

An integrated model of factors influencing project managers' motivation — Findings from a Swiss Survey

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Abstract

The imperative need for increasing project managers' motivation is a major concern for organizations. We developed and evaluated an integrated model of factors influencing project managers' motivation, the 'Motivational Factor Inventory' (MFI). The MFI consists of 47 items grouped in 6 motivational dimensions. These dimensions are: 1) interpersonal interaction, 2) task, 3) general working conditions, 4) empowerment, 5) personal development, and 6) compensation. Results of this study showed that the MFI was a valid instrument and that all identified items were relevant for project managers' motivation. A clearly defined, interesting task, working with a supportive and goal oriented team, getting the necessary information and financial and personnel resources, and having the possibility to influence important decisions have been identified as the most important motivators for project managers working in Switzerland. Factors related to compensation were the least important motivators. Results are discussed, and practical conclusions and recommendations for further research are formulated.

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1. Introduction

All over the world, projects have become a means to enhance organizational performance and competitiveness (Gällstedt, 2003). The use of project work is a clear trend in businesses and organizations, which makes project management a rapidly developing discipline in modern service societies (Belout and Gauvreau, 2004; Ekstedt et al., 1999). Despite the developments in project management, 65% of today's projects do not reach their objectives (Hass, 2007). Productivity surveys and war game exercises conducted by DeMarco and Lister (1999) amongst more than 500 IT project managers and team members showed that the absence of motivation is the most frequent cause of a project's failure. Motivation is seen as a central factor in successful project management (McConnell, 1996; Sharp et al.,

2007; Verma, 1996). Managers and employees who lack motivation perform poorly, even though they may have excellent technical and project management skills (Germann, 2004; Wiley, 1997). Hence, the imperative need for discovering, comprehending, and increasing project managers' motivation is a major concern for organizations (Adams and Ruiz Ulloa, 2003; Kim, 2006; Watson, 1994).

The goal of this study was to develop and empirically test an integrated model of motivational factors for project managers, the 'Motivational Factor Inventory' (MFI), and evaluate the importance of this inventory for project managers working in Switzerland. In the following, we will first emphasize on the importance of work motivation with a focus on project management, then present results from previous studies on work related motivators in general and for project managers in

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particular, before introducing the MFI and results of the empirical study.

2. Motivation at work

The word motivation is coined from the Latin word “movere” which means to move. Motivation is defined as an internal driver that activates and directs behavior (Sansone and Harackiewicz, 2000). From early on, the concept of motivation has been utilized to explain types of behavior, for example, basic biological needs or drives connected to survival and procreation (e.g., hunger or thirst) and extrinsic rewards or punishments. These types of explanations suggest that behavior is motivated by the need or desire to achieve particular outcomes (e.g., promotion, recognition, or avoidance of punishment) (Sansone and Harackiewicz, 2000). Thus, motivation energizes and guides behavior toward reaching a particular goal and is intentional and directional (Nel et al., 2001). Several authors postulated that without motivation even the most talented people will not deliver to their potential, and that motivated people perform way above the level expected of their intelligence and academic ability (Bateman and Snell, 1999; Germann, 2004; Snell, 1999; Woodall et al., 1997). Motivation has more positive effects on output factors (e.g., reaching project goals in time) than other aspects (Boehm, 1981; Hall et al., 2009).

Different motivation theories describe why and how human behavior is activated and directed. These motivation theories can be divided into two main categories: a) content theories (e.g. Maslow’s (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs; Alderfer’s (1972) ERG theory; McClelland’s (1961) three needs theory; or Herzberg et al. (1959) two factor theory) and b) process theories (e.g. Adams’ (1963) equity theory; Vroom’s (1964) expectancy theory; Locke’s (1968) goal setting theory; or Skinner’s (1969) reinforcement theory). Content theories define motivation in relation to the needs of individuals (e.g., being motivated through the need of achievement or the need of power) and explain why it is important to consider individual needs of employees with regard to work motivation. While Maslow (1943) argued that individual needs exist in a hierarchical order (physiological needs, security needs, social belongingness needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualizing needs) and that unsatisfied needs motivate behavior, whereby lower-level needs have to be satisfied before higher-level needs become motivational (e.g., lower-level needs such as an adequate pay to take care of the family and safe working conditions have to be satisfied, before higher level needs such as the desire of social belongingness or increased responsibility become motivational), Alderfer (1972) argued in his ERG Theory, that the need for ‘existence’ (E) (comparable to Maslow’s physiological and security needs), for ‘relatedness’ (R) (comparable to Maslow’s social belongingness and self-esteem needs), and ‘growth’ (G) (comparable to Maslow’s self-actualization needs) can have motivational character simultaneously. McClelland (1961) argued that individuals learn needs throughout their socialization and vary in their needs for affiliation, power, and achievement. As a consequence, managers should try to identify and focus on the need-dominance of their employees and structure the work environment and recognition strategy accordingly, in order to

create a motivating working environment. Herzberg et al. (1959) identified two sets of factors that have an influence on employees’ motivation: hygiene factors (e.g., working conditions, quality of supervision, compensation, status) and motivation factors (e.g., recognition, achievement, responsibility, hierarchical and personal growth). Based on his research he concluded that the presence of hygiene factors would mainly prevent employees from being dissatisfied, while only the presence of motivation factors would lead to higher work motivation. As a consequence, managers have to ensure that employee’s hygiene factors are met in order to have a satisfied workforce; if they want to motivate their employees to exert additional effort, they need to focus on motivation factors by increasing employees’ autonomy and responsibility, recognizing their work and offering professional development opportunities. In sum, content theories suggest to focus on individual needs and to match individual needs to job requirements (e.g., people with high growth needs are more motivated to solve challenging tasks) in order to improve employees’ work motivation.

While content theories focus on individual needs, process theories define motivation in terms of a rational cognitive process (e.g., being motivated through a challenging goal). Process theories focus on behavior as a result of a conscious decision-making process. Adams (1963) for instance postulated in his equity theory that individuals compare their own efforts and rewards with efforts and rewards of others. Perceived inequity has a negative influence on motivation (e.g., leading to reduced working efforts or requests for higher compensation). Vroom (1964) argued that individuals choose working behaviors which they believed to have positive outcomes. According to this theory, a person is motivated to show a certain behavior, if he/she expects that increased efforts will improve performance and that improved performance will lead to valued rewards or outcomes. Locke’s (1968) goal setting theory focuses on the importance of specific and challenging goals in achieving motivated behavior. He argues that specific (measurable) and challenging (difficult but not impossible to achieve) goals are more motivational than vague and easy to achieve goals. Skinner (1969) postulated in his reinforcement theory that the consequences of a behavior are the main reasons why a person is behaving in a certain way. Behavior that is reinforced is most likely to continue, while behavior that is not rewarded or punished is unlikely to be repeated. Hence, managers can improve employees’ performance by modifying their behavior based on reinforcing desired and punishing undesired behavior. In sum, process theories suggest to emphasize on goal setting and reward processes, to link reward systems to performance, and to check the system for equity between different individuals and groups.

For project managers, both categories of motivation theories are of utmost importance and relevance; their individual needs (e.g., their need for belonging to a group, empowerment, and achievement) as well as their rational cognitive processes (e.g., their evaluation of goal setting processes or reward systems) play an important role with regard to their work motivation. In order to identify specific content and process related motivators for project managers, we need to understand the nature of their work. Project work leads to additional pressure such as fluctuating workloads, uncertain requirements, or multiple role demands.

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