they already find interesting, they lose intrinsic motivation for those activities. By 1999, more than 120 studies confirmed that indeed there is strong evidence for the paradoxical negative effect of contingent extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation.

Are Rewards Harmful?

No, extrinsic rewards do not always undermine intrinsic motivation and are, at times, appropriate. However, great care should be given so they are not used to motivate or control behavior, thus achieving an unintentional negative effect. This occurs because extrinsic rewards have a strong tendency to make employees dependent on the rewards. And since research has shown that autonomous motivation is more likely than controlled motivation to promote flexible thinking, high-quality learning, and problem solving, employees are more effective and they experience greater satisfaction at work when extrinsic rewards are minimized in favor of fostering employees' intrinsic motivation.

The Three Basic Psychological Needs

Examination of the research shows that when three basic and universal psychological needs are supported, employee motivation and productivity rises. When these needs are thwarted, healthy functioning plummets. This has broad implications for the workplace. These three needs are:

- Competence – People's experience of being effective and mastering their social and physical environment.
- Relatedness – People's experience of close, meaningful, and mutually supportive connections with important others.
- Autonomy – People's sense that their behavior is volitional, performed willingly, reflectively self-endorsed, and experienced as chosen.

Considerable empirical research indicates that employees whose leaders provide support for competence, relatedness, and autonomy experience higher levels of well-being, trust in the organization, engagement and satisfaction at work, and performance in the workplace.

Internalizing Motivation

Providing support for basic psychological need satisfaction also facilitates the process of internalization toward greater autonomous motivation, which is associated with high-quality behavioral persistence and performance—as well as physical, psychological, and social wellness—in the workplace and other areas of life. However, employees perform work-related tasks for a variety of reasons. Some complete their daily tasks quite willingly and with experiences of interest, excitement, enjoyment, and satisfaction, while others feel pressured or forced to do those tasks.

How employees approach given tasks depends on many factors. Importantly, leaders cannot force their employees to internalize their motivation. They can, however, contribute to their employees' workplace success by providing an environment and facilitating certain behaviors that allow employees to satisfy their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, thus promoting optimal motivation and functioning at work.

For more information on self-determination theory and workplace motivation, visit www.coachingredefined.com.



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