# **The Importance of Employee Mental Health and Motivation**

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An employee’s mental health and their ability to maintain constant motivation in a career field or job is the first building block for an employer in constructing a staff that is both efficient and satisfied. Latham (2012) refers to N. R. F. Maier’s equation: job performance = ability x motivation to explain why motivation is a primary focus in the fields of human resource (HRM), industrial and organization psychology (I-O), and organization behavior (OB) (p. 3). The advantages of creating a focus on improving employee mental health and developing efficient motivators can result in an increase in productivity and extend employment duration of the employees in the company. Furthermore, these benefits according to Rosen (1984) as cited by Conrad (1987) can show in numerous different forms (¶2):

Benefits of worksite health promotion have included improvements in productivity, such as decreased absenteeism, increased employee morale, improved ability to perform and the development of high-quality staff; reduction in benefit costs, such as decreases in health, life and workers compensation insurance; reduction in human resource development costs, such as decreased turnover and greater employee satisfaction; and improved image for corporation.

This paper examines the importance of maintaining positive employee mental health and developing motivators using an interdisciplinary approach incorporating three different disciplines: history, psychology, and management. These three fields are vital to the development of improvements in any career. History consider previous research and examples to determine the importance of mental health of employees as well as providing examples to support the effectiveness of motivators for employees. Psychology dives into the direct relation of an employee’s mental state in relation to their work, as well as how a work environment can affect an employee’s health. Management focuses on how certain aspects of a company can affect the mental health and productivity of its employees and determines the level of efficiency specific motivators can have. Research shows how essential each of these disciplines are in improving employee mental health over time and creating incentives that result in positive feedback and grant evidence to support that a focus on these ideals is crucial in any work environment.

# **History**

# To fully understand the importance of prioritizing employee mental health and motivation in the workplace, one may wish to understand the history of work motivation research and theory between the 20th century to the present day.

An example provided by Latham (2012) that displays the result of a lack of motivation in history is when the British acquired Canada in 1759 by defeating the French on the Plains of Abraham, which is basic knowledge. However, many don’t realize that it was primarily due to the French officer’s lack of motivation that caused such a devastating defeat. Rather than rally his troops, his choice, effort, and persistence – the three pillars that define motivation in the workplace – were dedicated to staying bed with his mistress rather than heeding warnings as to the approaching British troops (¶7). While this is an unconventional example of a lack of motivation in a career field, it still displays the importance of inciting a passion or purpose in an employee so that they can complete their job effectively.

The basic idea that if an employee is satisfied and motivated then they will produce results may seem straight forward, however, it has gone through a rigorous analysis and development process throughout history to reach its prominence and significance in the work environment today. Developments such as Thorndike’s (1927) Law of Effect which state that behavioral responses that resulted in satisfaction were most likely to become established patterns and occur again to illicit the same stimulus. Likewise, Frederick Taylor’s (1911) scientific management of incentivizing payment for achieved goals were integral to making motivators a common place focus for businesses. This ideal began to be examined throughout the remaining three quarters of the 20th century (Latham, 2012).

Further developments in a focus on employee health and motivation would gradually gain traction throughout the 20th century and reach a breakthrough when behaviorism begun to be considered as a valid theory according to Latham (2012). Founded by John B. Watson, behaviorism puts a focus on the effect of environmental stimuli on observable behavior. This theory became more relevant as industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologist for the time-period were vital in the picking and placement for the selection service of World War, particularly of military officer positions. In the decade following the war, the American economy flourished and I-O psychologist research was greatly supported due to the need for an efficient and effective workforce and their acclaimed success during the war (Latham, 2012).

During the second quarter of the 20th century I-O psychology research underwent a drastic shift due to three major events: the world’s economy crash, I-O psychology being accepted into departments of psychology, and World War II (Koppes, 2003).

The Great Depression during the economic collapse drastically decreased the need for the selection of workers which shifted focus from choosing employees based on mental state to an overall focus on the needs and goals of people. Morris Viteles published *Industiral Psychology* in 1932, which included a chapter on “Motives in Industry” that elaborated on the idea that basing an analysis of workers solely on output of the economy wasn’t fair during the time of recession. He stressed a need to focus on a detailed analysis of *motives-in-work* to determine the main contributors that affected economic efficiency and the individual satisfaction of each employee. He opted for a focus on “worker feelings and experience” as he believed the biggest influencer on performance was attitude (Latham, 2012).

There was a drastic focus shift for I-O psychologist from simply assessing employees’ capabilities for employment to finding ways of measuring attitudes of employees to recognize effective sources of motivation in the workplace. This helped lend to the second major development in the focus on employee health and motivation, its acceptance into modern day psychology (Latham, 2012).

World War II marked the last significant factor that affected the progress of I-O psychologist, as there was major focus on employee participation in the decision-making process. Following World War II, there was an economy boom in which several employee strikes were incited due to wage freezes during the war, which forced employers to consider employee demands and sentiments. This change in power dynamic in accordance with the economic depression and second world war led N. R. F. Maier (1946) to conclude that the most overlooked aspect of the workplace is management of labor power. He suggested that by integrating employee participation in the decision-making process then previously unattainable goals were much more plausible to reach. Two years later, the new emphasis for I-O psychology became focused on producing maximized, consistent productivity by taking into account abilities, energies, interest, and the motive of the workers (Latham, 2012).

By the second quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of the third quarter, I-O psychologist began to assess scientific management. Certain ideologies begun to emerge from these assessments such as the belief that monetary gain was only secondary to workers and the worker’s degree of independence and initiative, plus recognition and value took precedent. In addition, there began an understanding that works preferred a superior who guides rather than commands. Thus, the idea that money was the primary motivation for workers became known as the “dollar-fallacy” (Latham,2012).

A major methodological breakthrough for the focus on employee health and motivation was the development and implementation of surveys to measure attitudes in the workplace. The theory behind these studies is that job attitudes directly affect job performance. This belief is supported by Viteles’s (1932) demonstration that motivation for employees stems from a multitude of variables in addition to money. Likewise, it was supported by the Hawthorne studies which was a series of studies of employee productivity at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in which employees displayed a “psychological” reaction to an increase in attention each of the employees received. Both became the stimulus for an exponential increase in subsequent studies on the relationship between employee health and motivation to their overall performance (Latham, 2012)

Up to this point I-O psychology research was largely atheoretical. This changed however as result to an essay written by Abraham Maslow (1943), a clinical psychologist. Within this, he specified the needs and triggers that energize and direct behavior which didn’t gain traction until 1954 after he published his book which was then immediately implemented into the work industry.

From the contribution of numerous I-O psychologist and research studies, it helped create a foundation for the implementation for a focus on employee health and motivation. It’s through these practices that the work environment for most companies and careers today exist in which the focus on employees is considered vital to success.

**Psychology**

Numerous developments have occurred over the past century in the development of creating a focus for employee health and motivation. Despite these great leaps, however, there still continues to be great contributions in the field of linking productivity to the psychological effects caused by motivators and employee mindsets.

A crucial component for the definition of health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is “…the notion of the capacity to participate in community life, rather than the traditional narrower view of health as the absence of disease” (Chopra, 2009). This meaning that health refers to “a state of wellbeing in which the individual….is able to work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (Chopra, 2009). For any individual, their mental health determines their ability to cope with both internal and external needs such as in positions within employment. With these increased needs, however, have also come numerous mental illness, and in particular Common Mental Disorders (CMD) which include depression and anxiety. These are not only the most frequent causes of occupational disability but furthermore, depression was predicted to be the second most common disorder behind ischemic heart disease by 2020 and was expected to account for 15% of the total disease burden (Chopra, 2009). This is a major issue as only 35% of people identified with mental illness sought treatment and according to several population-based studies have demonstrated that CMD’s are under-recognized and under-treated (Chopra, 2009).

An important factor in the cause of illness is the risk factors involved with psychological process linked to the social environment of work which are implied by psychosocial work characteristics. (Stansfeld, & Candy, 2006). According to Karasek (1979), he describes two key dimensions of the psychosocial work environment which are psychological job demands and decision latitude.

In Karasek’s (1979) “job-strain model”, he classifies jobs into four different categories: “high-strain jobs” which comes with fatigue, anxiety, depression, and physical illness and is characterized by high demanding jobs and the involved workers decision latitude in the task is low meaning they lack the resources to deal with the demands. Similarly, “active jobs” can be intensely demanding, however, the workers have more control over their activities and the liberty to use available skills and these types of jobs are usually associated with average psychological strain and active leisure time. The next category is “Low-strain job” which have a few psychological demands and high levels of control with lower-than-average levels of psychological strain and a lower risk of health issues due to the lower ceiling of challenges and a greater freedom for the employees. The last category is “passive jobs”, these are both low demand and low control; this type is typically demotivating and have the possibility of deteriorating skills and abilities of the employee but have only average levels of psychological strain and health risk. In accordance with this, effort-reward imbalance (ERI) stating that workers invest effort and expect rewards in return however, if there is an imbalance in this exchange then psychological distress occurs with physiological arousal. Due to the combination of putting in high effort at work along with high work demand in return for little reward is a potent risk factor that can cause ill health and trigger CMD’s (Stansfeld, & Candy, 2006).

Common mental disorders, as well as depressive and anxiety disorders, have been identified in the general population using screening questionnaires and psychiatric interviews to have a direct correlation to high levels of psychological demands in the workplace which include, fast work pace and high conflicting demands. On the other hand, however, the surveying has also found that high levels of social support from colleagues and superiors as well as high levels of decision latitude have been shown to be effective protection for mental health (Stansfeld, & Candy, 2006).

Conrad (1987) states that work-site health promotion is “a combination of educational, organizational, and environmental activities designed to support behavior conducive to the health of employees and their families.” The author notes that certain ways work-site health promotion presents itself in a company is through health education, screening, and/ or implementing interventions for employees that may have been observed to have a shift in behavior and are at risk of experiencing declining health or motivation. These are applied in the hopes of improving employee health and reducing the overall health risk they may suffer.

Programs that companies can implement to promote work-site health can range from single interventions of people at risk to comprehensive health and fitness programs designed for the employees to undergo. Current wellness programs implemented by companies to develop a healthier mindset for the employees include hypertension screening, aerobic exercise and fitness, nutrition and weight control, stress management, assistance with smoking habits, cancer-risk screening and reduction, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, accident prevention, self-care and health information. Numerous implemented programs are vetted using a health-risk appraisal (HRA) to determine employee’s health risk and help develop specific plans tailored for each struggling employee to reduce their risk of contracting CMD’s and improve their overall health (Conrad, 1987).

The programs that a company decides to implement can rely on numerous factors rather than just their tested success rate. Conrad (1987) suggest that aspects that a company must consider include whether most of their activities are off- or on-site, company or vendor run, on or off company time, all inclusive for employees or exclusive for a select few, at some or no cost to employees, focused on mental health or physical fitness, incremental or constant, have dedicated facilities to achieve goals, and whether the programs are exclusive to employees or include family members.

Work-site health promotion had only begun to emerge in the 1970’s according to Conrad (1987) but, has experience a drastic increase in its implementation in numerous companies outside of the medical care system. This is clearly due to the numerous benefits that come from developing a focus on employee’s mental health and promoting motivation centric work plans that has been shown through vast research studies and results when introduced to companies.

**Management**

For companies, the ultimate decision of its core focus relies solely on what management can deem beneficial for a company through a strict cost/value aspect for the business.

Seymour and Dupré (2008) explain that according to the Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation that supporting existing workers is integral factor in employee retention. They suggest that creating a work environment that promotes high quality performance as well as individual and organizational health, development, and growth is an essential objective for any organization’s management department. They propose that this can only be attained through the development of comprehensive strategies devised specifically for improving the work environment which has shown to be an effective approach in creating healthy workers and workplaces.

In a 2002 report, *Building on Values*, the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada reported that the lack of human resource planning was the main contributor to the decline of the quality of work life which led to a decrease in available trained professionals and the low moral experience by skilled workers is a major influence for their poaching by competitors in the same field (Seymour & Dupré, 2008).

According to these findings, managers may wish to foster, maintain, and grown engagement because a vital step in effectively advocating for employee health and implementing useful motivators is establishing a two-way relationship between employee and employer. The goal ,according to Seymour and Dupré (2008), should be to make this process seamless as possible for the reason that whilst research promotes numerous benefits for establishing a focus on employee mental health, research also indicates that too much change and rationalization can result in an increase in employee turnover and actually decrease productivity and employee engagement.

A main concern for management Semmer (2006) states, is that although interventions are important in improving overall health within a company by addressing work condition and social aspects, they are likely to have a diverse effect on an organizational level rather than an individual level due to the vast number of subsystems with potentially diverging interest. Management must consider tradeoff’s so that the greatest number of individuals can experience improvement and suggest that balancing a combination of person-focused with organization-focused approaches is vital to maximize profit from implemented programs. He also indicates that due to the inevitable limited resources allotted for establishing a focus on promoting employee health and creating effective motivators, that establishing trust between employee’s and management is a necessary step.

If there is to be a focus on employee health, then proceeding with an interdisciplinary approach would be beneficial in that history would lead as a base for the process in that there can be introspection on what has worked in the past and may be beneficial in the future. Likewise, a psychology discipline would be able to lend research and a scientific approach that would provide suggestions on the best possible factors that can positively affect employee health and which factors should be removed as they are detrimental to growth. Lastly, using a management discipline would be able to collect the examples from history and the results of the research from psychology and find the best way to implement these into modern companies and workforce so that it would promote an increase in overall employee wellbeing whilst ensuring that profits are maintained so that companies can continue to succeed.

Through concept, research, and implementation, an emphasis on employee mental health has proven itself to be a critical step for the development of any company as the benefits far outweigh the cost. Every business requires employees to operate, which is why they should be the first considered when making any decision.

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