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Implementing need hierarchy theory in work settings: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract
This study explores the utility of need hierarchy theory (Maslow, 1943) in employees' work context. Though, Maslow has proposed his theory to explain motivation in general population, the theory has extensively been used in the organizations for motivational training programmes. Many theory to explain human motivation is also based on the need hierarchy theory. The need hierarchy theory is very appealing because its ease of understanding. It explains human motivation very effectively and in very simple way. While implementing this theory in work context, managers face difficulty because the theory says that there is individual differences as far as hierarchy of needs are concerned. Hence, to motivate an employee, the management first has to know at which level of the hierarchy of need the person is currently on. This produces challenges in developing a common motivational programme in organizations. From the practical point of view, it is very difficult to study hierarchy of need for every employee and developing a universal motivational programme.

Keywords: Need hierarchy theory, work setting, opportunity, challenges

Introduction

Motivation is studied under the affective process of psychology. Affective process deals with feeling component of human being. It has profound impact on human cognition also. Under the affective process, we study those aspects of behaviour due to which we are inclined to give more attention- our cognitive functioning, including, learning and memory became better. Affective process explains the "why aspect" of behaviour. It explains the reason behind the behaviour. For example, if any employee performs better then why they are doing so, similarly, it also explains why another employee's performance is not meeting the benchmark. So, we could understand the cause of any behaviour when the motive behind that behaviour is understood.

Motivation is not an observed phenomenon, but on the basis of behaviour we could infer about the nature of motivation. Following are the important indicators of motivation Underwood (1949) [7]:

1. **Energy Mobilization:** We could know about motivation by knowing the energy level of an individual. It could be estimated by knowing how long a person is performing any particular activity. This is known as energizing role of motivation. It indicates that motivation gives energy to an individual.

2. **Direction of Movement:** An individual could move in many directions available to him/her. We could infer about motivation by knowing the direction of movement of a person. This is known as directing role of motivation. It indicates that motivation gives direction to an individual.

3. **Selection of Stimulus:** There are many stimuli present in the environment, but the organism select very few stimuli present in the environment. The selection of particular stimulus is also an indicator of motivation. This is selective or emphasizing role of motivation.

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The nature of motivation has extensively been studied under the domain of basic field of psychology. Also, later on its importance had been understood largely in applied field- particularly in employees' work context. Many work motivation theories have been developed in the area of organizational behaviour which explains 'what' and 'why' aspects of employees' motivation. These theories of motivation could be broadly grouped into two main categories- *content* and *process* theory of motivation.

The Need Theories represent the starting point for most contemporary thought on motivations; although these too attracted critics. The basic premise of need theories is that human motivation is one or more important needs or needs categories. Need theories have attempted to identify or categorize needs important to people. The *content theories* are concerned with identifying the needs that people have and how these needs are prioritized. The *content theories* of work motivation attempt to determine "What" it is that motivates people at work. They are concerned with the types of incentive or goal that people strive to attain in order to be satisfied and perform well.

At first, money was felt to be the only incentive (Scientific Management- Taylor, 1911) [6], and then a little later it was felt that incentives include good working conditions, security, and perhaps a democratic style of supervision (Human Relations Approach). More recently, the content of motivation has been deemed to be the so-called "higher level" needs or motives, such as esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) [4]; responsibility, recognition, achievement, and advancement (Herzberg, 1959) [2]; and growth and personal development (Alderfer, 1969) [1]. This approach (content) tries to answer: "What motivates people?"

The *process theories* are more concerned with the cognitive antecedents that go into motivation or effort, and more importantly they relate to one another. The *process theories* of motivation attempt to understand "how" and "why" people are motivated. Expectancy theory of motivation (Vroom, 1964) [8] is a process theory of motivation. It says that motivation is a process and number of cognitive steps are involved in it- employees' expectancy (cognition) is involved in every steps.

The *content* and *process* theories have its distinctive implication to understand the human motivation. As mentioned above, the need hierarchy theory developed by Maslow categorized under *content* theory of motivation. Maslow's need hierarchy theory of motivation has extensively been studied in the basic field of psychology and many other behavioural sciences. It is understood that this theory is very much capable to understand human

motives. But, Maslow did not intended that his needs hierarchy be directly applied to work motivation. Despite this lack of intent on Maslow's part, others, such as McGregor (1960) [5] in his widely read book *The Human Side of Enterprise*, popularized the Maslow theory in management literature. The needs hierarchy has tremendous intuitive appeal and is widely associated with work motivation (Luthans, 1973) [3]. After McGregor's effort, this theory has largely been used by management practitioners to understand employees' work motivation and to develop motivational programme in work settings. Maslow's need hierarchy theory could briefly be described as follows:

Maslow hypothesized that within every human being there exists a hierarchy of five needs:

1. **Physiological:** Includes hunger, thirst, desire for sex and other bodily needs.

2. **Safety/Security:** Includes security and protection from physical and emotional harm.

3. **Social:** Includes love and affection, belongingness, acceptance and friendship.

4. **Esteem:** Includes internal esteem factors such as self-respect, autonomy and achievement; and external esteem factors such as status, recognition and attention from others.

5. **Self-actualization:** The drive to become what one is capable of becoming; includes growth, achieving one's potential, and self-fulfillment.

Beginning at the bottom of the hierarchy, according to Maslow, each need level must be satisfied before the level above in the hierarchy becomes important. Thus once physiological needs have been satisfied their importance diminishes, and security needs emerge as the primary sources of motivation. This escalation up to the hierarchy continues until the self-actualization needs become the primary motivators. So, to motivate a person, according to Maslow, it is important to understand that at what level of the hierarchy the person is currently on and focus on satisfying the needs at or above that level.

Researchers and practicing managers, while applying Maslow's need hierarchy theory in work context, considered "salary" as a lowest need in this hierarchy. Researchers viewed that at the initial stage of employment salary is the basic need. The organizational examples of various needs could be depicted as follows in the Table:

Table 1: Organizational Examples of Various Needs

Categorization of Needs	Hierarchy of Needs	Organizational Examples of Needs in the Hierarchy
Higher-Order Needs	Self-actualization	Challenging Job, Realization of Potential in the Job
	Esteem	Job Title, Status Symbol, Opportunity for Promotion, etc.
	Social	Participative Supervision, Friendly Co-workers, etc.
Lower-Order Needs	Safety/Security	Pension Plan, Health Insurance, Employee Assistance Plan, etc.
	Physiological	Salary

Maslow separated the five needs into higher and lower orders. Physiological and safety needs are described as lower-order and social, esteem and self-actualization as higher-order needs. The differentiation between the two orders was made on the assumption that higher-order needs

are satisfied internally (with person), whereas lower-order needs are predominantly satisfied externally. In work context employees feel satisfaction for higher-order needs internally, while for the satisfaction of lower-order needs,

such as pay, employee assistance plan etc., the authority of the organization are responsible.

Maslow's need hierarchy theory has received wide recognition, particularly among practicing managers. This can be attributed to the theory's intuitive logic and ease of understanding. Various employees' motivational programmes have been developed based on this theory, but there are great challenges in applying this theory in work context. As Maslow considered that in order to motivate a person, it is essential to know at which level in the hierarchy the parson is currently on. So, when this theory is applied, particularly in the large organizations, the management practitioners have to individualize the motivational programme being developed for the employees. First, they have to study every employee at which level on the hierarchy they are, and after that their distinctive needs would be gratified.

Another major challenge in applying Maslow's theory is that researches do not generally validate the theory. Even Maslow provided no empirical substantiation to validated this theory, and several studies that sought to validate the theory found no support for it.

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