



Book Beyond Boredom and Anxiety

Experiencing Flow in Work and Play

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Jossey-Bass, 2000

First Edition:1975

Recommendation

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presents a detailed examination of motivation based on a study of a half-dozen groups of people involved in recreational pursuits: rock climbers, composers, dancers, chess players and basketball players. He chose these groups in an effort to understand more fully what motivates people to engage in activities that are extremely challenging or offer few external rewards. Although some of his conclusions may be of interest to executives and managers seeking ways to motivate employees, most readers will find this academic study too detailed. Some of the interview comments are interesting, but much of the book describes survey results, a discussion that non-statisticians may be hard put to follow. Because of this complexity and because of the book's somewhat dense prose, *BooksInShort* recommends this 25-year-old reissued classic primarily to scholars or to those who are intensely curious about the nuts-and-bolts of motivation. But any human resources professional or leadership specialist should have at least a passing familiarity with its concepts and contents.

Take-Aways

- Whether or not people receive extrinsic rewards, they may be intrinsically motivated to participate in an activity.
- People are motivated to pursue some activities that have few rewards because they gain satisfaction from doing them.
- One intrinsic motivation is enjoyment.
- Other motivations are developing personal skills, building friendship or companionship, and engaging in competition.
- Autotelic activities maximize the participant's immediate, intrinsic reward.
- Flow is the state of total involvement you experience in an autotelic activity.
- In a state of flow, one action follows another without your conscious intervention.
- While certain types of activities are likely to provide flow, such as games, sports and the arts, you can experience the flow state in work activities, too.
- A clear sign that you are experiencing flow is that your actions and your awareness merge.
- A loss of ego or self-consciousness is a key characteristic of flow.

Summary

The Importance of Flow

Artists enter an almost trancelike state when their work goes well, presenting a paradigm for how adults react to play and to work they enjoy. Until these studies were published in 1975, psychologists largely viewed play as a way for children to learn, practice adult behaviors and develop skills. Professional behavior scientists hadn't regarded adult recreation as a model for motivation and enjoyment.

“The more a person complies with extrinsically rewarded roles, the less he enjoys himself, and the more extrinsic rewards he needs. The only way to break the circle is by making the roles themselves more enjoyable; then the need for a quid pro quo is bound to decrease.”

However, play can be very satisfying and motivating to adults, too, and most work has elements of play. For instance, many people like work as much or more than they do play. Conversely, sometimes people who appear to be playing really aren't enjoying themselves. People may not enjoy what seems to be the play experience because they are so caught up by competition or in trying to maintain a certain outward impression that, inwardly, they feel only greed, anger, or frustration. But with play, some people come to truly enjoy activities that seem far from enjoyable - in fact, dangerous - such as rock climbing.

“If we can learn more about activities that are enjoyable in themselves, we will find clues to a form of motivation that could become an extremely important human resource.”

Thus, the idea for this study of intrinsic motivation was born. A team of graduate students were employed to interview people who were involved in different kinds of intrinsically motivated or "autotelic" activities. These included modern dance, rock climbing, basketball, chess, and surgery. These participants were interviewed to learn why they found the activity so attractive and rewarding. The results can help you understand why people are intrinsically motivated to participate in certain activities, whether or not they receive extrinsic rewards.

The Nature of Rewards

Modern society may appear to be ruled by the pursuit of money, power, prestige and pleasure, but some people sacrifice these goals because they are deeply drawn to other activities. Many artists and athletes give up material rewards because of the great value they place on experiencing and enjoying these activities. Learning their reasons can help you understand more about motivation.

“Clearly, people are motivated to pursue these activities because they derive some satisfaction from them, and this satisfaction itself acts as a reward.”

Commonly, behavior-management theories are based on the concept that people are motivated by external rewards or the fear of punishment. These ideas have some value, because societies have developed a rational, universal motivation system by objectifying incentives into money and status. Based on this system, communities can get people to behave predictably and desirably. Societies offer different types of people differing rewards, resulting in a complex social hierarchy. In other words, in response to superior rewards, people do more difficult, complex work. Their highly valued work earns more money and higher status than work of lower value.

“Autotelic activities are patterns of action which maximize immediate, intrinsic rewards to the participant.”

However, this notion of external motivation is incomplete, since it is based on making a distinction between work and leisure. It assumes that what one must do cannot be enjoyable. It also assumes that people feel bored and frustrated at work and guilty at leisure. The other drawback to extrinsic motivation is that people in a society that depends only upon extrinsic rewards will feel alienated, because they don't like what they have to do. Additionally, since extrinsic rewards are scarce or expensive, such a society drains its material resources and can be undermined as material resources dwindle.

“The intrinsic dimension also can be a powerful source of motivation, either alone or in conjunction with external rewards.”

Thus, people must also be motivated intrinsically, not only for their individual satisfaction but also for society's sake. Psychologists have not paid much attention to intrinsic motivators, because they generally use external rewards in social experiments. However, if you are trying to understand people you manage, you should use a more holistic approach to understanding why people act as they do. This enables you to understand how individual abilities and goals drive people, and how to evaluate an external situation objectively.

Two Definitions of Enjoyment

According to the natural science branch of psychology, known as behaviorism, people enjoy complex activities because of the usual stimulus-response reaction. Psychoanalysts claim people enjoy such behavior because enjoyment - or creativity - results from a disguised manifestation of a conflict between basic instinctual needs and social constraints. In other words, people displace their repressed instinctual desires, such as their libidinal curiosity or anger against their parents, into an activity, thereby releasing an inner tension that turns into enjoyment.

“Poised between boredom and worry, the autotelic experience is one of complete involvement of the actor with his activity. The activity presents constant challenges. There is no time to get bored or to worry about what may or may not happen.”

However, such explanations are not adequate. Assuming that the activities themselves offer independent rewards seems more reasonable. While the psychoanalytic or behavioral explanations may fit the motivators in some cases, in other situations the activity just may be intrinsically rewarding in itself.

Why We Do What We Do

People are motivated to pursue activities that offer minimal conventional rewards because they gain satisfaction from doing them. Based on interviews with people who like playing chess, dancing, rock climbing, composing music, and playing basketball, they find an activity enjoyable for eight reasons, although these rankings differ from group to group. Ranked in order for all interviewees, these reasons are:

1. Enjoyment of the experience and use of skills.
2. The activity itself.
3. The pattern, the action, and the world it provides.
4. Development of personal skills, friendship, and companionship.
5. Competition, measuring yourself against others.
6. Measurement of yourself against your own ideals.
7. Emotional release.
8. Prestige, regard and glamour.

“When a social system learns to rely exclusively on extrinsic rewards, it creates alienation among its members, and it places a drain on material resources which eventually may prove fatal.”

As a whole, the group members found that the activities provided little worlds of their own, which are enjoyable. Thus, the intrinsic rewards were especially critical to their continued participation, reflected in the high ranking of the first two factors. The weight of the other reasons varied for individuals with different kinds of interests. For instance, basketball players and rock climbers ranked camaraderie higher than dancers and composers did. Dancers and composers rated the development of personal skills more highly. Such differences might be explained by the different characteristics of the activities, since basketball and rock climbing are team sports, while dancing and composing are more individualistic activities.

A Theoretical Model of Enjoyment

Though the people interviewed experienced differences in the types of rewards they garnered from different pursuits, all of them were primarily motivated by intrinsic rewards. In fact, certain types of people may be likelier to find intrinsic rewards most important - including older people, women, and those with more education or higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

“A simple hedonistic model fails to account for a wide range of human action. The crucial question is why patterns of stimulation which under some conditions are neutral or even aversive can suddenly become enjoyable.”

To better understand intrinsic motivation, distinguish among autotelic activities, personalities, and experiences. Autotelic activities maximize immediate, intrinsic reward to the participant. However, no activity is absolutely autotelic or exotelic in and of itself. Rather any activity provides a varying amount of intrinsic and extrinsic reward, depending on how different people experience it. Some people might be considered autotelic, in that they enjoy an activity regardless of whether they get any external reward for it. Although some activities may be more or less autotelic, some people can enjoy any activities, while others need more external incentives. Finally, some autotelic experiences provide a bridge between activities. This is defined as a psychological state that acts as a reward itself, in that it produces continuing behavior in the absence of other rewards.

“An autotelic experience is a psychological state, based on concrete feedback, which acts as a reward in that it produces continuing behavior in the absence of other rewards.”

You can evaluate the different qualities of autotelic activities through a factor analysis studying how people experience them. The five major factors include: 1) friendship and relaxation, 2) risk and chance, 3) problem solving, 4) competition, and 5) creative activity. In general, people are drawn to participate in these activities because - to a greater or lesser degree - they enjoy the challenge, the experience of exploration and discovery and the camaraderie and closeness. For experiences to be intrinsically rewarding they also require involvement and active participation, whether physical or intellectual. Also, these experiences are typically open-ended, with an outcome that the participant can determine. To some extent the outcome is uncertain, such as exploring a strange place or playing a new pieces of music, but the person feels able to control it.

Applying the Theoretical Model for Enjoyment

As these interviews showed, when you participate in autotelic activities, you have an experience you don't normally get in everyday life. You feel completely involved. This motivates you to continue the activity, due more to intrinsic rewards than extrinsic ones. This state of total involvement is called flow.

Once you are in this state, one action follows another without your own conscious intervention. Rather, you experience a sense of unified flowing from one moment to the next. You are in control of your actions, but at the same time, you will experience little difference between yourself and the environment, between stimulus and response, and between the past, present, and future.

Certain types of activities are especially likely to provide flow, such as chess, sports, rock climbing, and dancing. However, you can find the flow experience outside of play and creativity. People sometimes report flow in a transcendental or religious context. In managerial terms, flow also occurs for working people who really like what they are doing. For instance, the surgeons in the study reported feeling flow during operations.

You will know you are experiencing flow, when you feel a merging of action and awareness. When this happens, you don't have a dualistic perspective. You are only aware of your actions, but not your awareness of your actions. You have this experience of total involvement. Typically, you can only maintain this experience for a limited period of time, and then you may pull out of it and become aware of what you are doing.

Activities that give you a sense of flow are generally those in which you don't get bored or worried, activities in which you feel totally involved and interested. Flow has several distinctive characteristics. First, it only seems to happen when you can perform the task at hand with certainty, which is why most flow occurs with activities that have clear rules and rituals. Second, flow merges action and awareness, which requires centering your attention and limiting stimulus, such as during competition. Third, while you feel flow, you may also experience a loss of ego, a loss of self-consciousness or a sense of self-forgetfulness. Fourth, you may feel fully in control of your actions and of the environment or, at least, you do not feel concerned about the possibility of losing control. Fifth, you usually will experience coherent, noncontradictory demands for action along with clear, unambiguous feedback about your actions. Finally, you find that flow is autotelic, in that the activity provides its own rewards.

About the Author

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi , Ph.D., is a professor and former chair of the department of psychology at the University of Chicago. He is currently the Davidson Professor of Management and the director of the Quality of Life Research Center at Claremont Graduate University. He is the author of several books dealing with flow and intrinsic motivation including *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* ; *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* , and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everything in Life* .
