

Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory: Applications and Criticisms

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Abstract

Motivational factors play an important role in increasing employee job satisfaction. This will result in improving organizational performance. High productivity is a long term benefits of employee motivation. Motivated employee is a valuable asset who creates value for an organization in strengthening the business and revenue growth. Motivation is going to work if the right person with suitable skills is made responsible for the job or otherwise it will be the wastage of resources and time, and will lead to job dissatisfaction. The paper is aimed to study the effect of employee motivation on job satisfaction and organizational performance. This paper attempts to define the motivational theory propounded by Maslow known as need hierarchy theory. In this the theory is well defined with literature reviews. It also explains the managerial applications of this theory in organizations and the criticism faced by it.

Keywords: Motivation, Need Hierarchy Theory, Organisations.

1. History and Explanation

The "motivation to work" published by Maslow probably provided the field of organisational behaviour and management with a new way of looking at employees job attitudes or behaviours in understanding how humans are motivated. Probably the best-known conceptualisation of human needs in organisations has been proposed by this theory. Abraham Maslow was a clinical psychologist who introduced his theory based on personal judgement, which was generally known as the need hierarchy theory. According to him if people grew in an environment in which their needs are not met, they will be unlikely to function as healthy individuals or well-adjusted individuals.

Specifically Maslow theorised that people have five types of needs and that these are activated in a hierarchical manner. This means that these needs are aroused in a specific order from lowest to highest, such that the lowest-order need must be fulfilled before the next order need is triggered and the process continues. If you look at this in a motivational point of view Maslow's theory says that a need can never be fully met, but a need that is almost fulfilled does not longer motivate. According to Maslow you need to know where a person is on the hierarchical pyramid in order to motivate him/her. Then you need to focus on meeting that person's needs at that level (Robbins 2001)

Below is a summary of these needs that in this thesis are divided into Deficiency needs (psychological, safety, social needs) and Growth needs (esteem, self-actualisation needs).

2. Factors Explanation

Physiological needs are the need at the bottom of the triangle and include the lowest order need and most basic. This includes the need to satisfy the fundamental biological drives such as food, air, water and shelter. According to Maslow organisations must provide employees with a salary that enable them to afford adequate living conditions. The rationale here is that any hungry employee will hardly be able to make much of any contribution to his organisation.

Safety needs this occupies the second level of needs. Safety needs are activated after physiological needs are met. They refer to the need for a secure working environment free from any threats or harms. The rationale is that employees working in an environment free of harm do their jobs without fear of harm.

Social needs: This represents the third level of needs. They are activated after safety needs are met. Social needs refer to the need to be affiliated that is (the needed to be loved and accepted by other people). To meet these needs organisations encourage employees participation in social events such as picnics, organisations bowling etc

Esteem needs this represents the fourth level of needs. It includes the need for self-respect and approval of others. Organisations introduce awards banquets to recognise distinguished achievements.

Self-actualisation: This occupies the last level at the top of the triangle. This refers to the need to become all that one is capable of being to develop ones fullest potential. The rationale here holds to the point that self-actualised employees represent valuable assets to the organisation human resource.

3. Organisational/ Managerial Applications

The greatest value of Maslows need theory lies in the practical implications it has for every management of organisations (Greenberg & Baron 2003 p.195). The rationale behind the theory lies on the fact that it's able to suggest to managers how they can

make their employees or subordinates become self-actualised. This is because self-actualised employees are likely to work at their maximum creative potentials. Therefore it is important to make employees meet this stage by helping meet their need organisations can take the following strategies to attain this stage

Recognise employee's accomplishments: Recognising employee's accomplishments is an important way to make them satisfy their esteem needs. This could take the form of awards, plaques etc.. According to (Greenberg & Baron 2003, p197) research carried out in GTE Data services in Temple Terrace, Florida shows that awards are given to employees who develop ways of improving customer's satisfaction or business performance. But it should be noted that according to Greenberg & Baron awards are effective at enhancing esteem only when they are clearly linked to desired behaviours. Awards that are too general fail to meet this specification.

Provide financial security: Financial security is an important type of safety need. So organisations to motivate their employees need to make them financially secured by involving them in profit sharing of the organisation. In a research carried out with AT&T and Wang showed that 50% of their employees received financial outplacement services to assist laid-off employees in securing new jobs.

Provide opportunities to socialise: Socialisation is one of the factors that keep employees feel the spirit of working as a team. When employees work as a team they tend to increase their performance. Research conducted on IBM shows that it holds a "family day" picnic each spring near its Armonk, New York headquarters.

Promote a healthy work force: Companies can help in keeping their Employees physiological needs by providing incentives to keep them healthy both in health and mentally. In a research carried out at the Hershey Foods Corporation and Southern California Edison Company showed that Employees are provided with insurance rebates with health lifestyles while extra premiums were given to those with risk habits like smoking.

4. Criticisms

Maslow proposed that if people grew up in an environment in which their needs are not meet, they would be unlikely to function healthy, well-adjusted individuals. Research testing Maslow's theory has supported the distinction between the deficiencies and growth needs but showed that not all people are able to satisfy their higher-order needs on the job. According the results of the research managers from higher echelons of organisations are able to satisfy both their growth and deficiency needs lower level managers are able to satisfy only their deficiency needs on the job. Maslow's theory has not received a great deal of support with respect to specific notion it proposes (Greenberg & Baron 2003, p195). To them this model is theorised to be especially effective in describing the behaviour of individuals who are high in growth need strength because employees who are different to the idea of increasing their growth will not realise any physiological reaction to their jobs.

Centers & Bgental (1966, .193) in their survey carried out among a cross-section of the working population in Los Angeles, posited “background factors, altitudes and aspirations affects workers needs, expectations and situation assessment”. According to Graham & Messner (1998, p.196) there are generally three major criticisms directed to the need theory and other content theories of motivation. (A) There is scant empirical data to support their conclusions, (b) they assume employees are basically alike, and (c) they are not theories of motivation at all, but rather theories of job satisfaction. This was supported by the views of Nadler & Lawler (1979) in Graham & Messner (2000, p 188).

Nadler & Lawler (1979) cited in Graham & Messner (2000,p.198) where also critical of the need theory of motivation. They argue that the theory makes the following unrealistic assumptions about employees in general that: (a) all employees are alike (b) all situations are alike and that (c) there is only one best way to meet needs. Another critic to this view was Basset-Jones & Lloyd (2004, p 961).

Basset-Jones & Lloyd (2004, p 961) presents that in general, critics of the need theory argue that it is as a result of the natural feeling of employees to take credit for needs met and dissatisfaction on needs not met.

5. Conclusion

Nonetheless and regardless of the heavy criticism levied at the hierarchy of need theory, I believe that this theory has made a significant contribution in the field of organisational behaviour and management especially in the area of employee motivation and remains attractive to both researchers and managers alike. The incorporation of the need theory into the work environment today could be as a result of the contributions made so far by Maslows Hierarchy of need theory.

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