

## The ABC of Work Motivation



# The ABC of Work Motivation

*How to Energize Any Organization*

*Anja Van den Broeck,  
Hermina Van Coillie,  
Jacques Forest, and  
Marcus B. Müller*

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# Table of contents

<b>Foreword</b>	9
<b>Preface</b>	11
<b>1. WHY MOTIVATE ACCORDING TO SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY?</b>	13
1.1 Without motivation there is no behavior	13
1.2 SDT is one of the most influential motivation theories	14
<b>PART 1. THE PRINCIPLES OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY</b>	
<b>1. THE METATHEORY OF SDT: WHAT YOU THINK IS WHAT YOU GET</b>	21
1.1 Theory X and Y: a different view of people	21
1.2 Your way of thinking has important implications for how you motivate employees	23
1.3 You get what you think	24
1.4 SDT starts from Theory Y	25
<b>2. AUTONOMOUS AND CONTROLLED MOTIVATION: “I WANT TO” VERSUS “I HAVE TO” MAKES A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE</b>	29
2.1 Motivated or not?	29
2.2 Types of motivation	30
<b>3. THE BASIC NEEDS: THE ABC OF MOTIVATION</b>	61
3.1 What are basic needs?	61
3.2 The ABC of motivation	63
3.4 Consequences of fulfilling or not fulfilling the ABC	73

## **PART 2 TOOLS TO START WORKING WITH SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY**

<b>1. PERSONAL DIFFERENCES IN MOTIVATION</b>	<b>81</b>
1.1 Demographic characteristics and personality	82
1.2 Sensitive to pressure?	87
1.3 Mindfulness	90
1.4 Personal intrinsic and extrinsic values	94
1.5 Different cultures	102
<b>2. THE IDEAL SALARY ACCORDING TO SDT</b>	<b>105</b>
2.1 Intrinsic motivation decreases due to rewards: the crowding-out effect	106
2.2 What should you be looking for when giving a reward?	111
<b>3. ABC-PROOF JOB DESIGN</b>	<b>129</b>
3.1 What is job design?	129
3.2 Motivating work contains many job resources or energy resources	131
3.3 Motivating work should contain an acceptable amount of job demands	135
<b>4. CAN COLLEAGUES AND CUSTOMERS ALSO BE MOTIVATING?</b>	<b>149</b>
4.1 Social contact with colleagues	149
4.2 Social contact with customers, clients, students, or patients	156
<b>5. MOTIVATING LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>163</b>
5.1 The motivating power of classic leadership styles	163
5.2 ABC supportive leadership	167
5.3 The importance of communication: the ABC language	180
5.4 ABC support in difficult times: organizational change and work from home	185

<b>Conclusion</b>	189
<b>Annex: THE ECONOMICS OF MOTIVATION</b>	191
1. The importance of investing in people	191
2. Focus both on fixing what is broken and nurturing what has potential to grow	193
3. SDT and ROI	194
<b>Key References</b>	203



# Foreword

Enhancing the motivation of employees is a key objective in most modern organizations. Engagement is easy to measure and even easier to observe. Spend some time within a company, and you'll notice that the level of involvement is generally palpable. You can feel it in the enthusiasm with which people approach their tasks and in their energy when interacting with colleagues. In an environment where individuals are invested, camaraderie is powerful, and there is a sense of purpose and a concern for the quality of services or products. Disengagement is equally striking: morale is low, emotions are negative, and everyone is simply waiting for the weekend.

While engagement and disengagement are thus evident, it is not always easy to change them. The latest data from major corporations show that, despite massive expenditures on employee motivation initiatives, the average engagement rate has decreased post-pandemic. In this time of turbulence, many good workers have even questioned their relationship with their jobs and started seeking a new vocation where they can find more meaning and a form of fulfillment beyond just a paycheck.

This trend urges leaders worldwide to pay more attention to factors that can help their employees be more involved, satisfied, and perform better. Fortunately, new developments in the science of motivation allow us to identify reliable paths to improve well-being and productivity. In particular, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a revolutionary perspective that emphasizes individuals' quality of motivation and psychological needs. This theory explains in detail how management styles, work climate, and job design can address psychological needs at all levels of the organization, fostering increased engagement, effort, and quality production. SDT shows notably that when managers adopt leadership styles that support autonomy, belongingness,

and competence, both their subordinates and the organization benefit. Not only is there more motivation and well-being, but also better results. Another positive side effect is that managers themselves are more satisfied when they adopt such leadership strategies.

This brings us to the importance and uniqueness of this book, written by four experts in Self-Determination Theory and organizational behavior. Informed by the latest motivation research and their respective consulting experiences, this work synthesizes theory and observations, making them applicable by presenting the pillars of motivation and well-being. The authors emphasize practical measures that can catalyze more vitality and satisfaction in everyday work. They provide concrete examples and compelling case studies from various sectors and organizations. More uniquely, this book not only addresses how managers can help employees but also what employees can do for themselves to improve their own motivation and professional fulfillment. It thus provides the means to cultivate intrinsic motivation and meaning, both for others and oneself.

As a co-founder of SDT, I am delighted to present this work. The main reason we continuously develop, test, and refine psychological theories is that we are trying to “change the world” and steer it in a better direction. This is why it seems so important to start with workplaces, where we, as adults, invest so much of our energy, and whose conditions profoundly impact our quality of life and mental health, both during and outside the hours we spend there. In this regard, it is inspiring to see organizational research on SDT from a global community of scholars being applied so practically in this book. Its reading provides reasons to reflect, ideas for innovation, and a compass to find our way towards greater well-being at work, in our relationships, and in life in general.

Richard M. Ryan, Ph.D.  
co-founder of SDT

# Preface

To motivate people or “to get them to move” is quite an art. Often we want to motivate others. **Anja** for example wants to motivate herself to do her work with passion (without becoming addicted to it) and to eat fewer cookies. She also wants to motivate her husband to take that big trip to Australia, and her students to read books and immerse themselves in their study materials (instead of taking the easy route to studying).

**Hermína** wants to motivate her four children to clean up their room (not easy), read books (instead of comics), study (not easy at all), and eat vegetables (much easier said than done). And not only when they are with her, but also when they go camping with their sports club when she can’t motivate them with a dessert. She also wants to motivate herself to walk every week and to eat a yoghurt in the evening instead of a bag of chips.

**Jacques** wants his two children to learn the beauty of discipline by having fun and finding things important, especially when it comes to school, sport activity and eating. He also wants his students to find their “true” self so that motivation comes mostly from within. On a personal note, he wants to eat more healthy and balance the numerous challenges of his different roles: father, husband, psychologist, cyclist, professor, skier, friend, etc.

**Marcus’** mission in life is to motivate people to change their own lives and contribute to the lives of others – for the better! The ABC has changed his life. In turn, he has been applying the ABC framework to help create health, well-being and success for his family, friends, colleagues, students, clients, communities and society at large.

Our professional careers brought us to Self-Determination Theory and – thanks to the theory – we found each other.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a recent theory of motivation that assumes that people naturally have the energy to be motivated. And that they are not only motivated “a lot” but especially “well”, i.e., that their motivation is of high quality.

When we want to motivate people, SDT says, there is no need to threaten them with a stick, entice them with a carrot or continuously control them. To the contrary! If you control people too much, their motivation and energy slip away like sand between your fingers: the harder you squeeze, the more sand slips away, until eventually you are left empty-handed.

Rather than being controlling, we can motivate ourselves and others without putting pressure. SDT helps to do exactly that, also in the workplace. Every job has some tasks that are less pleasant, for which people are not intrinsically motivated. In this book we bring forward the basics of SDT and we indicate how SDT helps you to have high-quality motivation which helps to make that impossible deadline, get your employees to go along with the organizational change and encourage your boss to bring more structure to meetings. SDT indicates how relationships in the workplace, compensation, jobs, and the organizational climate can be motivating. It accomplishes this through the ABC of motivation and by eliciting high-quality motivation, that is, through internal drive instead of outside control.

We have deliberately chosen to keep the book short and added questions and exercises for yourself and your team to make it more practical. We also bring a number of examples from our consultation practices. In this way we hope to inspire and inform you. We also hope that you, perhaps together with your colleagues or managers, will become inspired to apply SDT in your workplace.

We hope you enjoy reading it and look forward to helping you motivate yourself and others at work!

**Anja, Hermina, Jacques, and Marcus**

# 1. WHY MOTIVATE ACCORDING TO SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY?

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU FOR YOUR WORK? AND HOW DO YOU MOTIVATE OTHERS?

- Do you think your boss is controlling you?
- Do you enjoy doing all your tasks?
- Do you explain why a (tedious) task is important?
- Do you ever use the word “have to” or similar expressions in your instructions (“you have to do this”, “you must do that”)?
- Do you let others be themselves at work?
- Do you enjoy receiving a bonus?
- Do you trust all your colleagues?

All of these questions have to do with motivation at work.

## 1.1 Without motivation there is no behavior

The word “motivation” comes from the Latin “movere” (to move).

Motivation is the energy:

- that makes you choose this task or another;
- that sets you in motion;
- that makes you persevere, even when the going gets tough.

In short, without motivation there is no movement. It is the basis of everything we do. Motivation helps you to do your job, to work hard. Or to avoid certain tasks.

Your motivation, for example, gives you the energy to finish the marketing campaign for that one client. It helps you persist in writing a book, even when it becomes difficult. It makes you doodle on your smartphone instead of actively participating in a meeting. Who or what motivates you in those moments may vary. But there's no question that "something" is causing you to do the things you do. Without the drive or motivation for your work, you may sit in front of the TV with a bag of chips (or with something healthier if you are motivated to eat healthy). Motivation drives your behavior and gets you moving. Without motivation there is no behavior.

Given the importance of motivation, it may not come as a surprise that the academic literature has extensively studied how we can best "motivate" and "set in motion" ourselves and others. There are many theories about motivation, including widely known theories such as Maslow's "pyramid of needs" (which never got scientifically validated as a true pyramid), or Bandura's "self-efficacy theory", saying that people are primarily motivated by what they think they are good at. Also "goal-setting theory" and its derivative of "management by objectives" are often used in practice. They assume that people are mostly motivated when they set difficult but achievable goals.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a recent, yet thoroughly tested theory. Its foundation was laid in the 1970s, but over the years, it has evolved into the rich theory that it is today. We have chosen to base this book in SDT.

## **1.2 SDT is one of the most influential motivation theories**

SDT is very valuable for several reasons, especially in the workplace.

First, to date, SDT has become one of the most prominent, well-established, and innovative theories of motivation. The

theory originates from the 1970s when one of its “founding fathers,” Edward Deci, conducted experiments on the impact of rewards on intrinsic motivation (doing something out of interest or enjoyment). By now, thanks to an ever-growing academic community around the world, SDT has grown into a broad theory and movement. Thousands of academic and peer reviewed articles and books have been published on this theory.

Second, SDT is a universal theory: whether you are trying to boost yourself for that important deadline, trying to get your coworker to pull out a new project, trying to motivate your partner to put their socks in the laundry or to motivate your child to do their homework, the principles of SDT help with all those motivation issues. The same motivation principles are thus not only valid in the workplace, but also at home, in the gym and in the classroom. And not only in the Western world, but all across the globe.

Third, SDT is a broad theory. SDT says something about why we do what we do and where we get our energy from. SDT also indicates for whom the theory works and how we can strengthen high-quality motivation.

Employees or executives who receive an introduction or training based on this theory often see it as a gift. Investing in the basic principles of SDT not only helps in one’s personal relations but also benefits the organization. Research indicates that investing in SDT reduces the risk of burnout within the organization and helps employees to be more productive and innovative. It also ensures that employees feel more involved with their organization, perform better and are less absent. Research shows that every dollar invested in improving employee motivation according to the principles of SDT, pays back more than threefold within 12 months.