

Cultural Influences and Work Motivation – A literature review

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Abstract

Employee motivation must be central to the interests of managers wishing to cultivate and develop the available human resources in addition to obtain increased performances. Traditionally, motivation was regarded as an individual phenomenon pertaining to only one business culture. This paper aims to analyze, through a contrastive approach, the role played by culture in both, the theoretical and the applied research conducted on work motivation.

Keywords: culture, work, motivation, management, human resources

Introduction

How does the energy that animates the members of an organization develop? Which are the factors that afford direction and channel employee efforts towards attaining the objectives desired by their organization? The answer to these questions can be advanced through researching work motivation.

Many of the theories pertaining to work motivation have been developed in the USA. Collectively these (i.e. the theories) have been engaged in trying to explain why employees develop a certain behavior

and what kind of actions can be developed by managers in order to encourage certain behaviors and to dissuade others. Work related motivation is studied on an individual level and in the context of a sole culture. Globalization has allowed important modification in the work environment, expat managers employed with multinational companies working in branches that belong to vastly different cultures, some only minimally explored. Workforce transition from a culture to another surpasses the individual level, requiring local workers to adapt to an ever increasing number of new managers and colleagues that contribute with novel ways of problem solving. This paper aims to analyze the universality of motivational theories and to advance an answer to the question whether work related motivation is dependent on cultural traits.

Work motivation is probably one of the few areas in psychology based on the positive approach of humanizing the workplace and identifying modalities to help employees achieve their self-worth and well-being needs. Some motivational theories seek to identify sources of enjoyment when individuals endeavor to maintain their equilibrium, avoiding pain and overstimulation, while other theories focus on the joy experienced by individuals who exceed homeostatic boundaries and push their limits (Erez, Kleinbeck, Thierry, 2001).

Robbins and Judge (2014: 97) define motivation as “the process that takes into account an individual’s intensity, direction and persistence of effort involved in attaining an objective”. We can distinguish the presence of three key elements in this definition: intensity, direction and persistence of effort. According to Cole (1995:191) “motivation is the term used to describe the instinctual and rational processes through which individuals seek to satisfy their basic desires, their personal needs and wants, which ignite the human behavior”. Thoroughly researching the individual’s motivation, Johns (1998:150-151) acknowledges four heavily interconnected characteristics that define a motivated behavior:

- *the effort* that is exerted in a different manner by individuals according to their position in the workplace;
- *the perseverance*, respectively the consistence and insistence involved in the individual’s effort to accomplish workplace related tasks
- *the direction* which represents the qualitative aspect of the motivated effort (motivation implies not only hard work but intelligent work as well)

- the *objectives* representing the aims towards which the motivated behavior is targeted. It is important to note that employees can be motivated by aims which coincide with the company's objectives (such as an increased productivity or augmenting the number of the creative decisions taken) as well as by aims which are contrary the company's objectives (blackmailing, fraud, truancy).

Let us analyze the relationship between culture and personal motives. Field related literature shows that reasons such as auto-efficiency, the need for self fulfillment and the inner need for competency are universal in character, although there are specific factors that determine these motives, which vary from culture to culture (Gelfand et. al., 2007: 482). Earley et al. (1999) have indicated that personal feed-back influenced the beliefs related to auto-efficiency in individualist cultures, while group feed-back determined auto-efficiency in collectivist cultures. Yamaguchi et al. (2005) have discovered that while the need for control seemed to have a universal character, personal control is critical in individualist cultures and collective control is more important in collectivist cultures. The significance of the need for self-fulfillment is different from culture to culture, the motivation afforded by this (i.e. self-fulfillment) being more pronounced in individualist cultures as opposed to collectivist ones. Sagie, Elizur and Yamauchi (1996) have collected and compared reasons of fulfillment from managers across five countries. The results have shown that the tendency towards fulfillment was the highest with managers from the USA (an individualist culture) and registered lower scores in Hungary and Japan (collectivist cultures). The drive to obtain the desired outcomes motivates self-independent employees, while the drive to prevent undesired outcomes motivates self-dependent individuals. Cultural background influences motivational orientation towards performance and learning. Chinese culture considers the learning process as fundamental in opposition to the need for accomplishment (due to the Confucian philosophy that values the need for self-improvement). Learning and seeking performance have been both correlated and associated with the performance levels registered by students from Hong-Kong; these features being more distinct with students from the US (Lee et. al.,2003, in Gelfand et. al., 2007:483).

Material and Methods

This paper comprises elements of the *interpretative and critical streams*, as various norms and practices in the field will be discussed in an interpretative manner (a neutral point of view is adopted), as well as critical one (involvement in a particular viewpoint). The research will be fundamental and its purpose will be a theoretical generalization after noticing the insufficiency of knowledge in respect to the *culture influence on work motivation*, as well as identifying certain facts, for which theorization was not suggested.

Literature review

1. The Content Theories of Work-Related Motivation and Culture

Motivational theories can be divided into two categories: content theories and process theories (Isac, 2007). Content theories emphasize *what* motivates an individual, while process theories seek to offer an answer to *how* is an individual motivated towards developing a certain behavior.

Abraham Maslow's theory argues that individuals are motivated to satisfy their needs, which are represented as a pyramid with physiological needs at its bottom and more evolved needs such as the need for recognition and accomplishment at the top. The satisfaction of needs is a gradual process, progressively advancing on the pyramid's steps from physiological needs towards self-accomplishment needs. The latter is an insatiable need, while needs in general are considered to be universal. Revisionist theories by Miner and Dachler (1973), Bridwell and Wahba (1976), respectively Campbell and Pritchard (1976) have concluded that there is no evidence for the five types of needs.

The question that arises then is whether Maslow's theory is transculturally applicable? Hofstede (1984) maintains that the order of needs in Maslow's pyramid is a value choice particular to the author and it is based on US middleclass values from the mid-50s. Early researches conducted by Haire, Ghiselli and Porter (1966) show that the importance of needs is not the same across every culture and that the priority of needs, especially in developing countries, was similar yet *not identical* to the one proposed by the original theory. In collectivist and matriarchal cultures social needs tend to be considered more important than the need for respect.

Maslow's pyramid reflects a reduced values for incertitude avoidance and increased masculinity values. In cultures that are defined by low values for incertitude avoidance and masculinity (for example the Nordic countries) we can expect a predominance of the need for group appartenance over the need for self-accomplishment (Adler, 2002: 175). In a culture characterized by a high level of incertitude avoidance we can expect an increased need for safety over the need for self-accomplishment. In such cultures, having a secure job is more important than being autonomous, than work related challenges and creativity issues.

Nevis (1983) has compared the suppositions of managers from individualist and collectivist cultures before proposing a general framework of analysis for the hierarchy of needs in China. In this particular culture managers value loyalty towards the nation, respect shown for one's age, wisdom and traditional norms. Therefore, at the bottom of the needs pyramid we are to expect the need for group belonging, followed by physiological and safety ones. At the top of the pyramid we are to find the need for self-accomplishment for the benefit of the society.

A second question we have to address is whether the fulfilling of inferior and superior needs produces the same effects in different cultures? Huang and Van der Vliert (2003) have concluded that in the 49 national cultures they have researched, satisfying superior needs does not produce similar effects. In developed countries with a solid social security system and a low power distance, job features that would satisfy superior needs (challenge, autonomy) are associated with a higher level of work satisfaction. In cultural contexts dominated by a high power distance, employee empowerment aimed at satisfying superior needs, sprung from close mentoring, failed to lead towards an increase in work related productivity and satisfaction (Ayca et. al., 2014).

Another work motivation content theory is forwarded by David McClelland (1961) who suggests that there are three important motives that lead individuals: the need for accomplishment, power and affiliation. Initially, McClelland considered that the need for accomplishment is fundamental in explaining why certain societies produce more than others (Sagie, Elizur and Yamauchi, 1996). During his studies conducted in India he discovered that entrepreneurs trained in cultivating their need for accomplishment have obtained better

performances compared to those lacking such a skill. In a different study (McClelland and Burnham, 1976) the authors have centered their attention on the executive managers' need for power. An early paper by Hines (1973a) has established that managers from New Zealand follow the same typology of needs (affiliation, power, accomplishment) as the ones from the USA.

Masculinity is characterized by the ideal of success, by striving to become the best, while femininity is characterized by the empathy shown towards the less lucky and the desire to remedy their status. Due to the diversity of cultures at a global level relating to the masculinity - femininity model, it becomes hard to settle on the fact that the need for accomplishment is the main motivation in every culture. Additionally, the term "accomplishment" itself has different meanings in each culture.

The theory proposed by Frederick Herzberg argues that the factors that are related to the job description itself (intrinsic factors) have a motivational character and lead towards work related satisfaction while a second group of factors related to the job's context (extrinsic or hygiene factors) have no bearing on work satisfaction and do not motivate towards attaining performance. Further studies have questioned the two categories of factors proposed by Herzberg (Adler, 2002:178). Ulterior researches have concluded that sometimes people continue with a certain action plan because they have publicly committed to it and not because of the rewarding action itself. In other situations, individuals who used to obtain intrinsic satisfaction from a certain activity change their motivational orientation towards extrinsic sources after they have received an extrinsic reward.

From a transcultural perspective, what is considered as a hygiene factor in a certain culture can be seen as a motivational one in another and vice versa (Aycañ et.al. 2014). In a hierarchical type of culture where decisions have a centralized character, the information disseminated by the manager to his subordinates can be perceived as a sign of respect and/or trust and is construed as having a motivational character. In an egalitarian culture, information dissemination towards subordinates has no ascribed motivational character, being considered as a normal and necessary practice. When researchers have tested the theory of the two factors in countries other than the US, they have failed to confirm the initial discoveries (Hines, 1973b). In New Zealand, surveillance and interpersonal relations have significantly contributed to attaining satisfaction and have had no impact on reducing

dissatisfaction. Moneta (2004) has discovered that Chinese workers reported the highest level of intrinsic satisfaction when required to display a high level of abilities and a low level of challenges, the cause being the influence of Daoism and the accent it places on prudence and emotional moderation. The relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in determining motivation is different from one culture to another. Furnham et. al. (1994) has identified transcultural variations in the 42 countries investigated between factors determining intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participants from the Americas (Argentina, Chile, US, Mexico) conferred a high level of importance to knowledge, hard work and savings, while participants from Asia and the East (Israel, China, India, Bangladesh) valued competitiveness and money.

In a less scientific study conducted in the US (HR Focus, 2003), employees and Human Resources professionals have charted the five most important components of a job. Job security was considered to be the most important feature by employees while ranked only as fourth by HR specialists. For employees, job security was followed by benefits, the communication between manager and employee, employee flexibility in managing work and personal life and salary. HR professionals considered the communication between employees and management as being the most important, followed by management recognition, the relationship with the direct hierarchic superior, job security and salary.

Lawrence (1991) has discovered that Dutch managers placed more emphasis on work environment, friendly staff, freedom and work related challenges. French managers are more reliant on formal authority, British ones on extrinsic rewards. Danish managers value team work and social integration while Swedish companies have a tendency of offering a relatively lower salary because Swedish workers are motivated intrinsically and tolerate this policy better. In Norway, motivation is considered as a key managerial task, emphasizing development and personal skills (Silverthorne, 2005: 110-111).

2. Process Theories of Workplace Motivation and Cultural Influences.

Process theories concentrate on cognitive processes that occur in the minds of employees and that influence their behavior (Schermerhorn, Hunt, Osborn and Uhl-Bien, 2010:110). Expectancy theories consider that people are motivated by believing that their action

will lead to certain results. According to this theory, the likelihood that a certain action leads to results (E) multiplied by the appeal of the result (V) determines employee motivation (M). Expectancy theories rely on how much people believe that they are in control of the results spurred by their actions and on the managers' ability to allocate proper rewards, both factors varying according to cultural settings (Adler, 2002: 179).

In countries dominated by individualism, employees approach their relationship with the organization they work for in a rational manner, while those from collectivist cultures on a moral basis. Employees with collectivist values prefer organizational commitment due to interpersonal relations with their colleagues and superiors and less because the nature of the job or the reward scheme in use (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). If Brazilian employees expect their company to take care of their personal needs, Americans do not develop such expectancies, being less loyal to their company.

Geiger et. al (1998) have tested the expectancy theory across ten cultures (Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Singapore, SUA). They have discovered that individualism as well as long term perspectives have been associated positively with beliefs relating to expectancies, while uncertainty avoidance and power gap have been negatively associated with expectancies. Emery and Oertel (2006) have identified a strong correlation between the belief of German employees that they can achieve performance if effort is invested and they work in collaboration with their hierarchical superiors.

Objective assignment theory has been also used from a transcultural perspective. It states that employees are motivated if they are assigned with clear objectives that are specific, acceptable and challenging. Individuals who have a strong desire for accomplishment will probably be motivated by specific and challenging objectives. Individuals with developed affiliation needs will be less motivated by challenging and clear objectives because these are able to increase workplace completion, as well as the likelihood of failure (Aycan and Gelfand, 2012). Grouzet et.al. (2005) have compared the objective related preference categories of 1854 students from 15 countries and have identified 4 types of objectives, resulted from combining two dimensions: extrinsic-intrinsic and auto-transcendence - physical self. The structure of the objective related categories was the same across all the researched cultures yet the positioning of the objectives in the space

created by the two categories was different. Intrinsically oriented objectives were: self-acceptance, affiliation, sense of community and physical health, while the extrinsically oriented ones were: financial success, public image and popularity. Financial success has a less pronounced physical and extrinsic character in financially underdeveloped cultures compared to wealthy ones.

Simcha Ronen (1986) preferred to analyze cultural differences regarding work motivation by considering 14 work related objectives (as opposed to needs). He observed that employees group objectives such as work space, work time, extra income and workplace security in one cluster, while relationship to colleagues and managers generally appear in a different one; work related challenges and opportunities to use their abilities form a third cluster. Ronen and Shenkar (1985) have identified the following groups of countries according to the similarity of work related attitudes: Anglo-American, Nordic and Germanic, Latin - European, Latin -American, Middle East, Far East, Arab countries and independent countries. Furthering their research, the following additional clusters have been identified: Arabic, Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, Germanic, Latin-American, Latin-European, Eastern Europe, African, Far East, Confucianist (Ronen and Shenkar, 2013).

Conclusion

An important part of the motivational theories in use today by researchers of organizational behavior are developed in the US according to its own business culture. The emphasis put on achievement is surprising because of the American propensity towards risk taking and their orientation towards performance. These theories do not offer a universal explanation for motivation but rather offer a reflection of the American value system (Hofstede, 1980). Cultural values, beliefs and norms have a significant impact on the ways employees can be motivated (Aycan et. al., 2014). Erez (1997) observed that managers from different cultures tend to use 4 types of motivational practices:

- Different ways to allocate rewards;
- Participation in the goal-setting and decision-making process;
- Job and organizational design;
- Involvement in improving the quality of TQM type programmes.

The expansion of transnational societies and the influence of globalization have deep implications in work related motivation. Employees that come from diverse cultures have different expectations

from an organization and its managers regarding the motivational strategies used.

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