



Advice to advance your career

CAREER COACH

JOB SATISFACTION

Are You Satisfied?

A new twist on Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps you understand what makes employees happy

by Ray Harkins

In an episode of the TV show “**Better Call Saul**,” its lead character, **Jimmy McGill**, asks his assistant, Omar, to “take a letter” as he dictates a handful of disjointed phrases to tender his resignation from his lucrative position at the Davis & Main law firm.¹ During a pause between Jimmy’s thoughts, Omar blankly states, “I just didn’t realize how unhappy you were here.”

Jimmy’s response, while puzzling and a bit comical, describes a concept key to understanding the nature of job satisfaction. He replies to Omar, “Not unhappy, per se. More like not happy.”

At first blush, this sounds only like an odd play on words. But research repeatedly demonstrates that the factors contributing to job satisfaction often are different than the factors contributing to job dissatisfaction.² In other words, the opposite of job satisfaction (or happiness, in Jimmy’s case) is not job dissatisfaction, but a lack of satisfaction. And the opposite of job dissatisfaction is simply a lack of dissatisfaction. Employees can, therefore, experience job satisfaction and dissatisfaction simultaneously, leaving them feeling ambivalent and disengaged.

Abraham Maslow’s seminal paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation”—in which he first published the now ubiquitous concept called the hierarchy of human needs—provides clues to understanding

this dilemma more fully.³ Although the validity of this theory has been critiqued and debated for seven decades, it remains a popular framework for understanding and discussing the factors that motivate people’s actions.

In Maslow’s hierarchy, human needs often are displayed graphically as a five-level pyramid with the most fundamental needs, such as sleep, food and basic medical care, forming the pyramid’s base and progressively more sophisticated needs forming each ascending level. Maslow concluded that as people’s lower-level needs are met, they are motivated to seek fulfillment of higher-level needs.⁴ Maslow also recognized that people may seek fulfillment at multiple levels simultaneously depending on their circumstances.⁵

In Maslow’s hierarchy, after people’s physiological needs are met, they can better focus on their security needs, which may include stable housing, a safe school and neighborhood, preventive medical care and other measures to protect themselves from harm.

After people’s safety needs are sufficiently met, they can better pursue what Maslow referred to as belongingness. These needs—which include acceptance, intimacy, friendship and trust—are fulfilled through personal or social relationships.

Maslow referred to his fourth level of human needs as esteem needs, which are broken down into two categories: self-esteem and esteem from others. Self-esteem needs include “the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom,”⁶ while needs related to esteem from others include recognition, appreciation and social status.

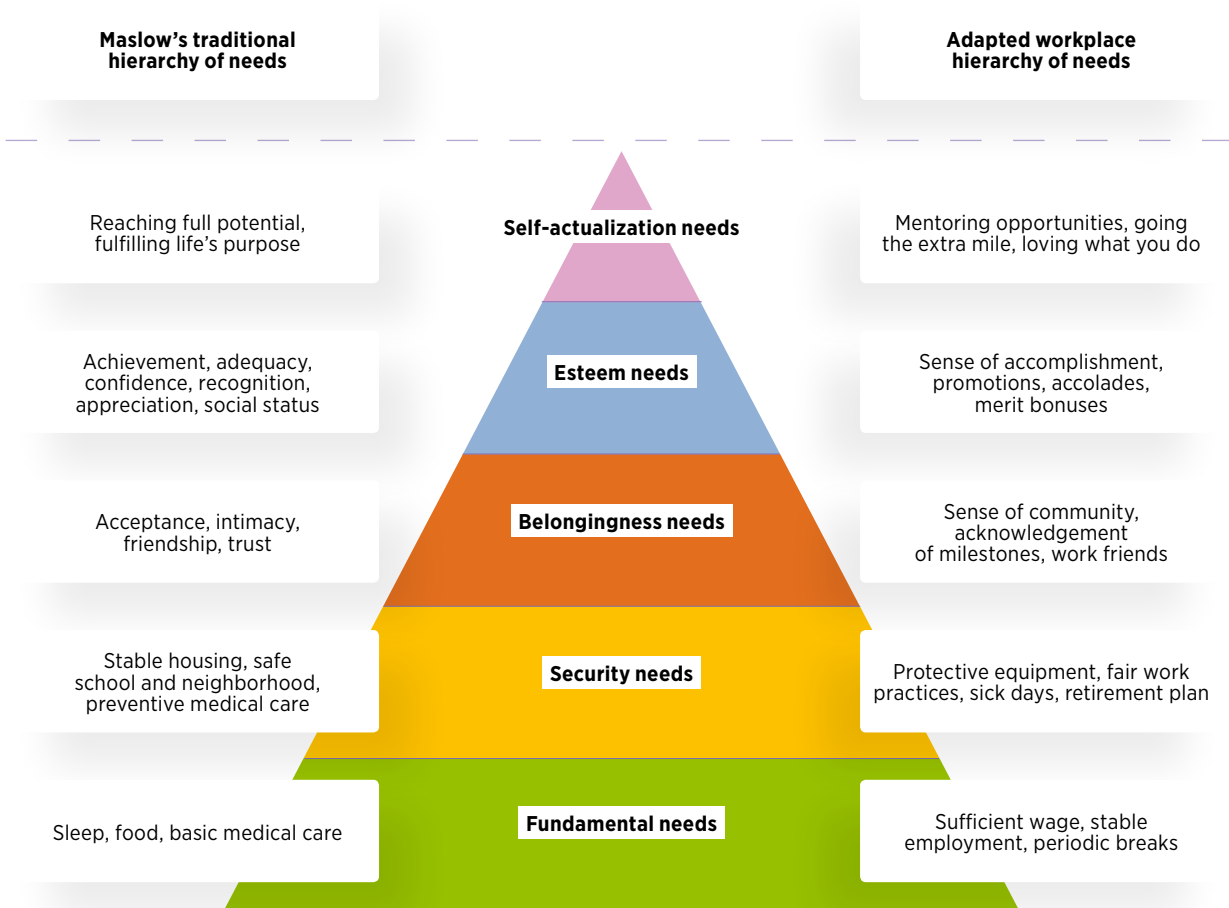
Maslow denoted these first four levels as deficiency needs because they arise from deprivation. When people lack food, for instance, they feel hungry, when they lack personal connections, they feel lonely and so on. Satisfying these lower-level needs is driven by the desire to avoid the unpleasant effects and feelings associated with their deficiency. Maslow referred to people whose needs were essentially met at these first four levels as basically satisfied.⁷

When people are asked “How are you?” replies such as “I’m good,” “I can’t complain” and “Well, I woke up on the right side of the bed,” indicate varying degrees of satisfaction among their deficiency needs. Similarly, when Jimmy told Omar that he was “not unhappy, per se,” he was indicating that his basics career needs were met—he was paid well, he enjoyed his colleagues and he was recognized for his achievements. But when he said that he was “more like not happy,” he also was indicating that he wanted more out of his life and career—something that would bring a greater meaning to his life.

Maslow referred to the peak of his hierarchy as self-actualization needs.

FIGURE 1

Traditional hierarchy of needs vs. workplace hierarchy of needs



When people speak about reaching their full potential or fulfilling their life's purpose, they are referring to their self-actualization needs.

From 1980 to 2001, the U.S. Army used the slogan "Be All You Can Be" as a means of appealing to the self-actualization needs of its potential recruits. In the film "Chariots of Fire," when Eric Liddell said, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His

pleasure,"⁸ he was speaking of a deep calling he sensed in his life. Fulfilling your self-actualization needs versus only your deficiency needs is the difference between feeling happy and simply feeling not unhappy.

Applying Maslow's hierarchy to the workplace

Acclaimed writer and poet Annie Dillard notably said, "How we spend

our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."⁹ Considering the typical person spends more than 11,000 days working, it's not surprising that Maslow's hierarchy also has significant applications in the workplace.

In a workplace version of Maslow's hierarchy, the foundational level of employee needs would likely include a sufficient wage, stable employment, periodic breaks and other

characteristics that make continued employment sustainable. (See Figure 1, p. 11, for a comparison of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the workplace hierarchy of needs.) An organization that fails to meet these basic needs would almost certainly have dissatisfied employees.

The security level of workplace needs might include appropriate personal protective equipment, fair work practices and a sufficient number of sick days. It also may include a retirement plan and short-term disability insurance. A lack of these basic benefits also would leave many employees feeling dissatisfied and likely looking for alternate employment.

Like its counterpart in Maslow's hierarchy, the needs found on the belongingness level of the workplace hierarchy are fulfilled through relationships with subordinates, colleagues and superiors. These workplace relationships can be a source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Organizations that hold annual picnics and acknowledge employees' personal milestones are attempting to foster a sense of community and meet the belongingness needs of their associates. But ill-tempered supervisors, micromanagers and incompetent cubicle mates alienate these same associates and can break down that sense of community quickly.

Professionals also may draw tremendous satisfaction through the fulfillment of their esteem needs. Professionals who master their craft and continually provide value to their organizations feel a sense of accomplishment, and that feeling in itself is a reward for them. Similarly, professionals may sense fulfillment of their esteem needs when their efforts are recognized by their employers through promotions, public accolades and merit bonuses.

The vast majority of professionals who find their workplace needs recurrently met at these first four levels feel a high degree of satisfaction, a low degree

of dissatisfaction and likely will remain with the organization for a long time.

For some professionals, perhaps those such as Jimmy McGill, this just isn't enough. They want their full-time work to reflect the deeper purpose they sense for their lives. Often, these are the professionals who mentor younger staff members, complete their tasks with tremendous integrity and go the extra mile without being asked. Organizations that employ these self-actualizing professionals benefit far more than they realize.

What does it all mean?

In Gallup's 2018 "Work and Workplace" poll,¹⁰ only 48% of full-time professionals surveyed reported feeling completely satisfied with their jobs. Therefore, the remaining 52% cope with some level of discontentment. For them, resolving these issues starts with identifying the specific bases of their dissatisfaction.

For people feeling dissatisfied because their job fails to meet their most basic needs of a steady paycheck, their solution is to find another job or take steps toward becoming qualified for a better job. For people whose job doesn't offer them the security they desire, consulting a career specialist may provide some needed direction. Often, a better understanding of the marketplace and the skills employers demand can lead to better and more secure opportunities.

At some point, everyone feels torn about their workplace relationships. They love their coworkers but despise their boss, or they like their supervisor but clash with someone in a neighboring department. Because relationships determine so much about the quality of someone's time spent at work, they often become prominent sources of dissatisfaction. Solutions for people struggling with workplace relationships are as varied as the relationships themselves. Potential fixes include befriending coworkers previously known only at a distance, developing a deeper base of soft skills

or finding new ways to communicate with adversaries. In extreme cases of dissatisfaction, the answer may be to move to a new organization.

Addressing needs at the esteem level of the workplace hierarchy may include taking a lateral move in the organization, furthering your formal training or pursuing a side hustle. It also may include soliciting specific feedback from your superior or presenting your case for a raise or promotion. Mid-career professionals often face this issue. They've essentially mastered their trade and no longer find it challenging. Yet something in them still wants to learn and grow. A new challenge either inside or outside the workplace often opens new perspectives.

While delivering the 2005 Stanford University commencement address, Steve Jobs said, "Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do."¹¹

This message came from a visionary who clearly loved his work. Not many people love their work, though. Most professionals work to meet the bulk of their deficiency needs, and seek that true satisfaction elsewhere. The rare few who seek to combine their working profession with what they truly love do so through careful reflection, vision and sacrifice. **QP**

EDITOR'S NOTE

The bibliography for this column can be found online at qualityprogress.com.



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