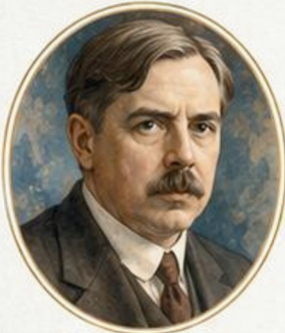


CLASSIC MOTIVATION THEORIES

Foundations, Thinkers, and Timeless Insights



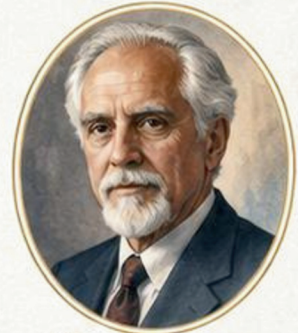
THORNDIKE



SKINNER



MASLOW



McCLELLAND



ATKINSON



HERZBERG



MAUSER & SNYDERMAN



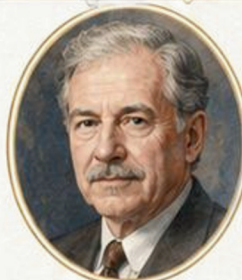
VROOM



ADAMS



ALDERFER



HACKMAN



OLDHAM

MARTIN CJ MONGIELLO



Classic Motivation Theories

PAGE 1/3

Timeline of early foundations: consequences, needs, motives, and satisfaction

FOUNDATIONS

Deeper roots include consequence-based views of behavior in Hobbes (1651) and Bentham (1789).

1930s-50s

1943

1950s-65

1959/68



Reinforcement



Needs
Hierarchy



Need for
Achievement



Two-Factor

1930s-50s

Reinforcement Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Edward L. Thorndike; B. F. Skinner; later applied in organizational behavior.

Elements: Behavior is shaped by consequences: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, extinction, and timely feedback.

Findings: Clear contingencies and feedback can lift performance, especially when tasks are observable and rewards are credible.

Limits: It can reduce people to stimulus-response machines, underplaying meaning, autonomy, equity, and intrinsic motivation.

Source anchors: Adams & Ama, 2024; Jex & Britt, 2008; Landy & Conte, 2013; Latham, 2012.

1943

Needs Hierarchy

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Abraham H. Maslow.

Elements: Human needs were arranged as physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, with lower needs generally more urgent.

Findings: It gave managers a memorable language for unmet needs, growth, and the idea that pay alone is not the whole story.

Limits: The fixed five-step ladder has weak empirical support; needs may appear simultaneously and vary by culture and context.

Source anchors: Landy & Conte, 2013; Latham, 2012; Maslow, 1943.

1950s-65

Need for Achievement Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

David C. McClelland; John W. Atkinson.

Elements: Work motivation reflects learned motives, especially achievement, power, and affiliation; high achievement need favors responsibility, feedback, and moderate risk.

Findings: It linked motives to entrepreneurship, leadership, goal pursuit, and development through training and experience.

Limits: Projective measurement is debated; motives do not predict performance without supportive roles, rewards, and culture.

Source anchors: Latham, 2012; McClelland, 1965; Pinder, 1998.

1959 / 1968

Two-Factor Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Frederick Herzberg; Bernard Mausner; Barbara Snyderman.

Elements: Motivators such as achievement, recognition, growth, and meaningful work create satisfaction; hygiene factors prevent dissatisfaction.

Findings: It launched job enrichment and separated the question of removing complaints from the question of creating motivation.

Limits: Critical-incident methods may bias findings; pay and supervision can behave as both hygiene and motivator depending on context.

Source anchors: Herzberg, 1968; Latham, 2012; Lee et al., 2022.

The 1960s Pivot

From what people need to how people calculate, compare, and adapt

PAGE 2/3

PROCESS + CONTENT

1964



Expectancy

1965



Equity

1969



ERG

1964

Expectancy Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Victor H. Vroom.

Elements: Force = expectancy x instrumentality x valence: Can I perform? Will performance be rewarded? Is the reward valued?

Findings: Rewards motivate only when ability, trust, and value line up; perceptions drive effort choices.

Limits: Assumes rational calculation; variables are hard to measure cleanly in messy workplaces.

Source anchors: Pinder, 1998; Pinder, 2017; Vroom, 1964.

1965

Equity Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

J. Stacy Adams.

Elements: Workers compare input/outcome ratios with referents; inequity creates tension and corrective action.

Findings: Made fairness central to motivation and helped shape organizational justice research and practice.

Limits: Referents and responses are subjective, cultures and teams use different fairness rules.

Source anchors: Adams, 1965; Greenberg, 2017; Rogelberg, 2017.

1969

ERG Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Clayton P. Alderfer.

Elements: Maslow's five needs became existence, relatedness, and growth; needs can operate at the same time.

Findings: Frustration-regression explains why blocked growth can refocus attention on pay, security, or belonging.

Limits: More flexible than Maslow but still broad; evidence is mixed and diagnosis can be fuzzy.

Source anchors: Alderfer, 1969; Jex & Britt, 2008; Latham, 2012.

Designing Work for Motivation

The job itself becomes the intervention, then the classics become a toolkit

PAGE 3/3

JOB DESIGN + SYNTHESIS

1975

2000s+

Job

Modern

1975

Job Characteristics Theory

KEY INDIVIDUALS

J. Richard Hackman; Greg R. Oldham.

Elements: Five dimensions - skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback - create meaning, responsibility, and knowledge of results.

Findings: The Job Diagnostic Survey and Motivating Potential Score made job design a motivational lever, not pep-talk confetti.

Limits: Effects depend on growth need strength, social context, and how much autonomy or feedback the job can realistically provide.

Source anchors: Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Liu et al., 2022; Oerlemans & Bakker, 2018; Oldham, 2017.

How the theories line up

A quick bridge: content explains wants, process explains choices, design explains conditions.



Needs / Content

Maslow, McClelland, Herzberg, Alderfer

What do people want or lack?



Choice / Process

Vroom, Adams

How do people decide effort is worth it?



Learning / Design

Reinforcement, Hackman & Oldham

What systems or job features sustain behavior?

Modern-use guardrails



Do not ladder people. Needs stack and shift by culture, role, and life stage.



Reward wisely. Feedback and incentives work best when expectations are clear and outcomes feel fair.



Design beats slogans. Autonomy, significance, and feedback make work itself more energizing.



Context is the boss battle. No classic theory is a universal magic button; combine lenses.

Modern anchors: Coco et al., 2023; Green et al., 2017; Ibn Khaldūn, 2005; Liu et al., 2022; Oerlemans & Bakker, 2018; Steers et al., 2004.

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