

Comparing Herzberg and Maslow: Work Motivation in Modern Organizations

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Abstract

Employee motivation remains a central concern in human resource management, particularly amid evolving work dynamics such as generational shifts, remote work, and digital transformation. Two prominent theories Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory have long guided organizational strategies but require renewed evaluation in light of current challenges. This study aims to analyze and compare both models to assess their relevance in contemporary organizational contexts. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was employed to examine scholarly sources from the past two decades, focusing on the theoretical structures, implementation practices, and contextual adaptability of both models. The findings reveal that while Maslow offers a tiered framework of human needs, its rigid hierarchy is often misaligned with modern employee preferences that prioritize self-actualization and purpose from early career stages. Herzberg's model, emphasizing job design and intrinsic motivators, is more adaptable but may oversimplify motivational drivers across cultures and roles. The study concludes that a hybrid motivational strategy integrating Maslow's foundational understanding of needs with Herzberg's focus on job enrichment can enhance engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Organizations must customize motivational practices using technology and employee analytics to align with diverse and evolving workforce expectations.

Keywords

Herzberg's, Human Resource Management, Maslow's, MSDM, Modern Work Environment, Work Motivation

1. Introduction

Work motivation is one of the crucial aspects in the world of Human Resource Management (HRM), especially in an effort to increase productivity, employee engagement, and loyalty to the organization (Nuryani et al., 2023). In the context of modern organizations marked by global competition, technological advancements, changing work patterns, and increasing complexity of tasks and responsibilities, the need for effective motivational strategies is becoming more and more urgent. Organizations that are able to understand and meet the motivational needs of employees appropriately will have a significant competitive advantage compared to other organizations (Petitta, 2007).

Work motivation is basically rooted in human psychology, which includes the internal and external drives that move a person to act (Osemeke & Adegboyega, 2017). Along with the development of organizational behavioral science, various theories have been developed to explain how and why individuals are motivated to work. Two of the most influential and widely used in managerial practice are Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Phiri et al., 2024).

Work motivation has long been a major topic in human resource management because it is directly related to employee morale, satisfaction, and productivity (More & Padmanabhan, 2017; Dewa, 2021). In the midst of increasingly complex changes in the work environment, including the emergence of millennials and Gen Z in the world of work, work flexibility, and digital transformation, organizations are required to re-understand how to motivate their employees effectively (Li et al., 2022; Alrawhani dkk., 2025).

In this context, two classic theories of work motivation that are still widely referred to are Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. Maslow's theory emphasizes that human motivation is based on the fulfillment of tiered needs, from the most basic to self-actualization (Wall & Stephenson, 1970; Hasan & Mishra, 2025). Meanwhile, Herzberg distinguishes between factors that cause job satisfaction (motivators) and factors that prevent dissatisfaction.

However, in practice, the application of Maslow and Herzberg's theories does not always go smoothly. Some organizations still use a one-way motivational approach and do not pay attention to the increasingly diverse needs of individuals (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005; Ozguner & Ozguner, 2014). In addition, criticisms of these two theories, such as the non-universality of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the lack of flexibility in Herzberg's models, raise questions about the extent to which they can be applied effectively in the contemporary work environment.

Based on this background, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis between Maslow's and Herzberg's motivational theories in the context of modern organizations. The main focus of this study is to assess the extent to which each model can explain and assist in the design of motivational strategies that are relevant to the current challenges and needs of the organization. This research will also discuss how practice in the field reflects (or does not reflect) the principles put forward by

these two figures, as well as their implications for the development of human resource management in the future.

By conducting an in-depth analysis of the theory and practice of work motivation, it is hoped that the results of this research can make a theoretical and practical contribution, especially in helping organizations design motivation systems that are more adaptive, responsive, and oriented towards sustainable employee development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Work Motivation

Work motivation is one of the important pillars in organizational behavior theory and human resource management (HRM). Etymologically, the word motivation Derived from the word motive which means a drive, reason, or driving force (Acquah et al., 2021). In an organizational context, motivation is defined as an internal process that directs, maintains, and intensifies employee behavior to achieve a specific goal. Manzoor (2011) explains that motivation is a process that explains an individual's intensity, direction, and perseverance in achieving work goals.

Work motivation plays a crucial role in creating a productive, satisfied, and committed workforce (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated employees tend to show high performance, be more loyal to the organization, and have resilience to work stress. On the other hand, lack of motivation can cause high attendance, turnover, internal conflicts, and a decrease in the quality of organizational services and products (Jonas, 2016; Mansaray, 2019).

Work motivation can be divided into two broad categories; Intrinsic motivation, which is the drive that comes from within the individual such as the need to achieve, job challenges, responsibilities, and self-actualization. In its development, many theories of motivation were developed to explain how and why individuals are motivated to work and contribute. The two classical theories that are most often referenced are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory.

2.2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

According to Maslow (1943), the motivation theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in his article "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943), and further developed in his book "Motivation and Personality" (1954), is one of the most influential psychological theories in explaining human needs in a hierarchical manner. Maslow divided human needs into five hierarchical levels, often depicted in the form of a pyramid. Here's the explanation.

The first is Physiological Needs, which are the most basic needs for survival, such as food, drink, air, shelter, and sleep (Ştefan et al., 2020). In an organizational context, these needs are represented by adequate wages, rest time, and adequate work facilities. Second is Safety Needs, which encompass a sense of physical and psychological security, including job security, a healthy work environment, and protection from threats or risks at work. Third is Social Needs, which relate to the

desire to be accepted within a group, establish social relationships, and feel part of a work community (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Kaur, 2013). The fourth is Esteem Needs, which consist of two types: esteem from others (status, recognition, prestige) and self-esteem (self-confidence, competence). Organizations can fulfill these needs through reward systems, promotions, and performance recognition. Finally, Self-Actualization Needs are at the top of the hierarchy of needs, representing an individual's desire to develop and realize their full potential. In the workplace, this can be realized through opportunities for self-development, innovation, and significant contribution (Sulistamata et al., 2024). Higher-level needs will only become motivators if lower-level needs have been relatively met. However, this theory also has limitations because the hierarchy of needs is not always linear or the same for all individuals, especially across cultures and generations (Ihensemien & Joel, 2023).

2.3. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

According to Spector (2014), he developed the Two-Factor Theory, also known as the Motivator-Hygiene Theory, based on research on more than 200 engineers and accountants in Pittsburgh in the late 1950s. This research showed that the factors that lead to job satisfaction are different from those that lead to job dissatisfaction.

Peramatzis and Galanakis (2022) divides motivational factors into two groups. The first is Motivator Factors (satisfying factors), which are intrinsic factors directly related to the content of the job. Examples include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and opportunities for development. These factors motivate individuals to achieve more and increase job satisfaction. The second is Hygiene Factors (hygiene factors), which are extrinsic factors related to the work context, such as salary, company policies, supervision, working conditions, and interpersonal relationships (Utami et al., 2023). The presence of these factors alone will not create satisfaction, but their absence will lead to dissatisfaction.

Herzberg argued that to truly motivate employees, organizations need to enhance motivating factors, not just hygiene factors. While this theory has made significant contributions to management practice, critics of this approach note that not everyone responds to motivators and hygiene factors in the same way, and the limited generalizability of Herzberg's study results (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

2.4. The Context of Modern Organizations and Previous Research

Modern organizations are facing various major changes such as digitalization, remote work (remote working), generational diversity and work culture, as well as increased attention to work-life balance (work-life balance). Millennial and Gen Z employees show different motivational preferences compared to previous generations. They tend to seek meaning, flexibility, self-development, and an inclusive work environment (Brown et al., 2011).

In this context, motivational theories such as Maslow and Herzberg need to be reviewed and adapted to the new needs of employees. For example, the need for self-actualization now often arises earlier due to the speed of change and the expectation of faster self-development (Nuryani et al., 2023). Similarly, motivating factors such as

work autonomy, digital social recognition, and room for innovation are becoming increasingly important. Modern organizational approaches to motivation should be dynamic, data-driven, and personalized. The use of Human Resource (HR) analytics, digital rewards platforms, career development programs, and work flexibility are key elements that combine the principles of classical theory with contemporary needs.

Susita et al (2020) assert that a theory of needs, such as Maslow's, can still be used, but requires adjustment to the changing context of the organization. Brown et al. (2011) found that in technology companies, Herzberg's motivating factors, such as learning opportunities and achievement, had a greater effect on job satisfaction than hygiene factors, including salary. Revelation (2021) in his research on startups (Startup) in Jakarta, stating that the most effective motivational approach is a combination of intrinsic (self-development, recognition) and extrinsic (facility and compensation) aspects. O'Reilly (1991) shows that employees in the digital era are more responsive to motivational systems that utilize technology (gamification, point system, feedback platform).

2.5. Theoretical Framework of Thought

This study compares two prominent theories of motivation Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory by focusing on several key aspects. It explores how each theory explains work motivation in both classical and modern organizational contexts (Upadhyaya, 2014). The discussion also includes how contemporary organizational practices apply or adapt the principles of these theories to align with changing employee expectations and workplace dynamics. In addition, the study analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of each theory when implemented in today's work environment, offering insights into their practical relevance and adaptability. With this approach, the research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the MSDM literature, as well as provide practical guidance for organizations in designing more adaptive and contextual motivational strategies.

3. Methods

This research uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method as the primary approach to analyze and compare two classic work motivation theories, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, within the context of modern organizations. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant scientific literature to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the topic under study. The research process began with a planning stage that included formulating research questions, determining literature inclusion and exclusion criteria, and selecting credible academic database sources. The primary focus of the research questions was the extent to which Maslow's and Herzberg's theories remain relevant in current human resource management practices, and how they compare in explaining work motivation in a constantly changing organizational environment.

Inclusion criteria included scholarly publications in the form of journals, books, proceedings, and research reports that discuss work motivation theories, the

application of Maslow's and Herzberg's theories, and their application in modern organizations. The selected literature spans a wide range of years, but focuses on publications from the last two decades to reflect the context and dynamics of contemporary organizations. Literature that was substantively irrelevant or unavailable in full version was excluded from the analysis.

The next stage was a literature search using structured keywords such as "work motivation," "Maslow's hierarchy," "Herzberg's two-factor analysis," "employee motivation in modern organizations," and their variations in English and Indonesian. This process was conducted using several major databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. After obtaining an initial literature list, a selection process was conducted based on relevance, methodological quality, and suitability to the study's focus. All selected literature was analyzed using a thematic approach, grouping research findings based on key themes such as the concept of motivation, theoretical structure, the strengths and weaknesses of each model, and the implementation of theory in organizational practice. The results of each study were critically interpreted and compared to gain a more comprehensive understanding. The SLR method offers advantages in terms of transparency, replicability, and objectivity, as each research step is systematically and documented. With this approach, the research not only presents theoretical explanations but also produces a synthesis of knowledge that can inform decision-making in human resource management.

4. Results

In this chapter, an in-depth analysis of motivational theories put forward by Abraham Maslow and Frederick Herzberg is carried out, as well as a discussion of how these theories are applied in the context of modern organizations. This study also compares the relevance of the two theories to today's work dynamics characterized by the speed of technological change, generational diversity in the workplace, and new values in work relationships. The main objective of this chapter is to identify the strengths, limitations, and adaptability potential of each theory in supporting employee motivation strategies in the modern era.

4.1. Theoretical Basic Similarities of Maslow and Herzberg

Both theories, both Maslow and Herzberg, have in common in their basic assumption that work motivation is closely related to human needs. Maslow viewed humans as beings who have multi-level needs that must be met sequentially, while Herzberg saw motivation as the result of two different types of factors, namely factors that cause satisfaction and factors that cause dissatisfaction.

Both theories emphasize that employees work not only because of external factors (salary, benefits), but also because of intrinsic drives such as achievement, sense of value, and opportunities to grow. This is an important basis for a human-centered human resource management strategy, which focuses not only on compensation but also on individual empowerment and development.

4.2. Fundamental Differences

The difference between Maslow's and Herzberg's theories lies in their structure and approach to needs. Maslow proposed that humans have five levels of needs that must be met gradually from physiological needs to self-actualization. Maslow's approach is hierarchical and linear, and assumes that the fulfillment of one level will open the impetus for the next.

Herzberg, meanwhile, does not divide needs in stages, but rather distinguishes between two main categories. Hygiene factors are factors that are not motivating when present but can lead to dissatisfaction when absent. Examples of hygiene factors include salary, work environment, and company policies. Motivator factors, on the other hand, are factors that can lead to satisfaction and increase motivation when present, such as achievement, recognition, challenging work, and responsibility.

Thus, if Maslow focused on the sequence of human needs, Herzberg emphasized more on the element of work itself as a source of motivation.

4.3. Application of Maslow's and Herzberg's Theory in Modern Organizations

In many modern organizations, Maslow's needs structure is still a reference for designing welfare policies and employee management strategies. The fulfillment of physiological and safety needs is realized in the form of adequate salaries, health facilities, a safe work environment, and job stability. Meanwhile, social needs and rewards are represented through team activities, organizational culture, recognition of achievements, and clear career paths.

However, self-actualization is becoming the most challenging but also the most important dimension in today's work context. Many organizations have realized that today's employees, especially millennials and Gen Z, place the meaning of work and personal growth as the main motivations. Therefore, continuous training, innovation opportunities, involvement in decision-making, and work flexibility are widely adopted forms of actualization.

However, criticism of Maslow's theory also emerges in modern application. For example, the assumption that human needs develop linearly does not always apply. In startup or creative industry environments, employees often seek self-actualization even before their job security needs are fully met. This suggests that Maslow's hierarchy should be applied flexibly and not dogmatically.

In today's organizational practice, many management policies are inspired by Herzberg's theory, particularly in terms of the separation between basic facilities and motivational triggers. Companies no longer consider compensation as the only form of motivation, but rather as a prerequisite for creating stable working conditions. Hygiene factors, such as benefits, work structure, and relationships between colleagues, are met to prevent dissatisfaction, but not as the main means of motivation.

On the other hand, increasing work motivation is focused on giving responsibility, non-material rewards, involvement in strategic projects, and work flexibility. Practices such as job enrichment, job rotation, and employee empowerment are concrete forms of applying motivating factors from Herzberg.

The main advantage of Herzberg's theory in the modern context is its ability to encourage the redesign of work to be more meaningful and challenging. This is especially relevant in today's world of work that demands creativity, collaboration, and innovation. However, the challenge that arises is when organizations misinterpret the hygiene factor as the main motivator. For example, companies that rely solely on raises to motivate workers, without paying attention to empowerment or the meaning of work, tend to fail to maintain motivation in the long run.

4.4. The Relevance of Theory in the Context of Modern Organizations

Modern organizations can no longer use a one-way approach in motivating employees. The complexity of work, competitive pressures, and the diversity of individual backgrounds demand a more personalized, flexible, and value-based approach to motivation. In this context, Maslow and Herzberg's theories remain relevant, but with a more adaptive approach.

Some important points related to this relevance include. Digitalization and flexible work demand a redefinition of security and social needs, as work relationships become increasingly virtual. New generations in the workforce also exhibit high expectations for the fulfillment of higher-order needs, such as self-actualization, even from the moment they enter the workforce. Furthermore, work-life balance and mental health are now part of the broader physiological and safety needs. The employee experience is evolving into a new form of motivation based on recognition and self-actualization.

Both theories can be used in complementarity to devise comprehensive motivational strategies: Maslow to understand human needs in stages, and Herzberg to design work that provides a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

4.5. Case Studies, Real Practices, and Implications for HR Management

Various studies have shown that the combined application of the two theories yields positive results. For example: Google Inc. applies the Herzberg approach through work design that provides freedom of expression, high responsibility, and recognition of achievements. Meanwhile, Maslow's approach is used through employee perks such as free meals, relaxation rooms, and ongoing training. Unilever Indonesia develops a talent management system based on self-actualization and rewards, while meeting hygiene factors such as insurance and work-life balance. And Gojek and Tokopedia use a combination of methods: providing non-financial rewards, freedom to work, and room to grow, while maintaining job security in the form of flexible contracts and benefits.

From the above analysis, there are several important implications that can be a reference for HR management practitioners: A multidimensional approach is crucial to work motivation, as motivation cannot be focused solely on one aspect, such as salary or training, but must encompass the entire spectrum of needs, from the most basic to self-development. Model flexibility is also necessary, as organizations must adapt Maslow and Herzberg's principles to the cultural context, age, and job role of each employee. Furthermore, work needs to be redesigned to be meaningful, provide space for responsibility, and open up opportunities for growth. Strengthening

organizational culture is also crucial, as company values must support the fulfillment of employees' social and self-actualization needs. Finally, ongoing evaluation is essential, as employee needs will continually change over time, requiring dynamic review and adjustment of the motivation system.

Table 1. Analysis Summary

Aspects	Maslow's Theory	Theory Herzberg	Modern Relevance
Structure	Hierarchical (5 levels of need)	Two factors (motivator and hygiene)	Need to adapt flexibly
Focus	Fulfillment of human needs	Job design and intrinsic satisfaction	Highly relevant for millennials
Excess	Comprehensive and holistic	Practical and focus on long-term satisfaction	Encourage value-based motivation strategies
Debilitation	Too rigid, not universal	Generalization of initial research results	Must be combined with a new approach
Implementation in organizations	To develop a well-being strategy	To redesign the structure of the work	The two complement each other

Table 1 compares Maslow's and Herzberg's motivational theories and their relevance in the context of modern organizations. In terms of structure, Maslow offers a five-level hierarchical approach to needs, while Herzberg divides motivational factors into two categories: motivators and hygiene factors. In terms of focus, Maslow emphasizes the fulfillment of human needs holistically, while Herzberg emphasizes job design and intrinsic satisfaction, which are considered highly relevant for today's millennial generation. Maslow's strength lies in its comprehensive and holistic nature, while Herzberg's is superior in its practical application and long-term focus on job satisfaction. However, each has its weaknesses: Maslow's theory is considered too rigid and not universal, while Herzberg's approach has been criticized for generalizing the results of his earlier research. In organizational practice, Maslow's theory is widely used to design employee well-being strategies, while Herzberg's theory focuses more on redesigning work structures. In the modern context, the two are actually complementary and need to be combined to create an adaptive and effective motivational approach.

5. Discussion

A comparative analysis of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory reveals important insights into how motivational theories can be contextualized in modern organizational settings. Both models emphasize intrinsic human needs as the foundation of employee motivation, but they differ in their conceptual structure and application. Maslow's theory presents a hierarchical

framework of needs, ranging from physiological to self-actualization, while Herzberg's focuses on the separation of hygiene factors and motivators, with hygiene factors being key to true satisfaction and engagement (Maslow, 1943; Galanakis & Peramatzis, 2022).

In practice, Maslow's model has long been used to design comprehensive well-being programs, but its hierarchical assumptions often fail to reflect the actual priorities of modern employees. For example, many Gen Z and millennial workers prioritize the elements of purpose, recognition, and growth at the top of the pyramid even though they do not fully address lower-level needs such as financial security or job stability (Ihensemien & Joel, 2023). This discrepancy suggests that Maslow's model, while still conceptually useful, must be applied flexibly to accommodate generational shifts and dynamic work environments.

On the other hand, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory offers a more pragmatic approach to job design by distinguishing between factors that cause dissatisfaction and factors that enhance satisfaction. Brown et al. (2011) empirically demonstrated that intrinsic motivators such as achievement, learning opportunities, and responsibility have a stronger impact on job satisfaction than hygiene factors like pay or policies. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) emphasized the need to design motivational strategies that prioritize personal growth, autonomy, and meaningful work as core elements of employee engagement in the post-pandemic workforce.

However, Herzberg's theory also faces limitations. The binary categorization of motivators and hygiene factors can be too rigid and may not apply universally across cultures, job roles, or industries. For example, in highly regulated sectors or traditional bureaucracies, hygiene factors such as job security or policy clarity may still play a dominant motivational role (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). This underscores the need for organizations to assess the context before relying solely on theoretical prescriptions.

Furthermore, Alrawhani et al. (2025) emphasize that the rapid acceleration of digital transformation, hybrid work models, and the emphasis on mental well-being have reshaped employees' expectations from their workplace. Today's workforce seeks a blend of flexible work arrangements, digital empowerment, and emotional fulfillment (Dewa, 2021). These demands often fall outside the original frameworks of Maslow and Herzberg, but can still be understood through the lens of self-actualization and intrinsic motivators. The challenge lies in translating these classic theories into actionable HR strategies that align with a diverse, tech-savvy, and values-driven talent pool.

As O'Reilly (1991) points out, the integration of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), feedback platforms, and gamification-based reward systems offers a modern way to operationalize both theories. For example, companies like Google and Unilever are implementing a combination of Herzberg's job enrichment principles and Maslow-inspired development programs to drive innovation, satisfaction, and retention.

These findings highlight the need for organizations to adopt a hybrid motivational framework that blends Maslow's hierarchy of needs with Herzberg's job design insights. This requires HR managers to dynamically assess employee expectations, tailor motivation strategies to individual and generational profiles, and

ensure that the work environment fosters not only retention but also meaningful engagement. As motivational priorities shift toward self-actualization, autonomy, and purpose, companies that successfully implement adaptive, human-centered motivation models will gain a significant advantage in attracting and retaining top talent in a competitive and evolving labor market.

6. Conclusion

This study explored and compared Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory in the context of modern organizations. The findings highlight that both theories place human needs at the core of motivation, despite their structural differences. Maslow's model provides a hierarchical understanding of psychological and social needs, while Herzberg distinguishes between hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators. Maslow's model is still widely used to guide well-being policies, but its linear structure does not fully align with the evolving expectations of younger generations. In contrast, Herzberg's emphasis on job enrichment and meaningful work has proven highly relevant in today's dynamic and innovation-driven work environment. Maslow offers a fundamental understanding of human needs, while Herzberg provides guidance on work design and engagement. Companies are encouraged to adapt motivation strategies to individual, generational, and cultural differences and utilize technologies such as Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and feedback systems to personalize employee experiences. Theoretical implications point to the need for a more flexible and contextual application of classical motivation theories, particularly given the rise of remote work, mental health awareness, and self-actualization-oriented work values.

Despite its strengths, this study is limited by its reliance solely on conceptual analysis without empirical testing. Generalizations of these two theories may also not fully capture the diversity of motivation across industries, regions, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the binary classification in Herzberg's model and the strict hierarchy in Maslow's model may oversimplify the complex and evolving nature of human motivation. Future research should explore how hybrid motivation frameworks operate in various organizational environments, particularly in digital workplaces and culturally diverse teams. Empirical studies using longitudinal and cross-sectional methods would be invaluable in validating the integration of Maslow's and Herzberg's principles. Furthermore, exploring how new theories such as Self-Determination Theory can complement classical models would provide richer insights for motivation management in the modern workforce.

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