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MOTIVATION

Choice of Involvement: An Antecedent to Motivation in Training Programs

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### Abstract

Throughout companies, increasing motivation for training programs is a consistent concern and project. Motivation is a complex web that is made up of many sub-dimensions and each play an important role in determining whether or not a person will be motivated to learn. This review focuses on how the choice to participate can affect motivation levels. Although there is conflict, many researchers agree that there is a relationship between choice and motivation. In fact, recent findings suggest that with supervisor's support and relevant training material, both choice and assignment conditions can be effective in raising motivation (Tsai & Tai, 2003).

### Choice of Involvement: An Antecedent to Motivation in Training Programs

Workers throughout the world complete job-related training programs everyday, however, it is not everyday that these programs are successful. This worldwide problem is not easy to remedy because of the multiple factors that affect a program's success. For example, some employees may not have had enough sleep, some may have a mountain of work piling up on their desk, and others may feel that they already know the material being offered. In each case, workers see the program as an ineffective use of time, and can potentially become unmotivated. This generates the question, "How are training programs ever effective?" Since employees do not always see the purpose of training programs or "buy into" them, increasing motivation to learn may be the key component to success.

Motivation, although not the only factor that determines the effectiveness of a training program, is a necessary component that cannot be ignored. If, for example, a program has proven successful in a particular company and is now being used with a new group of employees, this "tried and true" program should work. This may not be the case however. Even if the new employees are identical in pre-training skills and background to the previous training groups, if they are not motivated to learn the material, then chances are that the program will be ineffective.

The current review will first provide a brief overview of the various components that effect motivation levels, and then focus on the specific factor of how choice to participate contributes to the motivation level of employees.

*Overview of motivation as an antecedent to learning*

Factors such as situational constraints and self-regulation affect human behavior and motivation every day (Bandura, 1991; Peters & O'Connor, 1980). In turn, motivation affects a variety of situations such as learning, and has the potential to positively influence trainees' reactions and success in any given training program (Tsai & Tai, 2003). Still further, a variety of attitudes and attributes may affect both motivation to learn and participation in training.

When employees approach a training program, either voluntary or assigned, they actively assess their strengths and weaknesses to succeed in the program (Noe, 1986). Through this process, candidates evaluate their feelings, often called expectancy, about whether they can master the content with a reasonable amount of effort (Gist, 1987). Making these decisions is linked to whether or not mastery is important and worthwhile to the trainees' personal goals. For example, if an employee feels as though the training may eventually result in a pay raise and promotion, and this is an outcome they are working toward, their level of motivation will be higher to learn. This basic example shows that employees face a daunting task when approaching training programs, finding the motivation necessary to pursue their goals. Each aspect to motivation, therefore, plays an important role in boosting motivation.

As you can see, motivation is indeed an important antecedent to learning, and each component of motivation mentioned above can be broken down into sub dimensions. These sub dimensions include: locus of control, expectancies, job environment, situational constraints, and choice of involvement, and the ability to transfer learned material to the job (Cohen, 1990; Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993;

Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992; Noe, 1986; Tsai & Tai, 2003). Given the breadth of sub dimensions, this paper will focus on how the choice to participate in a training program can effect motivation and consequently learning.

*Choice of Involvement as an antecedent to learning*

The research surrounding the effects of choice on motivation is mixed. In the past, researchers often reported that people who volunteer for training programs are more motivated to succeed and do succeed than those assigned to training programs. One major problem with this statement is that these volunteers usually are not the employees who need the training (Baldwin, Magjuka, & Loher, 1991). Contradictory to these previous findings, there is now evidence that employees who are assigned to a training program may perceive the information as more important and, therefore, benefit more from the training (Tsai & Tai, 2003). There is not always a clear relationship between choice and motivation however, in contradiction to the research just mentioned; there is evidence that there may not be a connection at all between choice to participate and motivation levels (Mathieu et al., 1992). These ideas of the relationship between choice and motivation will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

While reading the upcoming review, keep in mind the following “memos” sent from a supervisor to an employee about a training program.

Memo A: I want you to attend this training program next week. I think that the topic is right up your alley of expertise and would be a great benefit to you.

Memo B: I received information on a training program next week and feel that it is right up your alley of expertise and would really benefit you, let me know if you would like to attend.

*Choice of involvement has a neutral effect on motivation and learning*

Although much of the research indicates a relationship between choice to participate and motivation for training programs, not all evidence points to this conclusion. In their experiment studying motivation for a proof reading training course, Mathieu et al. (1992) hypothesized that employees who were given the choice to participate would learn more from the program than those who were forced to participate. They also predicted that those with more training motivation would learn more. It can be assumed from these hypotheses, therefore, that those given the choice to participate would be more motivated to learn. Using a pretest survey, training motivation and assignment to the program (i.e. volunteer vs. enrolled by the supervisor) were measured; learning was measured by comparing number of proof reading mistakes in pre- and post-tests. Results from these surveys and tests showed that neither of the hypotheses was supported. Consequently, these results suggest that there may not be a relationship between choice and motivation. The results from this study could be attributed to various extraneous variables (i.e. prior expectations of the program and interest in the material).

Since the results were not expected, Mathieu et al. (1992) revised their hypothesized model for future research. In accordance with the bulk of research in this area, the revised model predicts a significant relationship between assignment and motivation. Specifically, it is expected that self-assignment (i.e. choice to participate) results in positive reactions to the program as well as more learning. According to this revised hypothesized model, Memo B should results in more training motivation.

*Choice of involvement positively affects motivation and learning*

There is some evidence suggesting no relationship between choice and motivation, although, as you have seen, this may simply be a design flaw (i.e. uninteresting training material). The majority of research does suggest that there is a connection between choice to participate and motivation. Hicks and Klimoski (1987) suggest that a high degree of choice not only influences motivation to learn, but also results in a heightened sense of satisfaction, and better performance on tests of the material presented. This data was gathered in a non-profit company. Hicks and Klimoski (1987) were able to manipulate both the information received about the training program (realistic vs. positive) and the employee's choice to attend. The results of these manipulations were obtained using a pre- and post-training questionnaire and a test of the material learned.

The results of Hicks and Klimoski (1987) complement the findings of Ryman and Biersner (1975) stating that having a choice to be involved in the program not only leads to more success, but also results in fewer absences from training sessions. As would be expected, the fewer absences may be due to the interest in the training program. Finally, Baldwin et al. (1991) also came to similar conclusions specifically that a high degree of choice results in higher pre-training motivation and more learning throughout the training program. Each of the findings thus far has shown that of the memos presented earlier, Memo B would provide a better source of motivation than Memo A because it provides the option to attend the program.

To provide a more in depth look at the body of literature that supports choice of involvement as an antecedent to motivation, we will first look at Cohen's (1990) study on

the relationship between the supervisory role and an employee's training motivation. Results from a pre-training questionnaire show that most participants' report that their motivation to learn comes from being allowed to volunteer for a training program rather than being assigned. The highest pre-training motivation, however, results from the choice to participate, and open support from the employee's supervisor. When both of these variables are present, trainees are able to set goals, and learn more from the training. Indeed, Tharenou (2001) also found that when the training program was supported by the employer and the information trainees expected to learn was perceived as important to growth and knowledge gain, they were more motivated to learn. Each of these studies again provides support for the use for Memo B rather than Memo A when trying to heighten motivation.

Prior to this data, Hand and Slocum (1970) examined how self acceptance can affect motivation through a field experiment testing the effectiveness of a human relations training program while examining various factors that affect success. Although this research does not explicitly measure the choice/motivation relationship, there are many implicit connections provided. The results from pre-training, immediate-post-training, and delayed-post-training questionnaires showed that acceptance of self and others significantly increased the positive effects of the training. This implies that one must have a minimal level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) in order to achieve success in training programs. When given the choice to participate, the trainee is more likely to feel a sense of self-efficacy because they are making their own decisions, which in turn raises self-esteem and creates a positive attitude towards training and higher success rates (Carlson, Bozeman, Kacmar, Wright, & McMahan, 2000). It is interesting to note that

Hand and Slocum (1970) actually found many trainees thought their level of choice had been compromised and training differences were no longer evident 90 days post-training. In this case, even though the supervisors supported the program openly, because the process by which participants were selected or given the option to participate was not fair, motivation and learning were low. This supports Cohen's finding (1990) that supervisor support in combination with perceived choice to participate is essential in generating motivation for training.

Finally, a fairly new study by Tsai and Tai (2003) finds slightly different results on the issue of choice and motivation. In this study, there is further evidence that individuals must have a choice in participating in training programs for motivation to exist. Choice is necessary because participation requires the expending energy toward learning, and without motivation (generated from choice) there will not be a willingness to expend effort. Tsai and Tai (2003) hypothesized that the mediator between training assignment (i.e. choice or no-choice) and motivation is the perceived importance of the program. Survey data was gathered prior to training on trainees' perceived importance of the program and training motivation. Mid-way through the program there was a reassessment of training motivation and the employees' familiarity with the training concepts. Results from the surveys show that perceived importance of the training program has a significant positive impact on training motivation. Even though choice to participate heightens motivation, Tsai and Tai also found that trainees who were assigned to the training perceived the program as more important, and were also highly motivated to learn. Unlike other studies, this shows that both choice and assignment can relate positively to motivation given the right circumstances. Contradictory to the other

literature reviewed here, this data suggests that both Memo A and B can successfully heighten an employee's motivation to learn.

The evidence presented in this review clearly shows that there is a slight discrepancy as to whether the choice or not to participate in training programs is ultimately better for training motivation. This is clearly demonstrated in the Memo example. Much of the research suggests that Memo B is best because it offers a high degree of choice and supervisor support. The more recent research of Tsai and Tai (2003) now suggests that although Memo B is successful, Memo A, when used in the correct situations, can be equally effective.

### *Discussion*

Training programs are an integral part of the corporate world today, but are often ineffective or unsuccessful. One major component in making such programs successful is motivation. Motivation is not easy to describe and alter, however, given its multi-dimensionality. Choice of involvement, a dimension of motivation, is proving equally as difficult to fully understand as motivation.

The current literature provides a variety of proposed relationships between choice and motivation. Some literature initially suggested that there is not a relationship (Mathieu et al. 1992); while other research clearly defends that there is a strong relationship (Cohen, 1990; Kicks & Klimoski, 1987; Tsai & Tai, 2003). The currently accepted theory is that choice plays a role in motivation, this role, however, remains unclear. Based on recent research, motivation can be high for those that choose to participate as well as those who are assigned to a program. For each condition to be successful supervisor support is a necessity. In the assignment condition, not only is

supervisor support needed, but the trainee must also feel that the material is important and worthwhile for motivation and learning to occur.

These conclusions lead to several gaps in the literature, and therefore openings for future research. Until now, several variables have been inadvertently manipulated that should be formally manipulated and studied, such as the interest level of the training material (Mathieu et al., 1992). Future research, therefore, should attempt to design a single study to manipulate supervisor support for the program, choice, and the importance of the material. Unfortunately, this approach would most likely only be testable in a lab setting given the number of variables and manipulations necessary. Even though this data would not be gathered in the work place, it should still allow clearer relationships to be established between choice and motivation as a result of supervisor support and material importance.

Another area of interest to be explored is how to determine which people in an organization should be given the choice to participate and which people should be assigned to training programs for maximum learning and motivation. For example, should people with low self-efficacy be allowed to choose a program to participate in, which will boost self-efficacy and consequently increase motivation (Carlson et al., 2000)? This type of information would not only help supervisors know how to approach each individual when training opportunities arise, but would also help the individual to understand their own motivation in various situations better.

As you can see, research in this area has proposed interesting ideas, but still needs to be developed further to be more useful for the business world as well as educational settings. For further development to occur, choice needs to be more clearly defined in

relationship to motivation; the antecedents (and their sub dimensions) to choice need to be defined and related to motivation and learning; and the relationship between individual differences and the antecedents of choice needs to be defined. Although this information will not be able to eliminate poorly written training programs, it will help to significantly increase motivation and learning in programs that are engaging and relevant.

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