

## 11.5: Recent Research on Motivation Theories

### Learning Objectives

1. Describe the modern advancements in the study of human motivation.

Employee motivation continues to be a major focus in organizational behavior (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). We briefly summarize current motivation research here.

### Content Theories

There is some interest in testing content theories (including Herzberg's two-factor theory), especially in international research. Need theories are still generally supported, with most people identifying such workplace factors as recognition, advancement, and opportunities to learn as the chief motivators for them. This is consistent with need satisfaction theories. However, most of this research does not include actual measures of employee performance. Thus, questions remain about whether the factors that employees *say* motivate them to perform actually do.

### Operant Conditioning Theory

There is considerable interest in operant conditioning theory, especially within the context of what has been called organizational behavior modification. Oddly enough, there has not been much research using operant conditioning theory in designing reward systems, even though there are obvious applications. Instead, much of the recent research on operant conditioning focuses on punishment and extinction. These studies seek to determine how to use punishment appropriately. Recent results still confirm that punishment should be used sparingly, should be used only after extinction does not work, and should not be excessive or destructive.

### Equity Theory

Equity theory continues to receive strong research support. The major criticism of equity theory, that the inputs and outcomes people use to evaluate equity are ill-defined, still holds. Because each person defines inputs and outcomes, researchers are not in a position to know them all. Nevertheless, for the major inputs (performance) and outcomes (pay), the theory is a strong one. Major applications of equity theory in recent years incorporate and extend the theory into the area called *organizational justice*. When employees receive rewards (or punishments), they evaluate them in terms of their fairness (as discussed earlier). This is *distributive justice*. Employees also assess rewards in terms of how fair the processes used to distribute them are. This is *procedural justice*. Thus, during organizational downsizing, when employees lose their jobs, people ask whether the loss of work is fair (distributive justice). But they also assess the fairness of the process used to decide *who* is laid off (procedural justice). For example, layoffs based on seniority may be perceived as fairer than layoffs based on supervisors' opinions.

### Goal Theory

It remains true that difficult, specific goals result in better performance than easy and vague goals, assuming they are accepted. Recent research highlights the positive effects of performance feedback and goal commitment in the goal-setting process. Monetary incentives enhance motivation when they are tied to goal achievement, by increasing the level of goal commitment. There are negative sides to goal theory as well. If goals conflict, employees may sacrifice performance on important job duties. For example, if both quantitative and qualitative goals are set for performance, employees may emphasize quantity because this goal achievement is more visible.

### Expectancy Theory

The original formulation of expectancy theory specifies that the motivational force for choosing a level of effort is a function of the multiplication of expectancies and valences. Recent research demonstrates that the individual components predict performance just as well, without being multiplied. This does not diminish the value of expectancy theory. Recent research also suggests that high performance results not only when the valence is high but also when employees set difficult goals for themselves.

One last comment on motivation: As the world of work changes, so will the methods organizations use to motivate employees. New rewards—time off instead of bonuses; stock options; on-site gyms, cleaners, and dental services; opportunities to telecommute; and others—will need to be created to motivate employees in the future. One useful path that modern researchers can

undertake is to analyze the previous studies and aggregate the findings into more conclusive understanding of the topic through meta-analysis studies (Iddekinge et al., 2018).

## CATCHING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

### Entrepreneurs and Motivation

Motivation can be difficult to elicit in employees. So what drives entrepreneurs, who by definition have to motivate themselves as well as others? While everyone from Greek philosophers to football coaches warn about undirected passion, a lack of passion will likely kill any start-up. An argument could be made that motivation is simply *part* of the discipline, or the *outcome* of remaining fixed on a purpose to mentally remind yourself of why you get up in the morning.

Working from her home in Egypt, at age 30 Yasmine El-Mehairy launched Supermama.me, a start-up aimed at providing information to mothers throughout the Arab world. When the company began, El-Mehairy worked full time at her day job and 60 hours a week after that getting the site established. She left her full-time job to manage the site full time in January 2011, and the site went live that October. El-Mehairy is motivated to keep moving forward, saying that if she stops, she might not get going again (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012).

For El-Mehairy, the motivation didn't come from a desire to work for a big company or travel the world and secure a master's degree from abroad. She had already done that. Rather, she said she was motivated to "do something that is useful and I want to do something on my own" (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012).

Lauren Lipcon, who founded a company called Injury Funds Now, attributes her ability to stay motivated to three factors: purpose, giving back, and having fun outside of work. Lipcon believes that most entrepreneurs are not motivated by money but by a sense of purpose. Personally, she left a job with Arthur Andersen to begin her own firm out of a desire to help people. She also thinks it is important for people to give back to their communities because the change the entrepreneur sees in the community loops back, increasing motivation and making the business more successful. Lipcon believes that having a life outside of work helps keep the entrepreneur motivated. She particularly advocates for physical activity, which not only helps the body physically but also helps keep the mind sharp and able to focus (Rashid, 2017).

But do all entrepreneurs agree on what motivates them? A July 17, 2017 survey on the entrepreneur's blog site asked 23 different entrepreneurs what motivated them. Seven of the 23 referred to some sense of purpose in what they were doing as a motivating factor, with one response stressing the importance of discovering one's "personal why." Of the remaining entrepreneurs, answers varied from keeping a positive attitude (three responses) and finding external sources (three responses) to meditation and prayer (two responses). One entrepreneur said his greatest motivator was fear: the fear of being in the same place financially one year in the future "causes me to take action and also alleviates my fear of risk" (Hear from Entrepreneurs, 2017). Only one of the 23 actually cited money and material success as a motivating factor to keep working.

However they describe motivation, entrepreneurs seem to agree that passion and determination are key factors that carry them through the grind of the day-to-day.

#### ? Questions

1. In the article from Hear from Entrepreneurs, one respondent called motivation "garbage." Would you agree or disagree, and why?
2. How is staying motivated as an entrepreneur similar to being motivated to pursue a college degree? Do you think the two are related? How?
3. How would you expect motivation to vary across cultures?

#### ? Concept Check

1. Understand the modern approaches to motivation theory.

This page titled [11.5: Recent Research on Motivation Theories](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Karen Calendo](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [14.4: Recent Research on Motivation Theories](#) by [OpenStax](#) is licensed [CC BY 4.0](#). Original source: <https://openstax.org/details/books/principles-management>.