



EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND JOB SATISFACTION: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual review examines employee motivation as a multidimensional construct associated with job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational effectiveness. Rather than treating motivation as a universal predictor of performance, the paper critically synthesizes classical theories and selected contemporary research to examine when motivational mechanisms may be more or less effective. The review integrates Maslow's hierarchy of needs, McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, Vroom's expectancy theory, and contemporary self-determination theory, focusing particularly on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence, relatedness, organizational culture, managerial feedback, and evolving work arrangements. Recent evidence on hybrid work shows that job satisfaction and retention may improve when flexibility supports employee needs, while performance effects depend on job design, coordination requirements, and managerial context. The paper argues that motivation should be understood as a context-dependent process rather than a single managerial instrument. Practical implications include differentiated reward systems, meaningful goal setting, supportive leadership, and systematic assessment of employee needs. Finally, the review identifies research gaps concerning hybrid and digital work, cross-cultural differences, and the need for longitudinal and multilevel studies that link motivational quality to job satisfaction and sustainable performance.

1 INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive understanding of workplace motivation and the application of different theoretical frameworks first requires a precise

conceptualization of motivation itself. Scholars from various disciplines have long examined this concept, emphasizing the need to establish clear underlying assumptions to avoid ambiguity when defining motivation as a complex behavioral phenomenon.

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Existing literature frequently reports associations between motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction, but these relationships should not be treated as universal or mechanically causal. Their strength can vary depending on job design, leadership quality, reward systems, individual preferences, and the broader organizational context. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of motivation requires not only a description of major motivational theories but also a critical comparison of their assumptions, limitations, and practical relevance across different work settings.

Individuals are driven by different configurations of motivational factors that may influence their performance, engagement, and contribution to organizational goals. Consequently, improving workplace effectiveness requires managers to develop a nuanced understanding of what drives employee motivation and what fosters a sense of fulfillment and well-being.

Motivation can contribute to productivity by supporting commitment, persistence, and discretionary effort, yet high motivation alone does not guarantee high performance. Performance also depends on employee ability, resources, role clarity, coordination, and organizational support. Likewise, job satisfaction can reinforce engagement, but the direction of influence may be reciprocal rather than one-way. This distinction is important because managerial interventions that focus exclusively on incentives may overlook structural conditions that enable employees to convert motivation into effective performance.

Intrinsic motivation, which arises from internal sources such as personal development, achievement, and a sense of accomplishment, tends to support sustained engagement and proactive behavior. Employees who feel their contributions are valued are more likely to show initiative and creativity. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is driven by external incentives such as compensation, bonuses, recognition, and career advancement opportunities. Rather than viewing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as equally important in all circumstances, their relative importance should be understood as context-dependent and influenced by individual preferences, job characteristics, and organizational conditions. When appropriately

designed, reward systems can reinforce desired behaviors and help align individual and organizational goals.

The organizational environment and culture also play an important role in shaping employee motivation. A workplace characterized by support, inclusion, fairness, and positive interpersonal relationships can strengthen employees' sense of belonging and organizational commitment. Transparent communication, opportunities for professional development, and clearly defined roles may further contribute to favorable motivational conditions. Managers therefore play an important role in this process through constructive collaboration, meaningful feedback, recognition of employee contributions, and the creation of conditions that support both individual development and organizational objectives.

Scope and Approach of the Review

The paper adopts a conceptual review approach. It integrates established motivational frameworks with selected studies from the existing literature on employee motivation, job satisfaction, organizational culture, and contemporary work arrangements. The purpose is not to provide a systematic review or meta-analysis of the available literature, but to critically compare major theoretical explanations, identify areas of convergence and disagreement, and derive implications for management practice and future research. Particular attention is given to findings reported in the literature that challenge simplified assumptions, such as the idea that stronger motivation automatically leads to higher performance or that a single motivational practice is equally effective for all employees. This approach allows motivation to be considered as a context-dependent and multidimensional phenomenon rather than as a uniform predictor of workplace outcomes.

2 CHARACTERISTICS OF MOTIVATION

Motivation shapes the level and direction of effort that individuals invest in certain activities and can therefore influence performance and the achievement of subsequent outcomes or rewards (Maslow, 1982). As a significant concept in psychology, motivation is closely related to

cognitive and affective processes, including perception, personality traits, attitudes, and learning mechanisms. In this sense, it represents an important factor in understanding human behavior. Previous literature suggests that differences in employee performance and workplace behavior may be associated with underlying motivational factors (Stepanov et al., 2016). Motivation also interacts with cognitive processes, influencing how individuals direct their effort and apply their knowledge and abilities in the workplace.

In organizational settings, motivation is often considered an important management factor associated with operational efficiency and employee performance (Fomenky, 2015). It can encourage employees to invest greater effort, pursue continuous improvement, and perform assigned tasks effectively. As noted by Bartol and Martin (1998), motivation can be understood as an energizing and directing force that maintains the consistency of behavior over time. This conceptualization emphasizes the importance of both motivational drive and clear goal awareness in understanding how individuals pursue desired outcomes.

Effective motivational systems should guide individuals towards behaviors that are aligned with organizational goals, while also addressing their personal needs and aspirations. This reflects the reciprocal relationship between individuals and organizations, where cooperation is based on the expectation of mutual benefit (Stepanov et al., 2016). From a contemporary perspective, motivation can be understood as an internal process that influences the direction, intensity, and persistence of voluntary actions (Bosančić, 2023).

Although definitions of motivation vary across theoretical approaches, they generally emphasize the processes that initiate, direct, and sustain goal-oriented behavior. Motivation may arise from both intrinsic and extrinsic sources and interacts with individual needs, expectations, and organizational conditions. In organizational settings, motivational processes can help align individual goals with organizational objectives and support employee engagement and commitment (Stepanov et al., 2016).

3 THE ROLE OF WORK MOTIVATION IN EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

Human resources play an important role in organizational performance. Employees are more likely to use their knowledge, skills, and experience effectively when their competencies are appropriately matched with job requirements (Stepanov et al., 2016). Such alignment can contribute to more effective use of employee expertise and support overall organizational performance (Petković & Stanković, 2011). Well-defined goals can contribute to effective job performance by providing employees with clear expectations and direction.

These goals should be sufficiently demanding while remaining achievable within employees' capabilities. Equally important is providing timely feedback, which allows individuals to monitor and assess their progress. Goal setting serves as a motivational mechanism, especially when employees already have an internal motivation to work effectively. The degree to which such goals are accepted depends on factors such as trust in management, perceived fairness in task allocation, and the level of challenge. By aligning employees' strengths with organizational demands and establishing clear but achievable goals, managers can create conditions that support both motivation and effective performance.

Performance is understood as the degree to which an organization achieves its strategic goals, relying on the coordinated efforts of both individuals and teams. Armstrong (2002) conceptualizes performance management as a comprehensive, strategic process aimed at sustaining organizational success through continuous improvement of individual and collective results. Effective organizational functioning therefore requires attention to the motivational conditions that support employees in pursuing individual and organizational goals.

Although profitability remains important in competitive markets, organizational performance also depends on broader dimensions such as quality, which can help align employee contributions with organizational and customer expectations (Nikolić, 2014).

Motivation can therefore contribute to high-quality performance, but its effects depend on individual

capabilities, job characteristics, and organizational conditions. However, fully understanding the complexity of human behavior remains an ongoing challenge within motivational research (Stepanov et al., 2016). Consequently, developing and implementing context-sensitive motivational strategies can contribute to a work environment characterized by engagement, adaptability, and greater alignment between individual and organizational goals.

4 MOTIVATION THEORIES

4.1 Theory of hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) is one of the most frequently cited theoretical frameworks in the study of motivation. Although the model lacks extensive empirical validation in Maslow's original work, it remains widely applied in organizational contexts because of its conceptual clarity, intuitive structure, and practical relevance. The theory proposes that human needs are organized in a hierarchical sequence, with individuals seeking to satisfy lower-level needs before progressing toward higher-level aspirations. Within this framework, unmet needs are assumed to drive behavior until they are sufficiently satisfied. The hierarchy is typically presented in ascending order, beginning with basic physiological needs, followed by safety needs, social and belonging needs, esteem needs, and, finally, self-actualization, which represents the realization of individual potential.

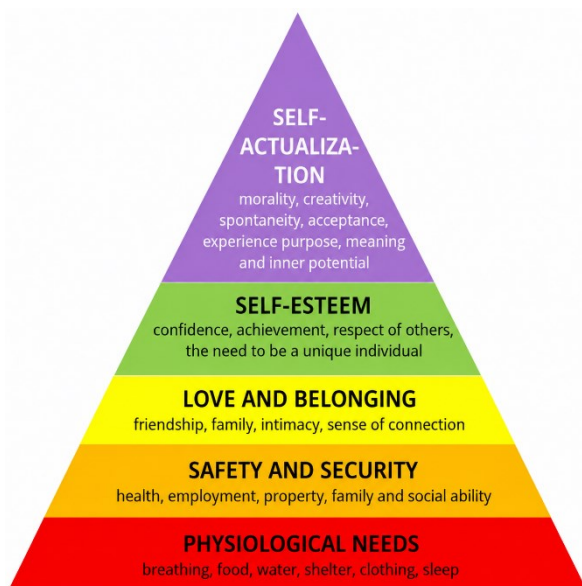


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs
Source: Gray (2024)

Despite the continuing popularity of Maslow's model, the hierarchy presented in Figure 1 should be interpreted as a heuristic rather than as a fixed sequence of employee needs. The pyramid suggests a progression from physiological needs to self-actualization; however, employees may pursue several needs simultaneously and assign them different priorities depending on their career stage, individual circumstances, and organizational context. The model's managerial value therefore lies in highlighting that compensation and security represent only part of the motivational process, while belonging, recognition, personal growth, and meaningful work may also play important roles. At the same time, the model's limited empirical validation suggests that managers should avoid applying the hierarchy as a universal diagnostic tool and should instead consider the specific needs and circumstances of individual employees and teams.

4.2 Theory X and Y

Douglas McGregor's theoretical framework conceptualizes human behavior in organizations through two opposing sets of assumptions. These perspectives, labeled Theory X and Theory Y, offer different views on employee motivation and management practices. McGregor argued that effective leadership requires tailoring motivational strategies to align with underlying assumptions about employee behavior (Sušić, 2016).

Theory X offers a more pessimistic view of human nature in the workplace. It assumes that individuals generally have an innate aversion to work and will avoid it whenever possible. Consequently, employees must be subjected to external control mechanisms, such as supervision, coercion, or the threat of sanctions, to ensure that organizational goals are met. Within this framework, workers are perceived as reluctant to take responsibility, preferring instead clearly defined instructions and structured leadership (Setyawati et al., 2022). They are considered primarily motivated by job security, showing limited ambition or initiative.

In contrast, Theory Y advocates a more optimistic, humanistic perspective (Kuswati, 2020). It holds that individuals can view work as a natural, even fulfilling, activity, comparable to leisure or recreation. Under the right conditions, employees

can exercise self-direction and self-regulation, reducing the need for rigid managerial control. They are willing to accept responsibility and contribute creatively to problem-solving. McGregor argued that these assumptions more accurately reflect human potential, emphasizing intrinsic motivation and autonomy rather than external enforcement (Fomenky, 2015).

The managerial implications of these two perspectives are significant. Approaches aligned with Theory X tend to rely on formalized control systems, including strict supervision, detailed procedures, and performance monitoring. In contrast, Theory Y advocates a facilitative role for management, in which leaders focus on creating conditions that enable employees to realize and develop their abilities. By minimizing constraints and fostering a supportive organizational climate, managers can direct individual potential toward collective goals (Sušić, 2016). This approach emphasizes empowerment, trust, and the development of intrinsic motivation as factors that may contribute to sustainable organizational performance.

However, Theory X and Theory Y should not be interpreted as universally applicable descriptions of employee behavior. Their practical relevance depends on factors such as job characteristics, employee competencies, organizational culture, and the degree of autonomy required in a particular work setting. In practice, managers may combine elements from both perspectives rather than conforming exclusively to either Theory X or Theory Y.

4.3 Expectancy Theory

Among process-oriented approaches to motivation, the Vroom framework is prominent. This theory assumes that individuals are motivated to engage in certain behaviors when they perceive desired outcomes as valuable and believe that their efforts are likely to lead to those outcomes. It also assumes that employee behavior is, to a significant extent, the result of conscious and voluntary choice. In this sense, the model seeks to explain why individuals choose certain courses of action in given situations.

The theory's explanatory structure is based on three elements (Nićin & Vasiljević, 2015). First, valence refers to the perceived attractiveness or

desirability of a potential reward, which can be evaluated as positive, negative, or neutral depending on individual preferences. Second, expectancy refers to an individual's belief that a given level of effort will lead to successful performance and goal achievement. Third, instrumentality encompasses the perceived link between performance and the realization of desired outcomes, reflecting the extent to which individuals believe that achieving a particular outcome will lead to specific rewards.

The basic assumption of this framework is that individuals have the autonomy to choose among alternative behavioral options. However, the theory has been criticized, particularly for assuming a high degree of rationality in human decision-making. In practice, behavior is not always guided by calculated expectations of outcomes; individuals may act impulsively or be influenced by emotional and irrational factors in their pursuit of results.

Despite these limitations, Vroom's model provides a useful framework for examining the perceived relationships among effort, performance, and expected outcomes. Its practical relevance is particularly evident in situations where employees can identify a clear connection between their effort, performance, and valued rewards. However, its explanatory power may be more limited when these relationships are uncertain or when employee behavior is strongly influenced by factors beyond rational expectations.

Taken together, these classical theories address different dimensions of employee motivation. Maslow emphasizes the role of needs, McGregor focuses on managerial assumptions about employee behavior, while Vroom explains motivation through expectations regarding effort, performance, and rewards. Their explanatory value therefore lies in different aspects of the motivational process, and none of the three frameworks alone provides a comprehensive account of employee motivation. Rather than competing universal models, they can be viewed as complementary perspectives whose relevance depends on individual and organizational context.

5 CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON WORK MOTIVATION

Contemporary self-determination theory (SDT) shifts attention from the amount of motivation to its

quality. From this perspective, sustainable motivation is more likely when the work environment supports three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This approach extends the classical intrinsic–extrinsic distinction by emphasizing that external rewards are not uniformly beneficial or harmful; their effects depend on whether employees experience them as informational and supportive or as controlling. A recent large-scale review of workplace SDT research suggests that need satisfaction and the quality of motivation are central mechanisms linking work conditions to employee outcomes and highlights the need for greater attention to alternative work arrangements and technological change (Gagné et al., 2026).

Compared with the classical theories discussed above, SDT provides a more differentiated account of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. While Maslow emphasizes categories of needs, McGregor focuses on managerial assumptions, and Vroom on expected outcomes, SDT examines the conditions under which different forms of motivation are internalized and sustained. This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary work environments, where autonomy, flexibility, meaningful work, and employee development have become increasingly important managerial considerations.

The rise of remote and hybrid work further underscores that motivational relationships are context-dependent. In a randomized trial of 1,612 employees, hybrid work improved job satisfaction and reduced quit rates by about one-third without harming measured performance (Bloom et al., 2024). However, these findings should not be generalized across all occupations or organizations. The motivational value of flexibility may depend on task interdependence, access to social support, managerial practices, commuting burden, and employees' need for autonomy and relatedness. Evidence from employees across seven countries similarly indicates that working from home can coexist with high job satisfaction and work–life balance, though preferences vary across workers and work models (Orešković et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings challenge simplified claims that either office-based or remote work is inherently more motivating and instead

point toward a contingency perspective in which motivational outcomes depend on individual, job-related, and organizational conditions.

6 MOTIVATION FACTORS

Motivational factors represent a range of influences that can shape individuals' willingness to pursue and achieve goals in both personal and organizational contexts. These factors include internal and external sources of motivation whose effects may vary depending on individual characteristics and organizational conditions (Lekić et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivation, in particular, arises from the satisfaction associated with the activity itself, including opportunities to overcome challenges, develop competence, experience personal growth, and find purpose and fulfillment in one's work (Setyawati et al., 2022). Individuals who experience stronger intrinsic motivation may demonstrate greater engagement, initiative, and creativity because the activity itself provides a sense of interest, satisfaction, or personal accomplishment.

Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, is based on outcomes that are separable from the task itself, including pay, bonuses, promotion, status, and formal recognition. Such incentives can address practical needs and reinforce desired behavior. Their effects depend on perceived fairness, transparency, and the extent to which rewards are experienced as supportive rather than controlling. This helps explain why identical reward systems can give different motivational responses among employees and organizational settings (Bosančić, 2023).

Organizational conditions provide the context in which intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors operate (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Inclusiveness, fairness, transparent communication, constructive feedback, and opportunities for learning and development may support employees' sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy. Their motivational effects, however, likely depend on how employees perceive these practices and how well they align with individual needs and job characteristics.

For organizations seeking a highly motivated workforce, the practical implication is not to maximize every motivational instrument at once, but to create a coherent system in which rewards,

job design, leadership, feedback, and development opportunities reinforce one another. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors can be complementary, yet their relative importance varies among employees and over time.

Therefore, motivational practices should be evaluated periodically rather than assumed to have stable effects, with particular attention to fairness, autonomy, role clarity, workload, and opportunities to develop competence and social connection.

This perspective is consistent with SDT in suggesting that the effectiveness of motivational practices depends not only on the presence of particular incentives, but also on how employees experience and internalize them.

7 APPROACHES TO ASSESSING EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

In organizational practice and research, motivation assessment instruments can help identify and analyze factors associated with employee motivation, engagement, and performance. Common approaches include surveys, interviews, and performance evaluations, each providing different and potentially complementary perspectives on motivational dynamics.

Survey-based methods typically involve standardized questionnaires designed to collect data on employee attitudes, satisfaction, and engagement. These instruments may combine scaled responses, such as Likert-type measures, with open-ended questions, allowing assessment of factors including autonomy, recognition, advancement opportunities, and work–life balance (Kuswati, 2020). Surveys can therefore provide a structured overview of employee perceptions and help identify patterns across organizational units (Fomenky, 2015).

Interviews allow for a more in-depth exploration of individual experiences and can provide nuanced insights into personal motivations, career aspirations, and perceived workplace challenges (Bosančić, 2023). Their main advantage lies in capturing context-specific information that may not emerge through standardized survey instruments, although the findings are generally less standardized and more dependent on the interview context.

Performance appraisal systems may provide indirect information about motivational conditions, although their primary purpose is to assess employee performance against established goals (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Through structured feedback discussions, managers can explore factors that may influence employee effort, development needs, and future career goals. Such discussions can also create opportunities to address motivational concerns and support subsequent performance development (Lekić et al., 2014).

These tools can help organizations translate an abstract construct into observable indicators, but each method has limitations. Self-report surveys may be affected by common-method bias and temporary mood; interviews provide depth but reduce standardization; and performance appraisals can reflect evaluator bias and may capture performance rather than motivation itself. For a more comprehensive organizational assessment, multiple methods can be combined and, where appropriate, repeated over time. In research settings, validated scales, transparent sampling procedures, and longitudinal or multilevel designs are particularly important when testing relationships among motivation, job satisfaction, and performance.

8 CONCLUSION

This conceptual review suggests that employee motivation is best understood as a multidimensional, context-dependent process rather than a single managerial lever. Classical theories remain useful because they highlight different mechanisms, needs, managerial assumptions, and expectations, but none provides a complete explanation of contemporary workplace behavior. Their value increases when they are treated as complementary lenses and evaluated against newer evidence, rather than applied as universal prescriptions.

A central conclusion is that the relationships among motivation, job satisfaction, and performance are managerially relevant but too complex to be reduced to a simple causal chain. Motivation may support persistence and engagement, while satisfaction can strengthen commitment; however, ability, resources, job design, leadership, fairness, and organizational

support influence whether these attitudes translate into performance. This also explains why motivational practices can yield heterogeneous outcomes across individuals, teams, sectors, and cultures.

Contemporary self-determination theory supports this interpretation by emphasizing the quality of motivation and the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Recent evidence from hybrid work settings further suggests that flexibility can improve satisfaction and retention without necessarily reducing performance, but these benefits depend on work design and organizational context (Bloom et al., 2024; Gagné et al., 2026). Managers should therefore avoid one-size-fits-all incentive systems and instead combine meaningful goals, fair rewards, constructive feedback, development opportunities, and sufficient employee discretion.

Several limitations of this review should also be acknowledged. As a conceptual rather than systematic review, the paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive coverage of the literature or a quantitative assessment of the relationships among motivation, job satisfaction, and

performance. The selection of theoretical frameworks and studies is therefore necessarily selective, and the conclusions should be interpreted as a conceptual synthesis rather than as definitive estimates of causal effects. These limitations also highlight the need for systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and well-designed empirical studies to test the relationships discussed in this paper across different organizational and cultural contexts.

The review also identifies several research gaps. Future studies should examine motivational processes in hybrid and digitally mediated work, compare across sectors and generations, and test for cross-cultural differences in the relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Longitudinal and multilevel designs are needed to clarify the direction of influence among motivation, job satisfaction, engagement, and performance and to distinguish short-term reactions from sustainable effects. Such research would move the field beyond descriptive associations and provide stronger evidence for designing motivational systems that support both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness.

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