

Nelson-Voluntary Participation in Development Activities:

Voluntary Participation in Development Activities: A Literature Review

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Introduction

‘Human resourcing is the key to determining organizational success’ (Aziz, 2011, p. 53). To develop those human resources, employers spent over 50 billion dollars on formal training programs in 2009 (Morrell, 2011). The challenge of developing human capital in organizations is answered by many organizations through the process of becoming “learning oriented”. Harrison and Kessels (2004) state Tjepkema and Wognum’s definition of “learning-oriented” organizations as those that “create facilities for employee learning” and “stimulate employees not only to attain new knowledge and skills, but to also acquire skills in the field of learning and problem solving, and thus develop their capacity for future learning”(p. 83). Hertz (2009) found that the transition to learning orientation is taking place, stating that episodic development interventions are becoming expanding into a more blended approach and a broader idea of development is taking hold. The broadening of development activities and the ever increasing costs associated with implementing interventions demands the investigation of variables influencing the effectiveness of these programs.

Training effectiveness can be evaluated with a variety of formative and summative tools. One of the most well-known evaluation methods is Kirkpatrick’s four levels. Kirkpatrick’s evaluates on the learner’s reaction to the program, whether learning occurred during the program, the change in learner behavior and if the learned behavior produced business results (Kirkpatrick, 1994). This type of summative evaluation can be a great resource but in order to employ evaluation strategies, the workforce has to participate in the activities. It is important for practitioners of human resource development to understand the variables influencing motivation to participate and the actual participation in development activities. There are a number of researchers investigating the variables that affect motivation to participate and learn and how to

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predict participation in development activities (Aziz & Ahmad, 2011; Garavan, Carbery, O'Malley and O'Donnell, 2010; Hurtz & Williams, 2009; Morrell & Korsgaard, 2011). Human resource development will need to address modifiable variables to increase participation, motivation and learning. The focus of this literature review is to investigate these issues through an exploration of the latest literature about employee motivation to participate in voluntary training or development opportunities.

Literature

Variables associated with Motivation

Aziz and Ahmad (2011) cite training motivation as the most important factor when measuring training effectiveness. Through an integrative and comprehensive review of the relevant literature the Aziz and Ahmad draw on relevant research and aim to provide new perspectives and frameworks for stimulating training motivation. The authors provide three variables associated with training effectiveness that are influenced by learner motivation (1) organizational characteristics; (2) individual characteristics and (3) training programs characteristics. The authors focused on training program characteristics as they believe them to be the most modifiable variable associated with training effectiveness and motivation. Individual and organizational characteristics are described to be out of the adaptable control of the organization. Aziz and Ahmad identify six training program characteristics that stimulate training motivation:

1. Voluntary attendance: Participants motivation is positively affected by the option to participate. While this view is supported by many, it is unsupported by Hurtz and Williams (2009) when they concluded “the more voluntary the activities are, the less likely employees are to participate” (p. 651).

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2. Training reputation: Motivation is increased when the program is perceived as reputable or of good quality. Morrell and Korsgaard (2011) echo this in their study citing managerial approval and positive social cues of development activities increase motivation to participate.
3. Appropriate training design: Focusing the development activities on the learner, making them active and employing blended techniques contribute to the motivation to participate. Garavan Learning environment characteristics. Garavan, Carbery, O'Malley and O'Donnell (2010) highlight content quality and instructional quality as contributing variables to participation.
4. Relevance to job: Motivation to participate is enhanced when employees see usefulness and application to job duties.
5. Career needs: With an eye towards the future of their career, an employee's motivation to participate is increased if the development activities are perceived to stimulate growth in their career.
6. Personal needs: Motivation is positively affected if personal needs like promotion, compensation, personal mastery of content are anticipated.

In direct opposition to Aziz and Ahmad (2011), Morrell and Korsgaard (2011) aim to explore motivation to participate through an investigation of individual and institutional characteristics. Using a person-by-situation approach the authors investigated conscientiousness, social cues and managerial status as it relates to motivation and participation. The authors found that a conscientious employee is more motivated to participate in development activities. The relationship between conscientiousness and motivation was strengthened by positive social cues and favorable managerial opinions of value.

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The implications of these studies are that training and development programs should focus on the all three variables, the training program characteristics, the organizational characteristics and the individual person characteristics. Practitioners wanting or needing to stimulate motivation to participate should optimize the identified characteristics from the research and focus on the reception of training opportunities. Shifting the responsibility of participation to the employee will positively contribute to the level of conscientiousness and therefore increase motivation. Future research should focus on blended, multi-faceted studies incorporating the contributing individual, organizational and training program characteristics defined in the research. This approach will investigate the mitigating and contributing factors between all three variables. Finally, future studies and research should be conducted to explore more fully the variables involved when employees do not participate in developmental activities. This would provide a fuller view of motivation variables by focusing an entire study on non-participation.

Participation in Development activities

Motivation is just one variable effecting the participation in development activities. As organizations move towards a broader, ongoing and continuous process to develop human capital (Hurtz and Williams, 2009), they move away from traditional development interventions and stimulate a shift towards more self-directed activities. Thus, there is need to explore the factors that encourage employees to participate in these activities. Hurtz and Williams (2009) crafted a multiple-indicator model to test the voluntary participation in employee development activities. To craft the model the authors expanded on the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The authors' model and the TPB both state that participation is directly influenced by the intention to participate. In turn the intention to participate is directly influenced by a learner's attitude

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towards development activities. Attitudes were also investigated via dispositional variables of (1) learning goal orientation; (2) work centrality; (3) job involvement and (4) conscientiousness.

Hurtz and Williams conducted an initial survey and then a follow up survey three months later to the same population. The authors make several conclusions and suggestions in regards to participation and the intent to participate. Participant knowledge of program availability was the strongest indicator of participation. This means the employees were likely to participate if they were informed of the activities. Intent to participate was closely related to attitudes in this model; improving attitudes directly improved the intention to participate. Reactions to past activities were high on the list of contributors to attitudes towards participation. In opposition of previous research, this model did not strongly correlate perceived control as a contributing factor to participation. This suggests lower participation if development opportunities were categorized as voluntary opportunities.

Hurtz and Williams found no significant correlation between conscientiousness and participation. This is contrary to Morrell and Korsgaard's (2011) findings. Morrell and Korsgaard found that managerial status moderates the level of conscientiousness as it pertains to training participation. This suggests that higher status does not positively affect participation. Morrell and Korsgaard found that favorable opinions of the development material by supervisors suggested an increased motivation to participate. This echoes the findings of Garavan et al (2010).

Focusing on the ever growing field of e-learning, Garavan, Carbery, O'Malley and O'Donnell (2010) investigate the factors that contribute to participation in voluntary e-learning opportunities. Expanding on the work of Hurtz and Williams (2009) the authors investigate several hypotheses in close relation to their model. Their model introduces general person

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characteristics and instructional design characteristics to directly explain participation in voluntary e-learning activities. Barriers and enablers, self-efficacy and motivation to learn have correlating relationships in the model. General person characteristics are important to this model as it is perceived that e-learning requires more responsibility, independence and self-directedness on the part of the learner. Instructional design characteristics like content quality, instructional quality and feedback and support are key to participation in voluntary e-learning. Perceived barriers and enablers are moderated by self-efficacy, and instructional design characteristics.

While Hurtz and Williams (2009) equated the intent to participate with actual participation, Garavan et al (2010) distinguished their study by measuring actual participation rather than intent to participate stating “it is a stronger measure of participation” (p. 159). A survey was crafted based on the variables in the model and distributed. The study concludes with three contributions. It expands on the work of Hurtz and Williams (2009); it expands research on participation and design in e-learning and discovers the importance of motivation to learn in participating in e-learning.

The literature investigating participation in development activities starts with Hurtz and Williams (2009). They employ a strong research based model with a multi-indicatory approach. Garavan et al (2010) and Morrell and Korsgaard (2011) take the research further. These studies provide insight and practical applications to the training and development field. A focus on learning design and designing programs with the learner in mind will directly contribute to the programs reputation and therefore increase participation. Another practical solution is to make sure your training program is advertised and known. Even the best program will suffer in its effectiveness if it is not marketed and known about. Morrell and Korsgaard (2011) found that participation was reduced in higher managerial positions. An exploration of the higher

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managerial employee's motivations to not participate would help expand the issue and provide insight into possible solutions. Future research should explore additional variables and expand the research on program design. Another opportunity for research resides in the variables that influence the level of conscientiousness in an employee. As with motivation, conscientiousness plays an important role in the research about participation. Exploring the variables affecting conscientiousness and the characteristics of conscientious employees can provide valuable input for human resource development recruiting practices and hiring practices.

Conclusions

There are multiple variables influencing an employee's motivation to participate and participation in voluntary development activities. Focusing on the motivation piece, the current literature provides research data and recommendations on training program characteristics, individual characteristics and organizational or institutional characteristics. While no single author or article addresses a systemic view of the characteristics, the research on motivation as a whole does. Oshry (2007) and Senge (2004) both focus on this big picture view as a conduit to making better decisions, enriching relationships and forming new frameworks and ways of doing business.

Participation in training and motivation to participate are also heavily influenced by positions of power. Managerial status is shown to play a positive role in how training programs are perceived thus affecting the motivation to participate or actual participation. A manager's power and position coupled with trust and good working relationships allow them to influence motivation and participation and provide a way to "see thing in context" (Oshry, 2007). Managerial status is also linked to participation. Higher managerial status was found to negatively affect participation rates as their level of conscientiousness does not play a mitigating

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role. Oshry (2007) may refer to these employees as overburdened tops. The key is to convince those higher ranking employees that the system will suffer by not participating in development activities. Ultimately they may waste more time and resources down the line with inefficient processes.

Involving the entire system in the research allows for a deeper observation of the variables. Similar to Senge (2004) theory of U, The observation and study of managers, human resource development(HRD) or training and development (T&D), and the employees allow for deepness in understanding. Reflecting on the data and reaching a new level of understanding ultimately helps improve motivation to participate. The deeper understanding allows HRD and T& D practitioners to more easily act on these issues by responding as part of the system, proposing solutions based in research. The literature supported a “connectedness” between research and practice (Senge, 2004). Each study was based in previous research and studies were conducted in real world situations. The studies and models relied on the practice of voluntary developmental activities, taking their data from actual participants and non-participants of developmental activities.

Simon (as cited in Van de Ven, 2005) points out two kinds of knowledge: “(1) applied knowledge about practical issues or needs of a profession and (2) scientific knowledge about new ideas and processes that are potentially possible” (p. xv). The literature attempts to connect the two types of knowledge by proposing and testing models to assist practitioners in the motivation and participation in developmental activities of their employees. Morrell and Korsgaard (2011) used a person by situation approach to study the variable in context. While Garavan et al (2010) and Hertz (2009) relied on surveys to gather data. In all three of these articles connect past and current research to the current practice of HRD and T&D. These

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authors commit to the research to practice model and are not researching the basic science of motivation; they are researching for practical applications in organizations.

York (2005) promotes the idea of bringing “theory to practice and practice to theory” (p. 376). This can mean new interventions and processes and at times bringing new research into practice can cause resistance. Robinson and Robinson (2008) cite that resistance to participate may happen because of differing expectations. The participants in the activities and HRD or T&D may not see eye to eye or the context could be unclear for the activities. Given this resistance, the relationship may quickly become uncooperative, resistant or imbalanced. Oshry (2007) warns that resistant relationships have to be careful to not fall out of partnership and cause this imbalance. HRD cannot be solely responsible for the motivation and participation in development activities. Participants have to maintain an equal partnership in the relationship. Conscientiousness was identified in the research as a key to motivation and participation. That can be fostered within an organization by shifting the responsibility for participation in development activities to the entire system. Managers have to encourage and provide context, HRD has to develop quality programs and interventions and employees have to be conscientious enough to voluntarily participate.

This entire system approach is not limited to motivation and participation. HRD must continue with the idea that system solutions come from the system. That does not mean a one size fits all solution to issues. It means addressing the differences in status, education level, level of conscientiousness and modes of communication to name a few. This will ultimately raise the perception of the development activities thus positively contributing to the motivation and participation in them.

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Moving into the future, an organization must tackle a shift in their approach to developmental activities. They must address the modifiable variables affecting motivation and participation. “Offering training that develops employee skills is not good enough” (Van Adelsberg & Trolley, 1999), the training or developmental activities must take full account of the influencing factors of motivation and participation. These voluntary opportunities for development will not accomplish goals if employees do not participate in it. Van Adelsberg & Trolley promoted that activities should be linked to business strategy and goals. This process will help provide context and thus improve participation. The activities must also address the numerous variables encompassed by the entire system’s diversity. Shifting this approach can mean a change in organizational culture. Schein (as cited in Harrison & Kessels, 2004; McLean, 2004) outlined three levels of culture; Level 1: Behaviors, Level 2: Values, Level 3: Assumptions. HRD and T&D need to determine the level of change needed and not waste valuable time and efforts trying to reach too deep a level of change.

Human resources are the key ingredient to organizational success. Developing those resources requires an effective program of development activities that are integrated into a learning oriented organization. Motivation to participate and participation are two important issues to consider when determining training effectiveness. Evaluating the effectiveness of training and developmental activities should be broadened to include more than the formative and summative strategies measuring reactions, learning, and behaviors. Effectiveness evaluation clearly encompasses more as evidenced by this review of relevant and recent literature.

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