

# An Empirical Examination of Herzberg's Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workplace. Organizational Psychology Re-Examined

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## Abstract

This present study empirically investigated the applicability of Herzberg's theory in the various workplaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including correctional officers, employees in the retail sector and front-line employees of telecommunication industries. In fact, through Systematic Review, it was examined whether Herzberg's motivational and hygiene factors, such as working conditions, relationship with peers, supervisor feedback, etc., play a major role in boosting the satisfaction and motivation of the employees, and whether the lack of such factors leads to increased turnover. It was found out that the strongest predictors for employees' perceived job satisfaction included the nature of the work along with recognition and achievement. Finally, certain limitations and suggestions for future research were provided.

## Keywords

Herzberg, Job Satisfaction, Hygiene Factors, Motivation, Turnover

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## 1. Introduction

As the psychological factors pertaining to employee well-being in the workforce continued to hamper many organizations worldwide during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to employee turnover and burnout, many theorists pondered for many years what were the underlying factors of this decrease in motivation, productivity and engagement that many employees exhibited (Stello, 2011). Employee turnover is considered to be quite detrimental to the competitiveness and profitability of organizations (Holston-Okae & Mushi, 2018). In addition, it can also jeopardize organizational performance and lead to inadequate employee rewarding, toxic work environments, and it cripples the assets of the company (Holston-Okae &

Mushi, 2018). Despite the numerous studies that were conducted these past few decades by researchers regarding employee job satisfaction and its underlying factors, there still are quite significant gaps in the literature, and thus human resource management practitioners and business professionals are kept in the dark (Le, 2014).

It was at that time, that psychologist Frederick Herzberg found a basis in Maslow's theory of self-actualization in order to comprehend how employees could implement personal growth and foster positive emotions in the workplace (Stello, 2011). Therefore, Herzberg started his research that was conducted during the late 1950s, on the area of Pittsburg, as at the time it was a location that brimmed with employment and there were numerous plants and facilities (Stello, 2011). To test their Hypothesis, Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman asked accountants and engineers to provide descriptions of incidents where they actually felt very happy while being in the workplace, and other instances when their feelings were quite negative and they were not as engaged as other instances (Sachau, 2007). In summary, what Herzberg and his associates discovered was that the main factors responsible for employee well-being and motivation, mostly had to do with intrinsic factors, such as achievement and personal growth, while feelings of dissatisfaction mostly emerged from what he called "hygiene" factors, that mostly included the working conditions of the organization, the quality of the supervisor responsible for the employees and even the various rules and regulations the company adhered to (Le, 2014). In addition, the researchers found that the factors that were attributed towards the intrinsic satisfaction of the employee were usually long-lasting, with feelings of achievement and motivation being the sole factors that provided short-term satisfaction (Stello, 2011).

In addition, recent research in the field of positive psychology has managed to consistently link the basic principles of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, with attributes such as optimism, grit, resilience, creativity, flow and fascination (Sachau, 2007). As a field, positive psychology is the study of the abovementioned attributes, and some researchers indicated that comparing their findings, they discovered similarities with Herzberg's theory, in the sense of showing that happiness does not simply involve the absence of unhappiness, but there are quite a lot of underlying factors that play a huge role in mediating such a relationship (Sachau, 2007). This paper will attempt to provide an analytic literature review regarding the effectiveness and implementation of Herzberg's theory in various organizational workplaces of today, most notably examining employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction, turnover, while the paper will also briefly touch upon the application of Herzberg's theory in positive psychology and motivation. Finally, there will be an empirical examination of the various experimental studies conducted in order to further solidify such evidence.

## 2. Employee Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction via Herzberg's Theory

Regarding the employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels in conjunction with

Herzberg's Hygiene-Motivational Theory, most contemporary studies have emphasized on the study and detection of industrial, personal, as well as economic factors that drive the employees' reported satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work (Lixel & Lantican, 2021; Mehrad, 2020). What is more, these particular studies have deepened their research question in terms of the importance of HRM in the workforce, by providing strategic principles and thorough guidance as a means to facilitate and flourish a positive correlation between the hygiene factors of Herzberg and perceived employee job satisfaction (Le, 2014). An additional variable that was found to be quite significant with the extrinsic demands of employees was organization behavior research (Le, 2014). What this means is that employees and firms inside a group of industries must share a common but unique set of environmental factors that in turn, mediate the positive relationship of employee job satisfaction, for instance, organizations that are usually quite large in size and in popularity, while most of the time report quite positive employee attitudes, it sometimes may be the case that this will have quite an inverse reaction on job satisfaction (Le, 2014).

Delving deeper into such factors, it is reported that altering the organizational structure, in terms of either leadership, or management, then it must be taken into consideration that the intrinsic demands of the employees will surely change as well (Alston, 2017). By applying Herzberg's theory in major workplace disturbances, such as firm downsizing, or global recessions, for instance, this will have a large area of effect in the needs and satisfaction of the workforce (Alston, 2017). Such drastic job changes are shown to dramatically reduce job mobility, to the point of even unemployment (Mehrad, 2020). Also, altering the employee's work schedule, which is a hygiene factor for Herzberg, can eventually lead to loss of personal income, and therefore create an imbalance in the work-life schedule of the individual (Alston, 2017).

A quite stunning instance of the effect of extrinsic and intrinsic factors in employee satisfaction can be identified in the basic emergent findings of the study conducted by Alston (2017), regarding the attitudes of resident librarians. What was found out was that when the residents were acquainted previously and there was knowledge of how the residency functions and its values, then there was less likely for the residents to exhibit resident dissatisfaction. In addition, when the residency offered them opportunities to challenge themselves with innovative projects, and there was a proper and fruitful guidance and feedback from supervisors then greater satisfaction was generated (Alston, 2017). Therefore, it seems that job dissatisfaction mostly encompasses lack of communication, not providing feedback to residents, and absence of mentoring in general (Alston, 2017). All these factors encompass the hygiene factors aspect explained by Herzberg, thus it is apparent there is an influence in perceived employee satisfaction (Le, 2014).

Herzberg's theory can also be applied in other organizational settings as well, such as the retail setting. When it comes to retail, there is a significant amount of literature that provides empirical evidence for Herzberg's theory (Tan & Waheed,

2011). In such settings, it was reported that the variable of achievement and recognition was very much valued in terms of job satisfaction and motivation (Tan & Waheed, 2011). Next in hierarchy of satisfaction, came the variable of promotion, or earning more money, whereas the relationship between the employee and the supervisor was significantly related with satisfaction, along with the hygiene factors of flexible company policies and positive relationship with coworkers (Tan & Waheed, 2011). In fact, it was also reported that because in the retail sector, employees do have a big responsibility in building a relationship of trust between them and the potential customer, when they were properly guided by their supervisors on how to handle such cases, customers tended to become quite loyal to the organization (Tan & Waheed, 2011). On the other hand, a demotivated employee in the retail sector would exhibit greater levels of absenteeism and reported turnover intentions (Tan & Waheed, 2011). This holds true especially for positions that are most likely to be poorly paid within the overarching hierarchy of the retail organization, which is a consequence of poor hygiene factors (Tan & Waheed, 2011).

Continuing with the application of Herzberg's theory in terms of job satisfaction, when the principles of the theory were tested among nurse practitioners, it was reported that indeed the employees who had the highest satisfaction reports attributed these attitudes towards several intrinsic factors, such as being given more responsibility and being respected and acknowledged by their supervisors for their efforts, whereas the employees who reported low satisfaction, justified this attitude because of extrinsic factors, such as lack of coordination with coworkers (Stello, 2011). On the same page, using the motivation-hygiene theory in psychiatric nurses, as a means to examine the interrelationships between skills, relations with co-workers, and of course job satisfaction, the findings of the study did indeed support Herzberg's principles, as it was revealed that the presence of intrinsic factors mediated the staff's ability to coordinate during shifts, and being able to juggle more effectively and efficiently potential workload and fatigue (Stello, 2011).

### 3. Employee Turnover in Terms of Herzberg's Theory

Moving away from the variables of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory can also be a tool for predicting and preventing employee turnover intentions. For instance, studies show that there is an increasing likelihood of an employee to be satisfied and therefore committed to his/her company, when he/she bonds with other colleagues, receive information related to work tasks, or participate in certain decisions related to the work (Holston-Okae & Mushi, 2018). Even though these factors do at first glance seem that they apply towards retaining and increasing the employees' job satisfaction, the most striking fact is that these employees exhibited tremendous levels of loyalty and commitment (Holston-Okae & Mushi, 2018). In fact, the number one variable that actually led to people quitting their jobs, across a variety of sectors and occupa-

tions, was role overload (Holston-Okae & Mushi, 2018).

Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory can also be applied in occupational settings where there is reportedly a voluntary turnover from the side of the employees. What voluntary turnover entails is a process by which the employee on his/her own, decides to terminate his/her running contract with the organization, for various factors (Udechukwu, 2009). Therefore, it seems valid to assume that in occupations where the environment that is being provided is quite hostile, such as in individuals who work as correctional officers, there is a large possibility of a voluntary turnover due to the hygiene factors being improper and hazardous (Udechukwu, 2009). Within the context of correctional officers, in 2002, the voluntary turnover was measured to be 77% of the total turnover percentage and in the next years, it remained quite stable (Udechukwu, 2009). Therefore, prisons in the United States, faced a tremendous turnover rate, which became quite costly due to various factors, including separation costs, acquisition costs and learning costs (Udechukwu, 2009). The fact that over the next decades, we did not observe any significant drop of this percentage, led researchers to report that these organizations either failed or were not quite bothered to identify why is there such an issue with the turnover of correctional officers, besides ramping up their policy structure to be more direct and strict, which of course did not aid in solving the problem and the impact of voluntary turnover continued to create a dent on their strategic and daily operations (Udechukwu, 2009). In addition, even motivators such as increased pay and bonus incentives were not enough to persuade the staff to keep their jobs, falling in place with Herzberg's theory of motivation (Udechukwu, 2009).

#### **4. Positive Psychology and Motivation**

In recent years, the realm of positive psychology has received a fair amount of attention, because it has crucial implications for human resource professionals (Sachau, 2007). The reason behind this sudden interest towards this field, is because the goals of positive psychology are aligned with those of human resource managers, that is they are both interested in improving the skillset of individuals, increasing satisfaction and wellbeing, promoting ethical behavior and desiring creativity (Sachau, 2007). Therefore, positive psychology focuses on the human strengths and not on weaknesses and depression (Sachau, 2007). In addition, positive psychology and its research is consistent with the principles of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, in the sense that factors of motivation are necessary for intrinsic motivation and that factors such as poor supervision, lack of communication with the rest of the department, or inequity in rewards, are hygiene factors that lead to dissatisfaction (Sachau, 2007).

As far as positive psychology is concerned, it argues that Herzberg's theory despite its criticisms, can be a low cost accessible tool for human resource professionals to implement certain programs that foster motivation and productivity (Sachau, 2007). The main factor that positive psychologists argue that should

be implemented in accordance to Herzberg's theory is job enrichment (Sachau, 2007). Job enrichment is the involvement of the supervisor in order to modify the job of the employee so to create motivational factors (Sachau, 2007). Examples include giving employees their own schedules, control over organizational resources, and letting them being accountable for their own work (Sachau, 2007). Evidence suggests that job enrichment is indeed effective and can tremendously boost the performance of employees (Sachau, 2007). Other factors that play a huge role in mediating motivation include opportunities for advancement, creating an environment where the individual feels safe, equitable rewards, and most importantly, autonomy on the job (Ogunnaike, Ekweme, Adeyemo, & Okedurum, 2017). Therefore, the employees are indeed motivated by the same motivational factors that Herzberg proposed (Bundtzen, 2021) and as a result, positive psychology is on Herzberg's side (Sachau, 2007).

## 5. Method

For the sake of the research, there will be an empirical examination of several experimental studies in order to detect how applicable is Herzberg's theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplaces. To begin with, Alston's (2017) study utilized eleven research questions, in an attempt to find correlations between motivational and hygiene factors detected in the literature, with the residents' experiences within the residency. But after the results did not provide much clarity, a sequential explanatory study design incorporating a follow-up explanations model is used in this study in order to test the established research hypotheses and answer the research questions by utilizing the Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient (Alston, 2017). The researcher gathered data utilizing questions that had a 10 point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strong agreement. What was found out was that since the research questions that were utilized, treated the residents' views of the residency as dependent variables and Herzberg's motivational and hygiene factors as independent, for the research questions in which there would be a potential change in either the hygiene or the motivational factor, the satisfaction of the residents was varied in conjunction with the quality of the factors presented (Alston, 2017).

In the study of Le (2014), a biannual, industry level data set was employed from various household populations in the United States, by the National Research Center. This particular quantitative study utilized two sets of software in order to statistically analyze the results, namely SPSS and AMOS version 22, in an attempt to analyze interrelationship effects (Le, 2014). What the study reported is that out of the numerous motivational factors of Herzberg, recognition and achievement were the ones who were significantly correlated with perceived employee job satisfaction, whereas out of the hygiene factors, the one that had the most potent influence on employee job satisfaction was the various policies and administration rules of the organization in question (Le, 2014).

Yousaf (2020) employed the stratified random sampling method in order to

gather responses from front-line employees that were working in the telecommunication centers in Pakistan. The participants included junior and senior executives, as well as business center managers (Yousaf, 2020). Through the distribution of a questionnaire via email, the respondents were asked to indicate their experiences in the workplace (Yousaf, 2020). It was reported that there was a strong positive correlation of motivational factors with job satisfaction, however the employees' relationship with their supervisor did not seem to be that important, even though at times it had a significant impact on the job satisfaction of the employees (Yousaf, 2020). The study of Alfayad & Arif (2017) wanted to measure employee job satisfaction in relation with employee voice behavior, meaning the privilege that employees have to voice their inputs on the matters of the organization. They conducted a Cronbach's alpha test, which is usually thought of as one of the most reliable tests when it comes to measuring inter-item reliability and consistency. It was revealed that employee voice is a very important element in job satisfaction, as it allows employees to be involved in the vision of the organization and implement their innovative ideas (Alfayad & Arif, 2017). In addition, structured feedback from the supervisor led to the encouragement of employee voice behavior (Alfayad & Arif, 2017).

In the study of Tan & Waheed (2011), a linear regression analysis was utilized so to test Herzberg's motivation and hygiene factors in relation to job satisfaction. On a similar vein to Le (2014), it was found that the nature of the work itself and recognition were by far the most important determinants in employee job satisfaction, achievement was also quite important and as far as the hygiene factors are concerned, company policies, payment, relationship with coworkers and working conditions were all significantly correlated with job satisfaction levels (Tan & Waheed, 2011). For Ogunnaike, Ekweme, Adeyemo, & Okedurum (2017), money and job security were found to be the motivational factors that secure a better workplace environment and only when the employee is challenged and tasked to innovate, then he/she will exhibit greater performance and satisfaction (Ogunnaike, Ekweme, Adeyemo, & Okedurum, 2017).

Repertory grid interviews were the method that Bundtzen (2021) decided to employ in his study, with the comparison method known as triad oppositional being utilized. Basically, the respondents were presented with three elements that can be applicable with Herzberg's theory. These constructs were the organization and the market, leadership and motivation, and finally quality and internal processes (Bundtzen, 2021). It was revealed that intrinsic passion for the work itself and efficient working conditions were the strongest predictors for motivation, with cooperative leadership and constructive feedback coming close second (Bundtzen, 2021).

## 6. Discussion

As it can be identified from the empirical analysis of the abovementioned literature, it seems that Herzberg's theory is very much applicable in today's stand-



ards, and holds many answers when it comes to boosting employee job satisfaction and motivation. All of the research that was utilized for the sake of this project, was in accordance with Herzberg's principles, indicating that it still holds true after almost 65 years after its initial conception, that motivation factors and hygiene factors are of key importance when it comes to perceived employee job satisfaction, motivation, increased wellbeing and positivity, and employee turnover. Most of the findings were aligned in that working conditions and the nature of the work itself were most of the times the strongest predictors of job satisfaction and motivation, whereas in the study of Udechukwu (2009), the true importance of satisfactory and above all safe working conditions when it comes to employee commitment and engagement to the job.

In addition, this study was among the first to incorporate the realm of positive psychology into the application of Herzberg's theory, since it helps in the explanation of the relationship between money and happiness better than any other models that are employed in positive psychology (Sachau, 2007) and as a matter of fact, human resource managers would be wise to consult such theory in order to foster employee growth and increased wellbeing (Sachau, 2007). Especially for those professionals who tend to operate from a theoretical paradigm, they will find it much easier to predict how to implement changes to the workplace that will lead towards long-term satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Sachau, 2007).

### Recommendations for Future Research

First of all, the study did in fact mostly consider Herzberg's theory in terms of job satisfaction and motivation. Therefore, it would be wise for future studies to dig deeper into other variables that also affect productivity in the workplace, such as employee engagement and commitment and the relationship between Herzberg's theory and the personality of the employee, whether it is hampered due to poor working conditions for instance, or inequity in rewards. Finally, this project focused only on Herzberg's theory and it is strongly recommended that future studies should explore factors such as leadership styles or the lack of feedback from the supervisor, in an attempt to showcase whether there will be any increase or decrease in the satisfaction and motivation levels of the employee.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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