

# Motivating Employees in Academic Libraries in Tough Times

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## **Abstract**

Academic library HR management is facing many interesting challenges. With an increasing number of M.L.S. graduates seeking positions outside academic librarianship, how can we compete with corporate libraries and other information providers when we try to recruit and retain quality librarians? While the budget keeps shrinking and more is expected from each employee, how can we keep them motivated? This paper describes the importance of motivating and retaining quality employees in academic libraries in tough times. Various motivation theories, which are often used in corporate environment, are presented and applications to academic libraries are explained.

## **Introduction**

Organizational effectiveness is largely determined by the quality of the employees and how the organization develops them. Therefore, it is natural that high performing organizations try to recruit and retain the right people and provide them with training and professional development opportunities. However,

abilities, skills, personality, and organizational support alone might not lead to individual job performance that contributes to overall organizational effectiveness if people are not motivated. It is possible that some employees choose not to perform even if they have the right qualifications.

Managers face tough motivational challenges especially in economic downturns and it seems helpful to know key organizational behavior studies' findings related to human motivation. However, the goal is not manipulating and making people do what managers want them to do, but making people reach their highest job performance potential and getting them excited to do so. The author's literature review revealed that motivation analyses in libraries as workplaces are limited and have been focused on content theories or what motivates people.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to build on the former analyses and explain applications of motivation theories that describe the motivation factors, motivation processes, effective job design, and conditions for sustaining motivation in the academic library workplace.

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**Content theories: What motivates people?**

The motivation theories that deal with the content of what motivates people are referred to as content theories or static-content theories as they look at only one point in time and do not predict behavior. The most well-known theories in this area include Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Alderfer’s ERG theory, McClelland’s theory of socially acquired needs, and Herzberg’s motivator-hygiene theory.

Maslow organized the needs underlying human motivation in a hierarchy on five levels: physiological needs, security needs, social needs, ego or self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.<sup>2</sup> He further proposed that lower-level needs such as physiological needs and security needs must be satisfied before the individual can address higher-level needs. Although there is little evidence to support the concept of hierarchical progression and all individuals cannot be

motivated in the same way, managers can attempt to influence their performance by satisfying employees’ needs. Table 1 shows some possible applications in academic library work environment.

Alderfer’s ERG Theory, on the other hand, provides an alternative to Maslow’s theory and is based on a 3-fold conceptualization of human needs: existence, relatedness, and growth.<sup>3</sup> It does not assume lower-level satisfaction as a prerequisite for the emergence of higher-level needs. To test his theory, Alderfer surveyed 110 bank employees at several job levels. Although the results indicated stronger support for the ERG theory than Maslow’s theory, both theories are similar in that people shape their actions to satisfy unfulfilled needs.

McClelland identified three basic needs that people develop in the society: the need for achievement, power, and affiliation.<sup>4</sup> He argued that each individual is likely to have developed a dominant orientation toward one of these needs based on our life experiences. An obvious

implication for managers might be to draw out those employees with a high need for achievement. However, McClelland suggested that motivation is changeable and that people can be taught to have certain needs through training programs.

Herzberg’s motivator-hygiene theory is different from other content theories as it suggested that motivation is composed of two dimensions: 1) *hygiene* factors or the conditions surrounding the job and can prevent dissatisfaction; and 2) *motivators*, or the factors associated with the work itself and influence employees to grow and develop.<sup>5</sup> The hygiene factors include such things as salary, supervision, policies, work-

| <i>Level</i> | <i>Needs</i>       | <i>Examples in the Academic Library Workplace</i>   |
|--------------|--------------------|---|
| 1            | Physiological      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean Air</li> <li>• Enough work space</li> <li>• Ergonomically-designed workstations</li> <li>• Appropriate lighting</li> <li>• Appropriate temperature</li> <li>• Convenient and reasonable foodservice facilities</li> <li>• Water fountains</li> </ul> |
| 2            | Security           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe workplace</li> <li>• Stable wages and salaries</li> <li>• Job security</li> <li>• Health insurance</li> <li>• Retirement benefits</li> </ul>  |
| 3            | Social Affiliation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee social activities</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Friendship</li> <li>• Sense of belonging</li> <li>• Affection</li> </ul>   |
| 4            | Self-esteem        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition</li> <li>• Awards</li> <li>• Prestige</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> </ul>   |
| 5            | Self-actualization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-being of others</li> <li>• Accepting self</li> <li>• Meaningful work</li> </ul>   |

ing conditions, relationship, and job securities. The motivators include promotion, growth opportunities, responsibility, recognition, and achievement. The main implication of this theory is that for employees to be truly satisfied and perform above minimum standards, motivators had to be built into the job.

**Process Theories: How does motivation operate?**

Although the static-content theories can provide a basic understanding of what energizes people, they are not sufficient to explain the complex nature of human motivation as people respond differently to their needs. Factors other than unfulfilled needs also influence motivation, and various process theories were developed to explain how motivation operates.

Expectancy theory, which is also known as VIE theory, assumes that motivation is a function of three components; for an individual to be motivated, 1) the reward must be valued by the person (valence); 2) the person must believe that higher performance will result in greater rewards (instrumentality); and 3) that additional effort will lead to higher performance (expectancy).<sup>6</sup> For example, if an employee perceives that high performance might not be achieved even after hours of effort due to lack of skills or self-efficacy, even if he or she desires promotion, the person might not feel motivated enough to achieve the goal. Therefore, providing appropriate training, clarifying expectations, and providing guidance are important to strengthen this effort-performance link. Another example might be that if an individual believes that rewards might be given to people with higher seniority regardless of their performance, getting the reward might be perceived as unlikely for junior staff, thus undermining the person’s motivation to perform. Finally, if an employee can perform well but does not value the reward provided, e.g., a gift certificate to a restaurant that the person does not care for, the person is likely to be less motivated.

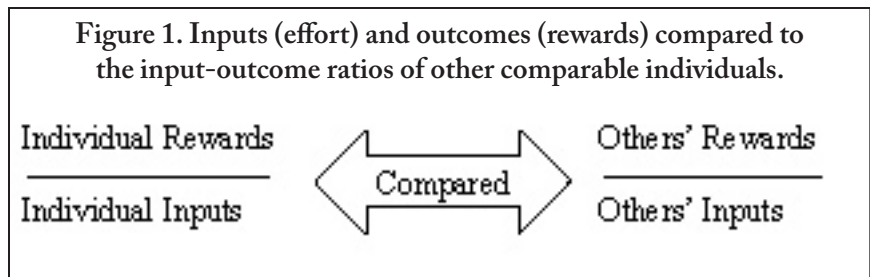
Goal-setting theory is another process theory and suggests the idea that setting goals can be a cause of high performance. Locke argued that a person’s conscious intentions (goals) are the primary determinants of task-related motivation.<sup>7</sup> Managers should 1) set specific goals; 2) make goals sufficiently difficult (but not too difficult); 3) involve employees in goal

setting to ensure commitment; 4) provide feedback; and 5) link goal accomplishment with rewards that are valued by the employee. This theory can be applied in various library tasks. For example, instead of asking employees to do their best in enhancing information fluency, the goal might be “implementing information fluency programs in at least 10 courses next semester.” To gain goal commitment, it will be important for managers to provide clear direction and guidance to employees in addition to building their self-efficacy.

Organizational justice theories suggest that people’s perception of fairness within the organization regarding *how* and *what* decisions are made about the distribution of outcomes affects motivation. Justice theories are important given the current economy where many organizations have been forced to lay off people. Questions such as “Are we restructuring our organization in a fair manner?” and “Were the layoffs perceived as fair by employees?” are important for managers. The outcomes of justice perceptions can have an economic impact on the organization such as absenteeism, withdrawal, theft, sabotage, or even lawsuits against employers.

Justice theories consider both procedural justice and distributive justice. Distributive justice theory is also referred to as equity theory and suggests that people compare the ratio of their inputs (effort) and outcomes (rewards) to the input-outcome ratios of other comparable individuals.<sup>8</sup> Figure 1 shows the simplified relationship.

The research on equity theory is also more definitive on the reactions of people who perceive that they are under-rewarded. If an individual views a relationship as unequal, an attempt will be made to restore equality either by trying to gain greater rewards or by putting forth less effort. For example, if an employee feels that everyone gets promoted at the same rate regardless of their amount of inputs, he or she who feels under-rewarded might reduce the amount of the



effort. At the same time, the employee will not think it is unfair if another employee who contributes more to the organization receives more reward.

Colquitt et al. conducted a meta-analysis of justice theories and concluded that there was a strong negative correlation ( $r = -.51$ ) between distributive justice and withdrawal, suggesting that if an employee views a relationship as unequal, he or she is likely to lose interest in the work or leave the organization.<sup>9</sup> They also concluded that there was a strong positive correlation ( $r = .56$ ) between procedural justice and performance, suggesting that employees are likely to perform better if procedures are perceived as fair.

Other business literature also suggests that procedural justice increases performance significantly as managers gain trust, commitment, and voluntary cooperation from their employees.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that some managers might be fair in terms of distributing rewards such as recognition, promotion, pay raise, authority, responsibility, and resources, but not so in terms of process. Fair process involves engaging employees, providing opportunities for them to speak up, explaining why final decisions are made as they are, and clarifying expectations. Fair process is lost when information is filtered and managers retain power by withholding what they know to themselves. It is important for employees to be treated with sincerity and respect, and adequate explanation needs to be provided. When the process is perceived to be fair, most people will realize that compromises are occasionally necessary and accept outcomes that might not be in their favor.

### **Job Characteristics Theory: How can we make jobs interesting?**

Job design and job enrichment also affect human motivation and it will be helpful to know the characteristics that make jobs interesting. The job characteristics model developed by Hackman and Oldham identified five core job dimensions that should be enriched when jobs are re-designed:<sup>11</sup>

- 1) Skill variety—the degree to which a job requires a variety of activities that draw on different skills and talents of the employee.
- 2) Task identity—the degree to which the job requires completion of a task, from beginning to end.
- 3) Task significance—the degree to which the job has a significant impact on the lives of other people.
- 4) Autonomy—the degree to which the job pro-

vides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling work and determining the procedures to be used.

5) Feedback—the degree to which workers are provided with direct and clear information about their performance.

As the core dimensions are enhanced, the job characteristics model posits that they influence three critical psychological states: 1) experienced meaningfulness of work, which is increased by skill variety, task identity, and task significance; 2) experienced responsibility for work outcomes, which is enhanced by autonomy; and 3) knowledge of results, which is provided by effective feedback mechanisms. Hackman and Oldham tested the job characteristics model using data obtained from 658 employees working on 62 different jobs in seven organizations based on the Job Diagnostic Survey, an instrument specifically designed to measure each of the variables in the job characteristics model. Their research found out that the jobs that are high in the five core dimensions lead to critical psychological states as hypothesized, and resulted in high motivation, high performance, high job satisfaction, low absenteeism, and low turnover. They also developed the Motivating Potential Score (MPS), a measure of the degree to which the above conditions are met:

$$MPS = \left( \frac{\text{Skill Variety} + \text{Task Identity} + \text{Task Significance}}{3} \right) \times \text{Autonomy} \times \text{Feedback}$$

From the above formula, it is clear that a near-zero score of a job on either autonomy or feedback will result in the overall MPS to the near-zero. It implies that if an employee does not have much autonomy or feedback, the person's motivation will be very low. Therefore, it is important to provide employees with sufficient freedom and independence and establish appropriate feedback channels so that the employee will hear directly from the users of his or her service. For example, providing credits to individuals rather than to the department when preparing pathfinders, instruction handouts, or other documents will provide opportunities for those employees involved to receive direct feedback from library users and establish client relationships with them. In addition, open lines of communication between employees and managers

need to be incorporated into the workplace culture. The more people know how well they are doing, the better equipped they are to take appropriate corrective action.

In terms of increasing autonomy, the first step will be to hire people who can do their jobs properly without close supervision. Second, the individuals will need to be trained to do their jobs effectively. Finally, it should be clear that high-quality performance is expected. Loading jobs vertically by giving employees greater responsibility for their jobs and allowing them to make their own decisions, instead of micro-managing, increase the level of autonomy and sense of accountability that results in higher motivation. At the same time, employees should not be given a great deal of autonomy in any organizations where marginal work tends to be accepted without question. Autonomy will work only when everyone involved buys into the importance of performing at a high level. One approach in increasing autonomy might be to ask employees what goals they want to accomplish and what resources or support is needed as self-setting goals are naturally self-committed.

It is important to note that the job characteristics model recognizes the limitation that not everyone wants and benefits from enriched jobs and that people with a high need for personal growth benefit the most. In that sense, it will be essential for managers to hire people who are interested in growing professionally in the work instead of people who are attracted to the work because of work conditions or benefits.

### **Environmentally-based theories: How can we reinforce and maintain motivation?**

Let's now think about some of the ways in which motivation can be sustained. If we are rewarded for behaving in a certain way, we begin to make the connection between the behavior and the reward and continue to engage in the behavior. As B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory explains, behaviors with positive consequences are strengthened and acquired, and behaviors with negative consequences are eliminated.<sup>12</sup> The positive consequences, such as recognition and reward, need to be tied directly to desired behaviors and be given immediately and continuously so that the connection between the behavior and reinforcer is established. For example, staff recognition needs to be

provided with an explanation of desirable behavior. It should also be repeated if the staff continues to improve the work instead of choosing different employees to be rewarded when in fact the same employee performed the best. Additionally, rewards need to be distributed consistently so that recognition of good work will become part of the organizational culture.

It is also important to know what you are rewarding. For example, if you reward someone because she or he answered the largest number of reference questions, the employee and possibly others might try to enhance the number of reference questions instead of focusing on the quality of the service and other ways that reference service can be improved. As social learning theory suggests, people acquire new behaviors by observing the rewards and punishments given to others.<sup>13</sup> If you want to increase teamwork but continue distributing rewards according to individual performance only, your desired outcome, i.e., teamwork will not be reinforced. In addition, if an individual performs fine in one area but not so in another, the explanation for the reward needs to be very clear so that the desirable behavior is strengthened while the undesirable behavior is not.

When providing rewards, it will be helpful to know the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards are contrived and some of them incur direct cost. They include such things as promotion, monetary reward, gifts, and bonuses. Intrinsic rewards involve no direct cost, and the examples include compliments, public recognition, opportunities, and a smile. Thus, intrinsic rewards are closely related to the work itself and are motivators in the context of Herzberg's motivator. Therefore, intrinsic motivation is synonymous with a desire to work hard solely for the pleasure of task accomplishment. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation encourages us to complete the task to receive the reward. In other words, rewards motivate people to get rewards. Luthans and Stajkovic's research implies that the feedback and social reinforcers, such as recognition and attention, may have as strong an impact on performance as pay.<sup>14</sup> Their research also indicates that extrinsic rewards can undermine an individual's intrinsic motivation. However, this is not to suggest that extrinsic incentives are unimportant. Good pay, benefits, and good working condition are often significant factors to attract and retain best people and cannot be ignored.

## Conclusions

This paper described applications of various motivation theories in the academic library workplace. Although those theories might not accurately explain behavior in all situations, they can still be helpful for managers who try to increase motivation among staff in academic libraries.

Need theories can be used to satisfy employees' physical and psychological needs and hopefully to motivate them by enhancing their sense of self-esteem and self-actualization. Hygiene-Motivator theory makes us realize that job conditions such as pay and benefits alone might not motivate people. Therefore, it will be important for managers to provide motivators such as growth opportunities, sense of responsibility and accomplishment, and recognition as well as providing good working conditions.

Expectancy theory suggests that managers need to provide rewards that are valued by their employees and that the employees need to feel they can achieve their goals and high-performance will result in the reward. Goals need to be specific, sufficiently difficult, accepted by the employee, and self-set if possible so that the employee becomes naturally committed. In addition, process and reward distribution needs to be fair to enhance trust, job performance, and motivation.

We also learned that characteristics of jobs affect human motivation. Jobs with a variety of activities, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback mechanisms tend to increase motivation. Autonomy does not mean that employees can do whatever they want; instead, it involves hiring the right people, providing training, explaining that high-performance is expected, enriching jobs, providing respect and independence, and rewarding appropriately. Direct feedback channels should be established between service users and the employees who contributed to the work as well as between the employees and their supervisors. Providing appropriate credits to work is important so that "thank you" notes and other feedback arrive to the people who were involved.

Rewarding excellent work is essential to reinforce and maintain employee motivation. Intrinsic rewards such as compliments, public recognition, professional and opportunities are motivators according to the content theory and can be as effective as extrinsic rewards such as monetary reward and gifts, which might motivate employees to win the reward rather

than to focus on the work itself. Nevertheless, extrinsic rewards encourage risk taking and for people to do extraordinary things and cannot be ignored. At the same time, it will be important for managers to be mindful of those employees who get disappointed when their effort does not lead to rewards. Distributing rewards consistently instead of providing them only when accomplishment is visible will help strengthen trust within the organization.

Although most theories were tested in corporate settings, it appears they are also applicable in academic or non-profit workplaces. Peter Drucker wrote that "Nonprofits need management precisely because they don't have a bottom line" and argued that nonprofit organizations often end up becoming pioneers in the most crucial area—the motivation and productivity of knowledge workers—as nonprofits start with the mission, which business will have to learn from them.<sup>15</sup> It seems that the key for the successful management is to clarify the mission of the organization, hire people who have the right skills and agree with the mission, set goals, provide development opportunities, explain accountability, build trust through fair process, give autonomy and feedback, and provide appropriate rewards. Service excellence can be achieved even in times of budget constraints.

## Notes

1. For example, see Betsy Baker and Beth Sandore, "Motivation in Turbulent Times: In Search of the Epicurean Work Ethic," *Journal of Library Administration* 14, no. 4 (1991): 37–50; Jennifer Rowley, "Motivation of Staff in Libraries," *Library Management* 17, no. 5 (1996): 31–35; Jamie Green et al., "In the Librarian's Chair: An Analysis of Factors Which Influence the Motivation of Library Staff and Contribute to the Effective Delivery of Service," *Library Review* 49, no. 8 (2000): 380–86.

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3. Clayton P. Alderfer, "An Empirical Test of a New Theory of Human Needs," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 4, no. 2 (1969): 142–75.

4. David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961).

5. Frederick Herzberg et al., *The Motivation to Work* (New York: Wiley, 1959).

6. Victor Harold Vroom, *Work and Motivation* (New York: Wiley, 1964).
7. Edwin A. Locke, "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 3 (1968): 157–89.
8. J. Stacy Adams, "Inequity in Social Exchange," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1965).
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10. For example, see W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, "Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy," *Harvard Business Review* (January 2003): 127–36.
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14. Fred Luthans and Alexander D. Stajkovic, "Reinforce for Performance: The Need to Go Beyond Pay and Even Rewards," *Academy of Management Executive* 18, no. 2 (1999): 49–57.
15. Peter F. Drucker, "What Business Can Learn from Nonprofits," *Harvard Business Review* (July–August 1989): 88–93.