

MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Content Theories of Motivation

Maslow · Herzberg · McClelland · Alderfer

PAPER 01 / 03

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Motivation and Engagement series in Furtherance's reference library. It covers the **content** theories – those that ask *what* motivates people, by cataloguing the needs and drives that energise behaviour. The question it answers: what do people actually want from work, and how is that want structured?

Content theories map the substance of motivation. Maslow arranges needs in a hierarchy; Herzberg splits the things that satisfy from the things that merely placate; McClelland identifies three learned drives; Alderfer rebuilds Maslow into something more flexible and testable. Together they answer the *what*; the next paper takes up the *how*.

Abraham Maslow 1908–1970

Humanistic psychology · the hierarchy of needs

CORE THESIS

Human needs are arranged in a **hierarchy**: lower *deficiency* needs must be substantially satisfied before higher *growth* needs come to motivate behaviour. At the summit sits **self-actualisation** – the drive to realise one's full potential.

FRAMEWORK

Level	Need
5 · Self-actualisation	Growth, meaning, realising potential
4 · Esteem	Status, recognition, competence, respect
3 · Belonging	Affection, relationships, membership
2 · Safety	Security, stability, protection from harm
1 · Physiological	Food, water, rest – basic survival

METHODOLOGY

Clinical observation and biographical study of people Maslow judged exceptionally fulfilled – qualitative and interpretive rather than experimental.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The most recognised idea in the motivation canon and the humanistic starting point for the rest. The critique is serious: the strict ordering has weak empirical support, the model reflects individualist cultural assumptions, self-actualisation resists definition, and – despite the ubiquitous pyramid – Maslow never drew one.

Frederick Herzberg 1923–2000

Work psychology · the two-factor theory

CORE THESIS

Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposite ends of one scale but the products of **different factors**. **Hygiene** factors – pay, conditions, policy, supervision – cause dissatisfaction when poor but do not motivate when good. Only **motivators** – achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, growth – create real satisfaction. Hence **job enrichment**.

FRAMEWORK

Hygiene factors (prevent dissatisfaction)	Motivators (create satisfaction)
Pay and benefits	Achievement
Working conditions	Recognition
Company policy and supervision	The work itself
Job security and status	Responsibility and growth

METHODOLOGY

The critical-incident method – asking accountants and engineers to recall times they felt especially good or bad about work, and analysing the causes.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The foundation of job design and enrichment, and the reason pay is treated as a dissatisfier to be removed rather than a motivator to be added. The critique: the results may be an artefact of the method – people credit themselves for good feelings and blame circumstances for bad ones – and the role of pay is more contested than the theory allows.

David McClelland 1917–1998

Personality and motivation · the acquired-needs theory

CORE THESIS

Three **learned** needs, acquired through culture and experience, drive behaviour in different mixes: the need for **achievement**, **affiliation** and **power**. The dominant need shapes what motivates a person and what roles suit them.

FRAMEWORK

Need	Seeks	Fits
Achievement (nAch)	Challenge, mastery, measurable success	Entrepreneurs, specialists
Affiliation (nAff)	Belonging, harmony, close relationships	Team and service roles
Power (nPow)	Influence and impact on others	Leadership – if socialised, not personal

METHODOLOGY

The Thematic Apperception Test – a projective method in which subjects' stories about ambiguous images are coded for underlying motives – applied across large samples.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Produced durable findings: achievement motivation predicts entrepreneurial behaviour, and a socialised power motive predicts managerial effectiveness. The critique centres on the projective instrument, whose reliability and scoring have long been questioned.

Clayton Alderfer 1940–2015

Organisational psychology · ERG theory

CORE THESIS

Alderfer condensed Maslow into three needs – **Existence, Relatedness, Growth** – that can operate **simultaneously** and in any order. He added a **frustration–regression** principle: when a higher need is blocked, people redouble their pursuit of a lower one.

FRAMEWORK

ERG need	Maslow equivalent	Principle
Existence	Physiological + safety	Material and physical wellbeing
Relatedness	Belonging + external esteem	Meaningful relationships
Growth	Self-esteem + self-actualisation	Development and fulfilment

Unlike Maslow's one-way progression, ERG allows several needs to be active at once and predicts **regression** when growth is thwarted – a better match to real behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

An empirical reworking of Maslow designed to be more testable, supported by Alderfer's own studies.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

More flexible and better evidenced than Maslow, and the frustration–regression idea is a genuine advance. The critique: it still rests on a limited evidence base and never achieved Maslow's practical reach.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

A caution: the content theories are far more famous than they are validated. Maslow's strict hierarchy and Herzberg's clean two-factor split have both struggled to replicate, and McClelland's projective measure is contested. They remain valuable as vocabularies for thinking about needs – not as tested predictive models.

Synthesis

Theorist	Structure of needs	Key mechanism	Critique
Maslow	Five-level hierarchy	Satisfaction–progression	Weak support for strict order
Herzberg	Two distinct factors	Hygiene vs motivators	Method artefact; pay contested
McClelland	Three learned needs	Dominant acquired motive	Projective measure disputed
Alderfer	Three flexible needs	Frustration–regression	Limited evidence base

FOR THE OPERATOR

Content theories give the operator a vocabulary for what people want from work – a stack of needs (Maslow), two different factors (Herzberg), three learned drives (McClelland), a flexible set (Alderfer). Their shared limit is that they describe the *content* of motivation but not the *process* by which it becomes effort. That is the subject of the next paper.