

## EDITORIAL

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# Measuring Work Motivation in Practice-Based Studies

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### Measuring Work Motivation

After more than 100 years of research, the measurement of work motivation remains an important topic in the field of human resource development, that has been studied extensively through theoretical and applied approaches. The continued interest in measuring work motivation can be attributed to at least two factors. First, technological advances are driving structural changes in the workplace, such as computer-generated environments and virtual teams working in virtual organizations (Latham & Ernst, 2006). In this dynamic organizational context, assessing the motivation of today's employees is challenging for both human resource (HR) professionals and scholars in the field (Grund et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2022). Second, measurement is a milestone in the evolution of a research field, defining its limitations and advances and reflecting current thinking on the topic (Mayer et al., 2007). We cannot expect relevant advances in work motivation research and practice without relevant advances in the way motivation is measured. The need for practical, rapid, accessible, and theoretically sound measures of employee motivation has been consistently advocated by scholars and practitioners (Mayer et al., 2007; Tremblay et al., 2009) and now seems more relevant than ever.

Described as one of the most difficult constructs to measure and assess (Slavin,

2019), work motivation is often defined as the force that determines, energizes, and directs work-related behavior resulting from the interaction between the individual and the environment (Kanfer et al., 2008; Latham & Pinder, 2005). It has been extensively studied as a building block for effective leadership and innovative management and has been linked to various facets of employee behavior and organizational outcomes such as job performance, commitment, citizenship behavior, learning, turnover, well-being, engagement, etc. At the same time, work motivation has received some well-founded criticism, being described as a field with a “splintered and perplexing array of theories, few with overwhelming empirical support and most with unresolved theoretical ambiguities and inadequacies” (Klein, 1989, p. 150).

In this seemingly contradictory landscape, reflection on the epistemological background of work motivation measurement might provide clarity and open directions for a critical approach. First, we might take a closer look at the relevant actors or stakeholders involved in the research design of work motivation measurement. Which voices should be considered when designing a study on work motivation measurement? Second, we can reflect on the intertheoretical choice as a critical step in our studies. On what grounds do we choose certain theories over others to measure work motivation? And third, we can

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ask ourselves about the reasons for choosing standardized instruments over ad hoc ones. How do we weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using personalized instruments versus standardized scales?

### **Voices Considered When Designing a Study to Measure Work Motivation**

Assessing employee work motivation requires theoretical knowledge and a specific set of research skills. Modernism and positivism teach us that the authoritative voice in designing a research project is that of the researcher, the "custodian" of scientific knowledge and the holder of expertise in scientific measurement (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). Postmodernism, however, calls for a broader approach in which the interests, knowledge, and perspectives of key stakeholders are integrated from the earliest steps in the design of a study. Thus, the voices of the beneficiaries of the study (the individuals or institutions that fund the study), the voices of the participants in the study, and the voices of those who will feel the consequences of the study would be equally desirable to be heard by the researcher or expert leading the process (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Onuț, 2014). In addition, the researcher, who may be the HR professional or an external consultant, should keep in mind the *reflection-in-action principle* that Schön (1987, p. 28) suggestively pointed out decades ago: "Reflection-in-action has a critical function, questioning the assumptional structure of knowing-in-action. We think critically about the thinking that got us into this fix or this opportunity; and we may, in the process, restructure strategies of action, understandings of phenomena, or ways of framing problems".

Keeping in mind both the reflective-in-action principle and the integrative approach, the perspectives and expertise of at least the employer/funder and the employees could add value and insights to the process, as both have in-depth knowledge of the organizational reality that is hardly accessible to a consultant or external researcher (and even to an internal HR professional). Thus, careful analysis and

integration of the knowledge and input that each stakeholder can bring to the measurement of work motivation could be a way to improve the measurement process and increase the chances that the results will be implemented to lead to authentic and long-term organizational change.

### **Intertheoretical Decision Making**

Choosing the appropriate theory or theories (i.e., intertheoretical decision-making) is a challenging step in measuring work motivation because it creates the "blueprint" for the entire process (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Thus, the chosen theory or theories will guide the measurement and data analysis and provide the framework for sound recommendations and actions to increase employee motivation. In this context, study coordinators, whether researchers or HR professionals, should know the answer to the questions: How do we select the appropriate theory or theories to measure work motivation in the current organization or for the current client? What criteria should be used to reduce the risk of selecting an inappropriate theory? Although this issue is addressed in some of the social science methodology manuals, the guidance is scarce and tends to be formulated as general suggestions, i.e., fit the objectives or relate to the field of study, etc.

Originally developed for management studies, Wacker (1998, p. 365) provides a list of "virtues" of a "good" theory that could guide the selection from a list of competing theories: (1) uniqueness - the theory is different from other work motivation theories; (2) generalizability - the theory is more virtuous if it can be applied more broadly; (3) fertility - a work motivation theory that is more fertile in generating new models and hypotheses is better than a theory that has fewer hypotheses; (4) parsimony - if two theories are otherwise equal, the one with fewer assumptions and definitions is more virtuous; (5) internal consistency - the theory logically explains the relationships between concepts (that are logically compatible with each other); (6) empirical risk - any empirical test of a theory should be risky, the theory that

predicts the least likely event is considered the superior theory; (7) abstraction - if one of two competing theories integrates more internally consistent concepts, it is more virtuous.

### Standardized or Ad hoc Measures

The decision to select standardized scales or to develop personalized measures is a third critical decision in assessing work motivation in practice-based studies. As the literature shows, each strategy has advantages and disadvantages (Heggestad et al., 2019, Iliescu & Tinculescu-Popa, 2023). However, taking into account the characteristics of the organization and the perspectives of the relevant stakeholders, after selecting the appropriate theory or theories on which to base the measures, a literature search should be conducted to identify the tools already developed and validated for each selected theory. Thus, in line with the recommendations of Iliescu and Tinculescu-Popa (2023), the use of standardized measures within a personalized research design should be considered for a sound project. If this strategy is adopted, careful consideration should be given to all aspects related to the psychometric properties of the instruments, including the limitations of translation procedures, as one of the most common forms of adapting a scale (Klotz, 2023).

If a customized approach is chosen, the rigors of developing dedicated scales or items to measure work motivation should be followed. In this scenario, trained researchers can join the team to contribute to the development of the data collection instrument and take advantage of the inclusion of personalized items that address the specifics of the organization being studied.

### Conclusions

Measuring employee work motivation continues to be a topic of great interest in both basic and applied research. Although there are well-established theories and conceptual models, a practice-based study that takes into account the specific needs of the client organization poses challenges in terms of both the epistemological framework and the

technical implementation. However, integrating the perspectives of relevant stakeholders (client, employees, study participants, researcher), following a reflection-in-action approach throughout the study, and carefully considering the measures employed can minimize the risk of error and maximize the applicability of the results. Thus, we reiterate the call to action for researchers and practitioners to adopt a holistic approach that integrates stakeholder perspectives, reflective practices, and rigorous measurement techniques to advance work motivation research and practice.

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