

# Understanding and motivating health care employees: integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs, training and technology

SUZANNE G. BENSON <sup>PhD</sup> and STEPHEN P. DUNDIS <sup>JD, PhD</sup>

Assistant Professor, *Human Resource Development Program, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL, USA*

---

## Correspondence

Suzanne G. Benson  
*Human Resource Development  
Program  
Northeastern Illinois University  
5500 North St Louis Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60625  
USA  
E-mail: s-benson1@neiu.edu*

BENSON S.G. & DUNDIS S.P. (2003) *Journal of Nursing Management* 11, 315–320

## **Understanding and motivating health care employees: integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs, training and technology**

*Aim* This paper applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model to the challenges of understanding and motivating employees in a rapidly changing health care industry. *Background* The perspective that Maslow's Model brings is an essential element that should be considered as the health care arena is faced with reorganization, re-engineering, mergers, acquisitions, increases in learning demands, and the escalating role of technology in training.

*Evaluation* This paper offers a new perspective related to how Maslow's Model, as used in business/organizational settings, can be directly related to current workforce concerns: the need for security and freedom from stress, social belongingness, self-esteem, self-actualization, altered work/social environments, and new opportunities for learning and self-definition.

*Key issues* Changes in health care will continue at an accelerated pace and with these changes will come the need for more and more training. The use of technology in training has heightened access, faster distribution, innovation and increased collaboration. However, with this technology come attendant challenges including keeping up with the technology, the increased pace of training, depersonalization, and fear of the unknown. The Maslow model provides a means for understanding these challenges in terms of universal individual needs.

*Conclusion* How does one motivate employees in the face of increased demands, particularly when they are being asked to meet these demands with fewer resources? The answer is, in large part, to make the employee feel secure, needed, and appreciated. This is not at all easy, but if leaders take into consideration the needs of the individual, the new technology that provides challenges and opportunities for meeting those needs, and provides the training to meet both sets of needs, enhanced employee motivation and commitment is possible.

*Keywords:* adult learning, human resource development, technology, training

*Accepted for publication:* 13 February 2003

---

## Challenges in the health care sector

The health and human service industry is undergoing one of the most massive transformations of any industry in our history (Fitz-Enz 1998), due, in part, to mergers, reorganizations, cost containment, a changing work-

force and technological changes that are doubling every 3 years. In addition to the furious evolution of medical technology, provider demands are increasing, in part, because people are living longer (Lozada 1995). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999), the population over 95 is growing four times as fast as

the total population, and national health care expenditures are 50% higher than the defense budget; amounting to more than 940 billion dollars yearly. It is not surprising therefore that the *US Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook* found that there are numerous health care related occupations that will grow faster than the overall average workforce through the year 2005. This has become an eminent concern to health care providers as current deficiencies are placing an ever increasing burden correlated to the shortages found in a variety of related occupational areas.

As new health care reforms are implemented and standards are revised, the demand for continuous quality improvement and management in these settings will also continue to rise. Kover and Neuhauser (1988) suggest that given all the changes the health care industry will face, adapting the organization will be the greatest challenge administrators face. White (1998) posits that this sector will find an increased need for health and human service management and training, in part because of the increased need for: strategic planning and efficiency, the transformation to a market-oriented, consumer provider paradigm, and an elimination of the traditional hierarchy. Further, Shortell and Kaluzny (1995) suggest that change in the health sector will be a dominant theme into the next century. This will provide both opportunities and challenges for training to assist in the successful transition to effective organizations. It is not surprising therefore that the 1999 *American Society for Training Development (ASTD) State of the Industry Report* (Basi & Van Buren 1999) found that of those responding, the area training the largest number of employees was found in health care (88%).

With the challenges facing this sector, including advances in technology, the metamorphosis occurring in the demographic and diversity of the workforce, the restructuring, re-engineering, downsizing, and current events facing those in the health and human service sector, understanding the needs of the worker becomes more essential than ever to promote a healthy work environment. Understanding what motivates the individual as well as how the manager can successfully motivate the staff and the leaders motivate the entire organization is a question of increasing concern.

### **Abraham Maslow's model**

One way to understand, and motivate, the individual is to revisit Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

(Maslow 1954), which has and continues to be used as a means to assist in understanding human behaviour. Maslow's model has been studied in various disciplines: in business it is approached as a model for understanding motivation; in the social sciences including adult learning, psychology, sociology and education, it is used as a model for understanding the needs of individuals. Regardless of the discipline, it has been and continues to be used for understanding what the driving forces are, or what is important to individuals.

Although there has been considerable debate whether Maslow created a model or simply a means to explain motivation, for clarity, this paper will address it as a model. Maslow created a visualization of his hypothesis in the shape of a pyramid which is divided into five levels. At the bottom of the pyramid is the physiological level which includes food, water and shelter, the most basic needs for human survival. The premise is that unless an individual's basic needs have been met, higher levels in the pyramid are of no relevance, as survival is the most basic human component.

When the basic survival needs have been met, the individual moves to the next level and seeks safety, including freedom from anxiety and stress. Stress, unfortunately, appears to be a constant in our culture. Ashkanasy and Hartel (2000), practising consultants in workplace health, suggest that the work life of the modern employee is more pressured today than at any other time in the history of work. Therefore, although anxiety and stress may be a constant, we need to look at these elements on an individual basis and on a continuum from moderate to extreme.

Once the stress level has been moderated, or is acceptable, for the individual, and basic safety conditions, as defined by the individual, have been met, he/she would then look to the third stage which is identified as the social level. This area includes the need for belongingness, friendship and love. It is important to note that all levels have a varying element of depth for the individual; what is adequate or necessary for one may be inadequate for another. Thus, although we all seek security in relationships, the need for belonging will be greater for one person than it will be for another because we are dealing with individual needs.

Having obtained relationship/belongingness security, it is then possible to look to the fourth level, self-esteem. In this arena the individual seeks to feel competent, confident and self-assured. Finally, the individual, having met the needs of the former four levels is able to pursue self-actualization – or to 'be all that one can be'.

## Maslow's model in the business/organizational environment

Maslow's model is a constructive tool in understanding individual human behaviour; its use in the business/organizational setting provides a means to understand and affect employee motivation. In the work setting Maslow's model has the same five levels, but the definitions were modified in the following manner by Maslow himself and authors of numerous management books and texts. At the base, the first basic level that must be satisfied is that of wages. Maslow posited that if individuals are, in their minds, fairly paid, they will not spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about their salaries (Maslow 2000). Conversely, if an individual does not believe that he/she is being paid a fair wage, too much time will be spent contemplating this perceived inequity and other work concerns will not be given the attention that might be required. There is a correlation between the traditional model and that found in the work environment. Basic survival needs must be met with wages which in turn provide shelter, food, water, heat, clothing, etc.

With adequate wages, the individual seeks safety on the job. This includes not only physical, but mental safety. A secure working environment can also mean the decreased anxiety produced by adequate benefits, union contracts, etc. Training occupies an important position at this level because the worker consciously and subconsciously relates training to safety. For instance, a person trained on a piece of machinery is a safer worker than one that has not had the training and has been required to learn by trial and error. However, the worker also associates the willingness of the company to spend resources, time and money, on his/her training as an assurance that he/she is of value to the company. Maslow (2000) also suggests that... 'it is a rare individual who is completely secure in his work environment' but training helps (p. 2).

Individuals then move to the third level seeking social belongingness in the workplace. Anyone having experienced the ordeal of feeling socially uncomfortable in a work setting can understand the importance of workplace collegiality. We seek pleasant working relationships with co-workers, peers, and others in the hierarchy; we seek to find our place in formal and informal work groups. The social needs 'wax and wane on the strength of our personal relationships and our participation with others in the organization' (Maslow 2000, p. 2). Unfortunately, in the highly pressured environments employees often find themselves working in, making others socially comfortable or 'fitting in,' is

given less and less consideration. Training provides the individual with additional opportunities to meet people in the place of employment, to discover others with the same interests or job responsibilities, and to establish new lines of communication. Although much consideration is given to the technical aspects of training, the social element cannot and should not be underestimated for establishing firmer workplace bonds. Thus, although Maslow specifically related training to only two of his levels – security and self-actualization, we posit that training, especially in the increasingly technological realm that it occupies, relates specifically to two other levels as well – social belongingness and self-esteem.

Self-esteem in the organization is generally based on the individual's successful performance appraisals, incentives, rewards received and recognitions obtained, all which enhance self-confidence. As the individual obtains training, it presents an opportunity to feel and actually be more productive and confident in the work environment. In turn, as the individual's confidence level grows there is greater opportunity to obtain rewards, recognition and positive performance appraisals.

Finally, training allows the individual to move toward self-actualization; to develop one's potential, to learn new things, to take risks, and to feel even more confident in what one does. As the individual learns, and grows in the work environment Maslow suggests that, 'Duty becomes pleasure and pleasure is merged with duty' (2000, p. 25).

## Technology, training and the hierarchy of needs

Technology provides new ways to think about, learn about, and complete tasks which provides the organization with new opportunities. These opportunities, however, also bring with them new challenges. First, we must remember that individuals tend to resist change. This resistance can be attributed to a number of factors including a fear for job security, loss of power/prestige, and changes in relationships. Also, people fail to relate change to their perceived personal needs, or on a larger scale, to those of the organization. In the constantly shifting landscape that is technology, we have to be cognizant of these fears and failures. Maslow's model can, we believe, give us some much needed perspective.

## Security

The Training Industry Report 1998 (1998, October) found that 20% of all training was being provided by computer. One year later, more than 50% of respondents

to the same survey indicated that they used computer-based training delivered via CD-ROM, 33% use the Web, and 25% used the company internet. In addition, it is anticipated that by the year 2006, as much as 60% of all training will be technologically based. This does not mean that new technology has been automatically embraced by individuals. In fact, it has affected the individual's basic security needs (or Maslow's level two) in several ways. First, there is a basic security concern that new technology will reduce the number of employees required to complete job tasks, or that it will require knowledge and skills that the individual does not currently possess. In this latter scenario there is the perception that the lack of knowledge or ability to learn the requisite skills will place jobs in jeopardy.

Technology can allow for new and innovative ways to train employees and allow, once again, freedom from the fear associated with the technology. However, these new and innovative training methods also require new knowledge, including operating computers, using new software, navigating websites, etc. Workers may feel increased stress, particularly as the technological changes become more rapid.

Finally, while technology has allowed for faster distribution of training and communication to almost any locale, this too has created an enhanced stressful scenario. People are expected to keep up with the increasing pace of training or, in some cases, just the constant flood of e-mails. This constant communication often requires workers to respond even if it requires completing a portion of it from their personal computers at home during personal time. The supposedly more peaceful home environment is being increasingly breached.

### **Social belongingness**

The technology associated with new ways to work and learn also provides for advantages and concerns in the social needs arena. 'With the advent of e-mail and the internet, organizations are uncovering the benefits and challenges of reducing face-to-face communication, and expanding the boundaries of work spaces and teams. The ability to reduce in-person teamwork via electronic and web-based techniques has created a new aspect of the team concept – virtual teams' (Hagan 1999, p. 2). This virtual teaming provides numerous benefits to the company including the ability to construct teams without concern for where the members are geographically or organizationally located.

However, this new form of communication also brings with it new problems. People often find a lack of what Murphy and Collins (1997) refer to as 'social presence' in online communications – those intangible qualities present when people are face-to-face. And while the internet has increased the possibility of communication, it has also increased the possibility for misunderstanding; electronic communication eliminates eye contact, body language, voice inflection and other communication cues. These misunderstandings can lead to conflict and tension, and escalate, especially when there is no opportunity to see team members *in the hall* (Gould 1999).

The opportunities to participate in new and different work groups can certainly expand the employees' belongingness bases, and grant them the opportunity to work with and become familiar with others that would not normally be possible. However, within the health care arena this can bring together different professional cultures that may clash. 'The education and training of health care professionals shape their identities, values, and norms of practice in certain ways that may either enhance or inhibit effective communication and collaboration...' (Clark 1997, p. 442). They are often, 'Protectively housed, trained and socialized in separate schools and colleges, away from the "contaminating influences" of other professions' (Clark 1997, p. 442). This training and socialization provides a level of belongingness sought by individuals, but also creates predictable patterns in professional practice. The addition of new and varied work groups often takes the employee out of their comfort area into a new realm.

It is also imperative that technological training not be limited to the actual technology being used. For example, how does one ensure that their true intent is being relayed in a written electronic message? Certainly, in our global environment, it is important that employees are trained in understanding differences in communication styles, patterns, perceptions and cultures. If carried out properly, this training as the opportunity to ease tension and avoid conflict. Communication and cultural training becomes even more imperative when technology is being used. Finally, it is important that as organizations embrace the concept of virtual groups, individuals be provided with training in group dynamics, not just thrust into the process.

### **Self-esteem**

Group decision making in hospitals and by health care providers is evolving along with new technological methods of communicating. Shared governance in the

health care arena emerged in the 1980s and continues as a popular hospital-based, organizational design using a participatory approach to management and creating a decentralized environment (Genrich *et al.* 2001). The use of technology has enhanced communication and work groups and provided an even greater method of participating in this approach; it presumably allows more employee input into the decision-making process. However, research has also found that decisions made at the group level are often changed or reversed at a higher organizational level (George 1997). If employee decisions, ideas and concerns are not attended to, involvement disappears. It is not simply the decisions that are overlooked, it is the employee that took part in them, and they often feel misunderstood and unappreciated – their self-esteem is diminished. As *The Maslow Business Reader* asserts, individuals avoid: being manipulated, misunderstood, unappreciated, not taken seriously, and not respected (to name a few).

Another self-esteem issue related to technology is the concern that individuals will become numbers in the organization; individuals not known by name, or interacted with personally, but by electronic communication. Maslow made a prophetic statement more than 30 years ago, when technology was not yet advanced. 'How can any human being help but be insulted by being treated as an interchangeable part, as simply a cog in a machine, as no more than an appendage to an assembly line?' (2000, p. 58).

Finally, it should be remembered that, besides affecting stress levels, the perceived failure to 'keep up' with technology can create self-esteem problems. People tend to hide what they feel is their technological ignorance from others, even when they are given the opportunity to learn.

### Self-actualization

In no other area of human need does technology make more promises than that of self-actualization. Citing again from *The Maslow Business Reader* (2000), 'Think of the huge acceleration in the rate of growth of facts, knowledge, of techniques, of inventions, of advances in technology. It seems very obvious that this requires a change in our attitude toward the human being, and toward his relationship with the world' (p. 188). Technology provides everyone, that has access to it, unlimited means of learning, exploring, and developing; a way to become self-actualized.

The training industry reflects this optimism with its focus on education *vs.* training. The person should not

only be taught to perform certain job functions, or trained, he/she should also be educated, or exposed to learning that touches every interrelated part of her/his life. The whole person should be addressed in ways that go beyond pure job performance, but instead addresses life performance. This is evidenced by the steady increase in the availability of soft skills training, and a focus on the active learner; one who is empowered to choose the learning they themselves want and feel they need.

However, self-actualization offers its own set of challenges to both the organization and the individual. 'Life performance' is a complex and ill-defined issue with consequences that can often be nebulous. For the organization, addressing this issue with little clear or established direction could represent a huge expenditure of expertise and resources with no clear effect – at least no clear effect on the organization's bottom line survival. Additionally, while technology may offer much more access to education on many levels, the individual must already be self-directed enough to take advantage of it in a meaningful way. Individuals may need help in overcoming a long tradition of passive learning that they have become accustomed to.

### Conclusion

How does one motivate employees when so many are being asked to do more with less? The answer is, in a large part, to make the employee feel secure, needed and appreciated. If leaders, those that have the ability to influence the lives of workers, take into consideration the needs of the individual, the new technology that provides challenges and opportunities for meeting those needs, and provides the training to meet both sets of needs, enhanced employee motivation and commitment is possible. The Maslow model presents a means for understanding the needs of the individual and the worker; ever present and growing technology allows for new ways to meet these needs; and training makes the worker more secure, can enhance feelings of belongingness and self-esteem, and provides the opportunity for self-actualization.

### References

- Ashkanasy N.M. & Hartel C.E.J. (eds) (2000) *Emotions in the Workplace: Research, Theory and Practice*. Quorum Books, Westport, Conn.
- Basi L.J. & van Buren M.E. (1999) The 1999 ASTD state of the industry report. *Training and Development* 53 (1) (suppl.), 1–27.

- Clark P.G. (1997) Values in health care professional socialization: implications for geriatric education in interdisciplinary teamwork. *Gerontologist* 37 (4), 441–451.
- Fitz-Enz J. (1998) Industry change = internal change. *HRD/OD, American Management Association International* 1 (2), 5.
- Genrich S.J., Banks J.C. & Bufton K. (2001) Group involvement in decision making. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing* 32 (1), 20–26.
- George J. (1997) Nurses' perceived autonomy in a shared governance setting. *Journal of Shared Governance* 3 (2), 17–21.
- Gould D. (1999) The virtual organization (on-line), available: <http://www.seanet.com/%7Edaveg/ltv.htm>
- Hagan M.R. (1999) Teams expand into cyberspace. *Quality Progress* 32 (6), 90–93.
- Industry Report 1998 (1998, October). *Training* 43–76.
- Kover A.R. & Neuhauser D. (1988) *New Management in Human Services*. National Association of Social Workers, Silver Springs, MD.
- Lozada M. (1995) The health occupations boom. *Vocational Education Journal* 70 (6), 34–37.
- Maslow A.H. (1954) *Motivation and Personality*. Harper and Row, New York.
- Maslow A.H. (2000) *The Maslow Business Reader* (D.C. Stephens ed.), John Wiley & Sons, New York.
- Murphy K.L. & Collins M.P. (1997) *Communication Conventions in Instructional Electronic Chats*. Available at: [http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2\\_11/murphy/](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2_11/murphy/)
- Shortell S.M. & Kaluzny A.D. (1995) *Health Care Management: Organization Design and Behavior*. 3rd edn. Delmar Publishers, Inc., Albany, NY.
- US Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999) *1998–1999 Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Available at: <http://www.bls.gov>
- White D.B. (1998) Client and practitioners perceptions of organization development utility and effectiveness in health and human service organizations: a national study. *Organization Development Journal* 16 (1), 45–58.