

Content Theories of Motivation

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will compare and contrast the major content theories of motivation. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Importance of Human Needs

The theories presented in this section focus on the importance of human needs. A common thread through all of them is that people have a variety of needs. A **need** is a human condition that becomes “energized” when people feel deficient in some respect.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When we are hungry, our need for food has been energized.

Two features of needs are key to understanding motivation. First, when a need has been energized, we are motivated to satisfy it. We strive to make the need disappear. **Hedonism**, one of the first motivation theories, assumes that people are motivated to satisfy mainly their own needs (seek pleasure, avoid pain). Long since displaced by more refined theories, hedonism clarifies the idea that needs provide direction for motivation. Second, once we have satisfied a need, it ceases to motivate us. When we’ve eaten to satiation, we are no longer motivated to eat. Other needs take over and we endeavor to satisfy them. A **manifest need** is whatever need is motivating us at a given time. Manifest needs dominate our other needs.

Instincts are our natural, fundamental needs, basic to our survival. Our needs for food and water are instinctive. Many needs are learned. We are not born with a high (or low) need for achievement—we learn to need success (or failure). The distinction between instinctive and learned needs sometimes blurs; for example, is our need to socialize with other people instinctive or learned?



TERMS TO KNOW

Need

A human condition that becomes energized when people feel deficient in some respect.

Hedonism

Assumes that people are motivated to satisfy mainly their own needs (seek pleasure, avoid pain).

Manifest Need

Whatever need that is motivating a person at a given time.

Instincts

Our natural, fundamental needs, basic to our survival.

2. Learned Needs Theory

David C. McClelland and his associates (especially John W. Atkinson) studied three needs in depth: the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power (often abbreviated, in turn, as nAch, nAff, and nPow) (Atkinson & McClelland, 1948). McClelland believes that these three needs are learned, primarily in childhood. But he also believes that each need can be taught, especially nAch. McClelland's research is important because much of current thinking about organizational behavior is based on it.

2a. Need for Achievement

The **need for achievement (nAch)** is how much people are motivated to excel at the tasks they are performing, especially tasks that are difficult. Of the three needs studied by McClelland, nAch has the greatest impact. The need for achievement varies in intensity across individuals. This makes nAch a personality trait as well as a statement about motivation. When nAch is being expressed, making it a manifest need, people try hard to succeed at whatever task they're doing. We say these people have a high achievement motive. A **motive** is a source of motivation; it is the need that a person is attempting to satisfy. Achievement needs become manifest when individuals experience certain types of situations.

To better understand the nAch motive, it's helpful to describe high-nAch people. You probably know a few of them. They're constantly trying to accomplish something. One of your authors has a father-in-law who would much rather spend his weekends digging holes (for various home projects) than going fishing. Why? Because when he digs a hole, he gets results. In contrast, he can exert a lot of effort and still not catch a fish. A lot of fishing, no fish, and no results equal failure!

McClelland describes three major characteristics of high-nAch people:

1. They feel personally responsible for completing whatever tasks they are assigned. They accept credit for success and blame for failure.
2. They like situations where the probability of success is moderate. High-nAch people are not motivated by tasks that are too easy or extremely difficult. Instead, they prefer situations where the outcome is uncertain, but in which they believe they can succeed if they exert enough effort. They avoid both simple and impossible situations.
3. They have very strong desires for feedback about how well they are doing. They actively seek out performance feedback. It doesn't matter whether the information implies success or failure. They want to know whether they have achieved or not. They constantly ask how they are doing, sometimes to the point of being a nuisance.

Why is nAch important to organizational behavior? The answer is, the success of many organizations is dependent on the nAch levels of their employees (Atkinson & McClelland, 1948). This is especially true for jobs that require self-motivation and managing others. Employees who continuously have to be told how to do their jobs require an overly large management team, and too many layers of management spell trouble in the current marketplace. Today's flexible, cost-conscious organizations have no room for top-heavy structures; their high-nAch employees perform their jobs well with minimal supervision.

Many organizations manage the achievement needs of their employees poorly. A common perception about people who perform unskilled jobs is that they are unmotivated and content doing what they are doing. But, if they have achievement needs, the job itself creates little motivation to perform. It is too easy. There are not enough workers who feel personal satisfaction for having the cleanest floors in a building. Designing jobs that are neither too challenging nor too boring is key to managing motivation. Job enrichment is one effective

strategy; this frequently entails training and rotating employees through different jobs, or adding new challenges.



TERMS TO KNOW

Need For Achievement (nAch)

The need to excel at tasks, especially tasks that are difficult.

Motive

A source of motivation; the need that a person is attempting to satisfy.

2b. Need for Affiliation

This need is the second of McClelland's learned needs. The **need for affiliation (nAff)** reflects a desire to establish and maintain warm and friendly relationships with other people. As with nAch, nAff varies in intensity across individuals. As you would expect, high-nAff people are very sociable. They're more likely to go bowling with friends after work than to go home and watch television. Other people have lower affiliation needs. This doesn't mean that they avoid other people, or that they dislike others. They simply don't exert as much effort in this area as high-nAff people do.

The nAff has important implications for organizational behavior. High-nAff people like to be around other people, including other people at work. As a result, they perform better in jobs that require teamwork. Maintaining good relationships with their coworkers is important to them, so they go to great lengths to make the work group succeed because they fear rejection. So, high-nAff employees will be especially motivated to perform well if others depend on them. In contrast, if high-nAff people perform jobs in isolation from other people, they will be less motivated to perform well. Performing well on this job won't satisfy their need to be around other people.

Effective managers carefully assess the degree to which people have high or low nAff. Employees high in nAff should be placed in jobs that require or allow interactions with other employees. Jobs that are best performed alone are more appropriate for low-nAff employees, who are less likely to be frustrated.



TERM TO KNOW

Need For Affiliation (nAff)

The need to establish and maintain warm and friendly relationships with other people.

2c. Need for Power

The third of McClelland's learned needs, the **need for power (nPow)**, reflects a motivation to influence and be responsible for other people. An employee who is often talkative, gives orders, and argues a lot is motivated by the need for power over others.

Employees with high nPow can be beneficial to organizations. High-nPow people do have effective employee behaviors, but at times they're disruptive. A high-nPow person may try to convince others to do things that are detrimental to the organization. So, when is this need good, and when is it bad? Again, there are no easy answers. McClelland calls this the "two faces of power" (McClelland, 1970). A *personal power seeker* endeavors to control others mostly for the sake of dominating them. They want others to respond to their wishes whether or not it is good for the organization. They "build empires," and they protect them.

McClelland's other power seeker is the *social power seeker*. A high social power seeker satisfies needs for power by influencing others, like the personal power seeker. They differ in that they feel best when they have influenced a work group to achieve the group's goals, and not some personal agenda. High social power seekers are concerned with goals that a work group has set for itself, and they are motivated to influence

others to achieve the goal. This need is oriented toward fulfilling responsibilities to the employer, not to the self.

McClelland has argued that the high need for social power is the most important motivator for successful managers. Successful managers tend to be high in this type of nPow. High need for achievement can also be important, but it sometimes results in too much concern for personal success and not enough for the employer's success. The need for affiliation contributes to managerial success only in those situations where the maintenance of warm group relations is as important as getting others to work toward group goals.

The implication of McClelland's research is that organizations should try to place people with high needs for social power in managerial jobs. It is critical, however, that those managerial jobs allow the employee to satisfy the nPow through social power acquisition. Otherwise, a manager high in nPow may satisfy this need through acquisition of personal power, to the detriment of the organization.



TERM TO KNOW

Need For Power (nPow)

The need to control things, especially other people; reflects a motivation to influence and be responsible for other people.

3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Any discussion of needs that motivate performance would be incomplete without considering Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1943). Thousands of managers in the 1960s were exposed to Maslow's theory through the popular writings of Douglas McGregor (McGregor, 1960). Today, many of them still talk about employee motivation in terms of Maslow's theory.

Maslow was a psychologist who, based on his early research with primates (monkeys), observations of patients, and discussions with employees in organizations, theorized that human needs are arranged hierarchically. That is, before one type of need can manifest itself, other needs must be satisfied.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Our need for water takes precedence over our need for social interaction (this is also called *prepotency*). We will always satisfy our need for water before we satisfy our social needs; water needs have prepotency over social needs.

Maslow's theory differs from others that preceded it because of this hierarchical, prepotency concept.

3a. Five Basic Types of Human Needs

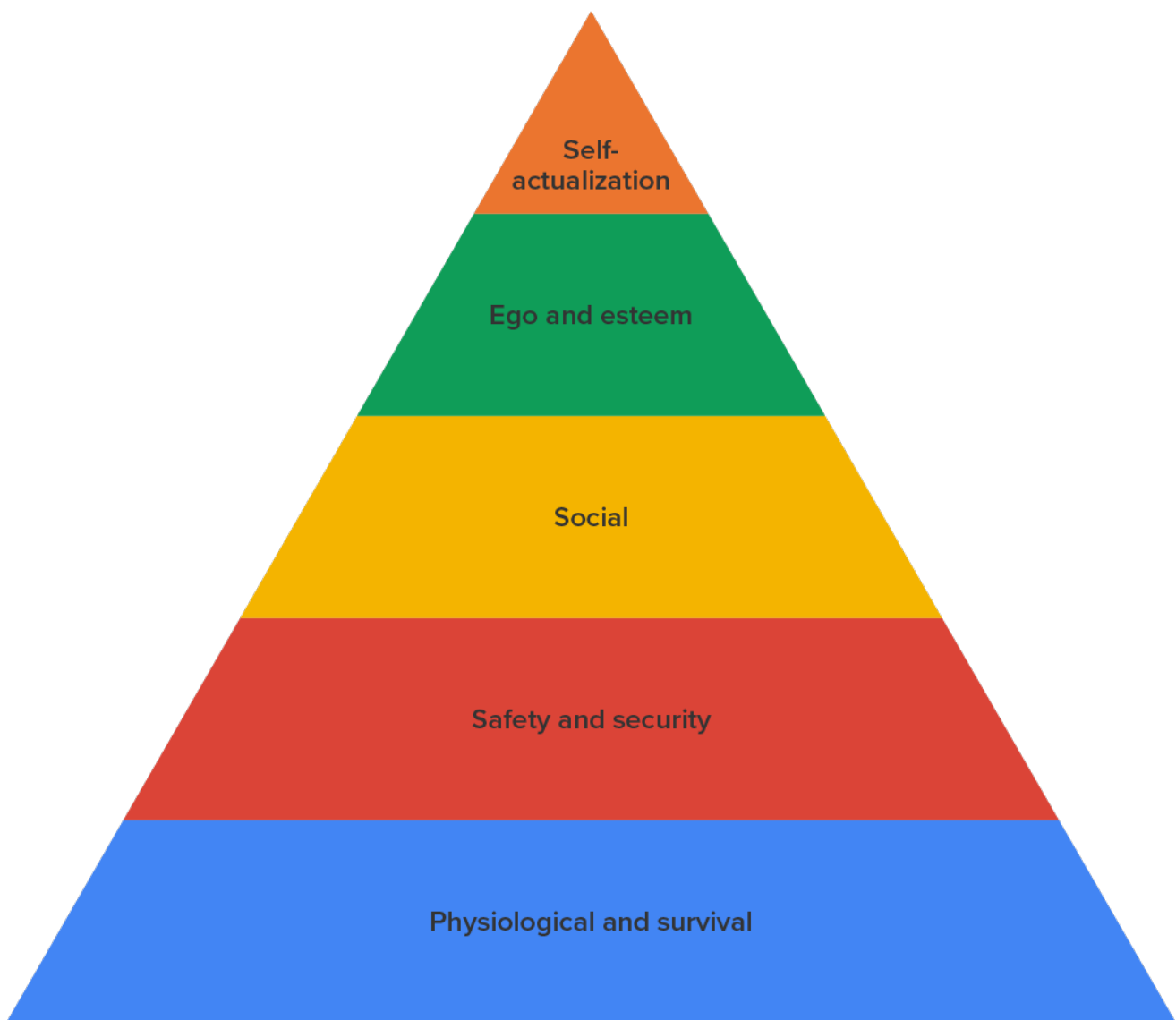
Maslow went on to propose five basic types of human needs. This is in contrast to the thousands of needs that earlier researchers had identified. Maslow condensed human needs into a manageable set. Those five human needs, in the order of prepotency in which they direct human behavior, are:

1. *Physiological and survival needs* These are the most basic of human needs, and include the needs for water, food, sex, sleep, activity, stimulation, and oxygen.
2. *Safety and security needs* These needs invoke behaviors that assure freedom from danger. This set of needs involves meeting threats to our existence, including extremes in environmental conditions (heat, dust, and so on), assault from other humans, tyranny, and murder. In other words, satisfaction of these needs prevents fear and anxiety while adding stability and predictability to life.
3. *Social needs* These needs reflect human desires to be the target of affection and love from others. They

are especially satisfied by the presence of spouses, children, parents, friends, relatives, and others to whom we feel close. Feelings of loneliness and rejection are symptoms that this need has not been satisfied.

4. *Ego and esteem.* Esteem needs go beyond social needs. They reflect our need to be respected by others, and to have esteem for ourselves. It is one thing to be liked by others. It is another thing to be respected for our talents and abilities. Ego and esteem needs have internal (self) and external (others) focuses. An internal focus includes desires for achievement, strength, competence, confidence, and independence. An external focus includes desires to have prestige, recognition, appreciation, attention, and respect from others. Satisfaction of external esteem needs can lead to satisfaction of internal esteem needs.
5. *Self-actualization.* Self-actualization needs are the most difficult to describe. Unlike the other needs, the need for self-actualization is never completely satisfied. Self-actualization involves a desire for self-fulfillment, "to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943). Because people are so different in their strengths and weaknesses, in capacities and limitations, the meaning of self-actualization varies greatly. Satisfying self-actualization needs means developing all of our special abilities to their fullest degree.

The diagram below illustrates Maslow's proposed hierarchy of needs. According to his theory, people first direct their attention to satisfying their lower-order needs. Those are the needs at the bottom of the pyramid (physiological, safety, and security). Once those needs have been satisfied, the next level, social needs, become energized. Once satisfied, we focus on our ego and esteem needs. Maslow believed that most people become fixated at this level. That is, most people spend much of their lives developing self-esteem and the esteem of others. But, once those esteem needs are satisfied, Maslow predicted that self-actualization needs would dominate. There are no higher levels in the pyramid, because self-actualization needs can never be fully satisfied. They represent a continuing process of self-development and self-improvement that, once satisfied on one dimension (painting), create motivation to continue on other dimensions (sculpting). One wonders if athletes are self-actualizing when they participate in multiple sports endeavors.



Source: Based on Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 5(4), 370-396.

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An overriding principle in this theory is that a person's attention (direction) and energy (intensity) will focus on satisfying the lowest-level need that is not currently satisfied. Needs can also be satisfied at some point but become active (dissatisfied) again. Needs must be "maintained" (we must continue to eat occasionally). According to Maslow, when lower-level needs are reactivated, we once again concentrate on that need. That is, we lose interest in the higher-level needs when lower-order needs are energized.

The implications of Maslow's theory for organizational behavior are as much conceptual as they are practical. The theory posits that to maximize employee motivation, employers must try to guide workers to the upper parts of the hierarchy. That means that the employer should help employees satisfy lower-order needs like safety and security and social needs. Once satisfied, employees will be motivated to build esteem and respect through their work achievements. The diagram shows how Maslow's theory relates to factors that organizations can influence. For example, by providing adequate pay, safe working conditions, and cohesive work groups, employers help employees satisfy their lower-order needs. Once satisfied, challenging jobs, additional responsibilities, and prestigious job titles can help employees satisfy higher-order esteem needs.

Maslow's theory is still popular among practicing managers. Organizational behavior researchers, however, are not as enamored with it because research results don't support Maslow's hierarchical notion. Apparently,

people don't go through the five levels in a fixed fashion. On the other hand, there is some evidence that people satisfy the lower-order needs before they attempt to satisfy higher-order needs. Refinements of Maslow's theory in recent years reflect this more limited hierarchy (Alderfer, 1972).

4. Alderfer's ERG Theory

Clayton Alderfer observed that very few attempts had been made to test Maslow's full theory. Further, the evidence accumulated provided only partial support. During the process of refining and extending Maslow's theory, Alderfer provided another need-based theory and a somewhat more useful perspective on motivation (Hall & Nougaim, 1968). Alderfer's **ERG theory** compresses Maslow's five need categories into three: existence, relatedness, and growth (Alderfer, 1972). In addition, ERG theory details the dynamics of an individual's movement between the need categories in a somewhat more detailed fashion than typically characterizes interpretations of Maslow's work.

As shown in the diagram below, the ERG model addresses the same needs as those identified in Maslow's work:



Growth Needs

1. Internal self-esteem needs
2. Self-actualization needs

Relatedness Needs

1. Social needs
2. Social esteem needs
3. Interpersonal safety needs

Existence Needs

1. Physiological needs
2. Material safety needs

Alderfer's ERG Theory

- *Existence needs* include physiological and material safety needs. These needs are satisfied by material conditions and not through interpersonal relations or personal involvement in the work setting.
- *Relatedness needs* include all of Maslow's social needs, plus social safety and social esteem needs. These needs are satisfied through the exchange of thoughts and feelings with other people.
- *Growth needs* include self-esteem and self-actualization needs. These needs tend to be satisfied through one's full involvement in work and the work setting.

The following table identifies a number of ways in which organizations can help their members satisfy these

three needs.

Growth Opportunities	Relatedness Opportunities	Existence Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenging job• Creativity• Organizational advancement• Responsibility• Autonomy• Interesting work• Achievement• Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Friendship• Interpersonal security• Athletic teams• Social recognition• Quality supervision• Work teams• Social events• Merit pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heat• Lighting• Base salary• Insurance• Retirement• Air conditioning• Restrooms• Cafeteria• Job security• Health programs• Clean air• Drinking water• Safe conditions• No layoffs• Time off

Four components—satisfaction progression, frustration, frustration regression, and aspiration—are key to understanding Alderfer's ERG theory. The first of these, *satisfaction progression*, is in basic agreement with Maslow's process of moving through the needs. As we increasingly satisfy our existence needs, we direct energy toward relatedness needs. As these needs are satisfied, our growth needs become more active. The second component, *frustration*, occurs when we attempt but fail to satisfy a particular need. The resulting frustration may make satisfying the unmet need even more important to us—unless we repeatedly fail to satisfy that need. In this case, Alderfer's third component, *frustration regression*, can cause us to shift our attention to a previously satisfied, more concrete, and verifiable need. Lastly, the *aspiration* component of the ERG model notes that, by its very nature, growth is intrinsically satisfying. The more we grow, the more we want to grow. Therefore, the more we satisfy our growth needs, the more important it becomes and the more strongly we are motivated to satisfy it.

Alderfer's model is potentially more useful than Maslow's in that it doesn't create false motivational categories.

➞ **EXAMPLE** It is difficult for researchers to ascertain when interaction with others satisfies our need for acceptance and when it satisfies our need for recognition.

ERG also focuses attention explicitly on movement through the set of needs in both directions. Further, evidence in support of the three need categories and their order tends to be stronger than evidence for Maslow's five need categories and their relative order.



TERMS TO KNOW

ERG Theory

Compresses Maslow's five need categories into three: existence, relatedness, and growth.

5. Herzberg's Motivator-Hygiene Theory

Clearly one of the most influential motivation theories throughout the 1950s and 1960s was Frederick Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory. This theory is a further refinement of Maslow's theory. Herzberg argued that there are two sets of needs instead of the five sets theorized by Maslow. He called the first set "motivators" (or growth needs). **Motivators**, which relate to the jobs we perform and our ability to feel a sense of achievement as a result of performing them, are rooted in our need to experience growth and self-actualization. The second set of needs he termed "hygienes." **Hygienes** relate to the work environment and are based on the basic human need to "avoid pain." According to Herzberg, growth needs motivate us to perform well and, when these needs are met, lead to the experience of satisfaction. Hygiene needs, on the other hand, must be met to avoid dissatisfaction (but do not necessarily provide satisfaction or motivation) (Herzberg et al., 1959).

Hygiene factors are not directly related to the work itself (job content). Rather, hygienes refer to job context factors (pay, working conditions, supervision, and security). Herzberg also refers to these factors as "dissatisfiers" because they are frequently associated with dissatisfied employees. These factors are so frequently associated with dissatisfaction that Herzberg claims they never really provide satisfaction. When they're present in sufficient quantities, we avoid dissatisfaction, but they do not contribute to satisfaction. Furthermore, since meeting these needs does not provide satisfaction, Herzberg concludes that they do not motivate workers.

Motivator factors involve our long-term need to pursue psychological growth (much like Maslow's esteem and self-actualization needs). Motivators relate to job content. Job content is what we actually do when we perform our job duties. Herzberg considered job duties that lead to feelings of achievement and recognition to be motivators. He refers to these factors as "satisfiers" to reflect their ability to provide satisfying experiences. When these needs are met, we experience satisfaction. Because meeting these needs provides satisfaction, they motivate workers. More specifically, Herzberg believes these motivators lead to high performance (achievement), and the high performance itself leads to satisfaction.

The unique feature of Herzberg's theory is that job conditions that prevent dissatisfaction do not cause satisfaction. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are on different "scales" in his view. Hygienes can cause dissatisfaction if they are not present in sufficient levels. Thus, an employee can be dissatisfied with low pay. But paying him or her more will not cause long-term satisfaction unless motivators are present. Good pay by itself will only make the employee neutral toward work; to attain satisfaction, employees need challenging job duties that result in a sense of achievement. Employees can be dissatisfied, neutral, or satisfied with their jobs, depending on their levels of hygienes and motivators. Herzberg's theory even allows for the possibility that an employee can be satisfied and dissatisfied at the same time—the "I love my job but I hate the pay" situation!

Herzberg's theory has made lasting contributions to organizational research and managerial practice. Researchers have used it to identify the wide range of factors that influence worker reactions. Previously, most organizations attended primarily to hygiene factors. Because of Herzberg's work, organizations today realize the potential of motivators. Job enrichment programs are among the many direct results of his research.

Herzberg's work suggests a two-stage process for managing employee motivation and satisfaction. First, managers should address the hygiene factors. Intense forms of dissatisfaction distract employees from important work-related activities and tend to be demotivating (Dunham et al., 1983). Thus, managers should make sure that such basic needs as adequate pay, safe and clean working conditions, and opportunities for social interaction are met. They should then address the much more powerful motivator needs, in which

workers experience recognition, responsibility, achievement, and growth. If motivator needs are ignored, neither long-term satisfaction nor high motivation is likely. When motivator needs are met, however, employees feel satisfied and are motivated to perform well.



TERMS TO KNOW

Motivators

Relate to the jobs that people perform and people's ability to feel a sense of achievement as a result of performing them.

Hygienes

Factors in the work environment that are based on the basic human need to "avoid pain."

6. Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation

One major implication of Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory is the somewhat counterintuitive idea that managers should focus more on motivators than on hygienes. After all, doesn't everyone want to be paid well? Organizations have held this out as a chief motivator for decades! Why might concentrating on motivators give better results? To answer this question, we must examine types of motivation. Organizational behavior researchers often classify motivation in terms of what stimulates it. In the case of **extrinsic motivation**, we endeavor to acquire something that satisfies a lower-order need. Jobs that pay well and that are performed in safe, clean working conditions with adequate supervision and resources directly or indirectly satisfy these lower-order needs. These "outside the person" factors are extrinsic rewards.

Factors "inside" the person that cause people to perform tasks, **intrinsic motivation**, arise out of performing a task in and of itself, because it is interesting or "fun" to do. The task is enjoyable, so we continue to do it *even in the absence* of extrinsic rewards. That is, we are motivated by *intrinsic rewards*, rewards that we more or less give ourselves. Intrinsic rewards satisfy higher-order needs like relatedness and growth in ERG theory. When we sense that we are valuable contributors, are achieving something important, or are getting better at some skill, we like this feeling and strive to maintain it.



REFLECT

1. Understand the content theories of motivation.
2. Understand the contributions that McClelland, Maslow, Alderfer, and Herzberg made toward an understanding of human motivation.



TERMS TO KNOW

Extrinsic Motivation

Occurs when a person performs a given behavior to acquire something that will satisfy a lower-order need.

Intrinsic Motivation

Arises out of performing a behavior in and of itself, because it is interesting or "fun" to do.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you compared and contrasted the major content theories of motivation. You began by understanding **the importance of human needs**, the term "need" referring to a human condition that becomes "energized" when people feel deficient in some respect. You learned that two features of needs are key to understanding motivation: one, when a need has been energized, we are motivated to satisfy it; two, once we have satisfied a need, it ceases to motivate us. You learned about David C. McClelland's **learned needs theory**, the foundation for much contemporary thinking about organizational behavior, which studies three needs in depth: the **need for achievement**, the **need for affiliation**, and the **need for power**. You also learned about **Maslow's hierarchy of needs**, based upon his theory that human needs are arranged hierarchically; that is, before one type of need can manifest itself, other needs must be satisfied. Maslow proposed **five basic types of human needs**, in the order of prepotency in which they direct human behavior: physiological and survival needs; safety and security needs; social needs; ego and esteem; and self-actualization. Refinements of Maslow's theory in recent years include **Alderfer's ERG theory**, which compresses Maslow's five need categories into three: existence, relatedness, and growth. You also learned about one of the most influential motivation theories throughout the 1950s and 1960s: **Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory**, yet a further refinement of Maslow's theory. Herzberg argued that there are two sets of needs instead of the five sets theorized by Maslow—"motivators" (or growth needs) and "hygienes," which relate to the work environment and are based on the basic human need to "avoid pain." Lastly, you explored the differences between **extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation**, since all of these theories require a closer look at motivation in terms of what stimulates it.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Access for free at <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management/pages/1-introduction>

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TERMS TO KNOW

ERG Theory

Compresses Maslow's five need categories into three: existence, relatedness, and growth.

Extrinsic Motivation

Occurs when a person performs a given behavior to acquire something that will satisfy a lower-order need.

Hedonism

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Hygienes

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Our natural, fundamental needs, basic to our survival.

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Manifest Need

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Motivators

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Need For Achievement (nAch)

The need to excel at tasks, especially tasks that are difficult.

Need For Affiliation (nAff)

The need to establish and maintain warm and friendly relationships with other people.

Need For Power (nPow)

Reflects a motivation to influence and be responsible for other people.