

# Motivation for Knowledge Work

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of motivation in knowledge work is generally acknowledged. With lacking motivation, the quality of the products of knowledge work is bound to drop dramatically. Without work motivation, individual knowledge workers may direct their efforts to their individual needs at the expense of organization goals or decide to leave the firm. Creativity, knowledge teamwork, knowledge sharing, and other knowledge processes depend on the motivation of knowledge workers. Lacking sustained motivation in association with an insufficiently knowledge-friendly culture has often been mentioned as the principal culprit for failed knowledge management (KM) initiatives and programs (Davenport, DeLong, & Beers, 1998; McKenzie, Truc, & Winkelen, 2001). Several traits of knowledge workers explain, so it is argued, why prevailing work motivation programs will not work when applied to knowledge workers: they have high needs for autonomy, their career formation is external to the organization, they are loyal to their networks of peers and to their profession rather than to the organization that employs them, and the exact form and sequence of their work processes cannot be fully predicted (Despres & Hiltrop, 1996).

## BACKGROUND

Motivation is a big issue in KM debates. Notwithstanding its recognized relevance to KM, knowledge about motivation issues in the KM arena is scarce and scattered. Huber (2001, p. 72) argues that “the management practice literature is replete with reports of practices being used to motivate a firm’s knowledge workers... to participate with commitment in the firms’ knowledge management system.” Empirical research on the effectiveness of such practices, however, is in short supply. With respect to the connection between KM practice and motivation for knowledge work, our ignorance exceeds our knowledge

(Huber, 2001). Whereas empirical research on the impact of KM practices on motivation is lacking, research does exist that addresses how motivation affects aspects of knowledge work. This research can be divided into two classes. Firstly, several studies link motivation issues to the broad categories of knowledge work and knowledge workers. Questions addressed in these studies are how motivation explains knowledge worker turnover or which role career development plays in knowledge work motivation (e.g., Kubo & Saka, 2002; Tampoe, 1993). Secondly, studies address how motivation is linked to knowledge aspects of work, such as creativity and other facets of knowledge exploration, and cooperation and knowledge transfer in knowledge teams. Questions addressed in such studies are how motivation plays a role in the establishment of key mechanisms that will lead to knowledge becoming organizationally valuable (e.g., Amabile, 1997; Janz, Colquitt, & Noe, 1997; Osterloh & Frey, 2000).

In this article, we argue that understanding the effect of KM practices on motivation presumes an understanding of how motivation plays a role in knowledge work. We also argue that the second class of studies specified above deserves more attention than the first, as it aims to glance into the black box of what constitutes the knowledge elements in work. It will provide better guidance for drafting KM practices and evaluating their effectiveness than studies in the first class can. Any work is knowledge based, unless performed by an automated machine. Therefore the terms *knowledge work* and *knowledge worker* are container concepts that are low in meaning without a specification of how knowledge defines them. Themes such as creativity and knowledge transfer provide exactly those specifications. The logical sequence for addressing the connections between motivation and the placeholder of knowledge work, therefore, is first to define work motivation and specify work motivation theories, next to link them to knowledge themes, and finally to derive inspiration from that connection for KM programs aimed at furthering motivation for knowledge work. This sequence defines the structure of this article.

## **THE MOTIVATION FOR KNOWLEDGE-RELATED ASPECTS OF WORK**

### **The Concept of Work Motivation and Work Motivation Theories**

Motivation concerns the question: “What is in it for me?” Motivation is about what makes people’s clocks tick. That is, it concerns how behavior is instigated and inspired by the expected outcomes of that behavior defined as goals, aspects of success, performance, or in other ways. What involves restricting the motivation concept to the work situation is succinctly expressed by the title of Maccoby’s (1988) monograph on work motivation: “Why Work?” Work motivation concerns the individual’s degree of willingness to exert and maintain an effort towards aligning individual goals with organizational goals, organizational success, organizational performance, and so forth. Such goals, success, and performance refer to what is commonly called group motivation. The concept of work motivation is closely related to such concepts as work commitment, attachment, involvement, and engagement. These concepts refer to the degree and different aspects of emotional binding to the job. Therefore, they can serve as indicators of motivation. Work motivation is also related to job satisfaction or personal assessment of work revenues. Job satisfaction simultaneously plays the role of a cause and an effect of work motivation.

Drawing from the plethora of motivation theories that such disciplines as psychology and sociology have brought forth, organization studies have had their share in adding to the smorgasbord of motivation-related concepts, ideas, and frameworks (for an excellent overview, see Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). Some work motivation theories appear more popular than others for addressing motivation issues with respect to knowledge work. Below we give an outline of these theories.

### **Two-Factor Theory and Self-Determination Theory**

Probably the most used distinction in motivation discussions is that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These concepts are the basic concepts of Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2004) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). They are closely related to what Herzberg (1968, 1987) in his Two-Factor Theory calls motivators and hygiene factors. Intrinsic motivation works through immediate need satisfaction. A person is intrinsically motivated to perform an activity when the goal of the action is thematically identical with the action itself, that is, when it is carried out for the sake of its own objectives. Extrinsic motivation works

through indirect need satisfaction, for example, through monetary and symbolic compensation. Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation represent positions on a continuum describing where the locus of causality or degree of self-determination lays in particular behavior. In intrinsically motivated behavior, that locus is fully internal. It moves to external and impersonal to the extent that individuals fully assimilate outside regulations or ignore these (with several intermediate positions identified; see Deci & Ryan, 2004).

### **Goal-Setting Theory**

Goal-Setting Theory (Locke, 1968; Locke & Latham, 1990) states that higher performance results from specifying goals, depending on how and by whom that specification is given. Once individuals determine the goals they intend to achieve, these goals and intentions direct and motivate efforts to attain them. Studies based upon goal-setting theory indicate that levels of goal specification are related to level of success in goal attainment (see Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). Individuals must be aware of the goal and accept it. Specific and difficult objectives lead to better achievement than vague or easy ones (Durham, Knight, & Locke, 1997). Goals should involve a challenge; to boost motivation, they should entail an extra effort. Research has also demonstrated that participation in goal setting is critical to commitment to the goal (e.g., O’Leary-Kelly, Martocchio, & Frink, 1994). Receiving feedback on goal achievement is also essential for motivation. If an employee does not get timely and accurate feedback on performance, it is impossible to know what behaviors to continue in order to achieve similar goals in the future (e.g., Carson & Carson, 1993; Gambill, Clark, & Wilkes, 2000).

### **Job Characteristics Theory**

Job Characteristics Theory (JCT; Hackman & Oldham, 1980) involves a three-stage model, specifying a set of core job characteristics that impact critical psychological states (meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results). These influence a set of affective and motivational outcomes. The five job characteristics are: (1) skill variety, which describes the degree to which a job requires the exercise of a number of different skills, abilities, or talents; (2) task identity, defined as the extent to which a job requires completion of a whole and identifiable piece of work; (3) task significance, referring to the degree to which the job has an impact on the lives of other people; (4) autonomy, or the extent to which the jobholder is free to determine work procedures; and (5) feedback, or the information an individual obtains about performance effectiveness.

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