

# Chapter 1

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## *Motivated to Work*

Le travail éloigne de nous trois grands maux: l'ennui, le vice et le besoin.—  
*Work banishes those three great evils, boredom, vice and poverty.*  
—**Voltaire, Candide**

*Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.*  
—**Max Ehrmann, Desiderata**

I have often wondered what other people think about their work. A number of years ago, about the time I first started exploring the idea of professional excellence, I decided to carry out an informal and very unscientific survey in an effort to find out. I was in South Africa on an extended assignment. One evening, while sitting at dinner in the beautiful Eastern Transvaal with a few of my colleagues, I asked the loaded question, “Why are you doing the job you do?”

The initial response was nervous laughter. The team worked under me—I guess they were afraid of what the boss might think. Then one of the group—predictably the most extroverted and vocal member—said a single word: “Money!!”

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However, as the evening wore on and the atmosphere mellowed, we returned to the subject, and came to some more considered conclusions. True, we need money to keep food on the table for ourselves and our families, but once that is taken care of, it ceases to be the main motivation. We have a wide range of other needs to meet—social needs and personal needs—and our work environment addresses many of these needs. These observations in the Eastern Transvaal reminded me of the findings of Abraham Maslow.

## MASLOW IN THE WORKPLACE

Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology in the 1960s, is perhaps best known for his “hierarchy of needs”.<sup>1,2</sup> This is based on Maslow’s observation that the human is a “wanting animal,” and our basic wants can be classified in five basic levels (see Figure 1).

The foundation of the hierarchy—Level 1—is our *physiological* needs. These relate to the physical necessities of life, such as food and drink, shelter and clothing. Without these life itself is at risk, and unless we can satisfy these most basic of needs, we are not able to give our attention to much else.

Level 2 in the hierarchy deals with *safety*. This goes beyond the absence of physical danger. It includes a more general longing for comfort and security, like an infant resting in a mother’s arms—or a worker assured of a weekly paycheck.

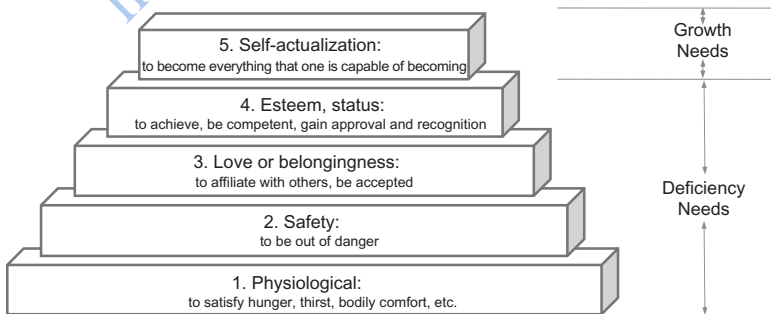


FIGURE 1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

At Level 3 we find *love*. This includes the concept of romantic love, but its scope is much broader. It also encompasses the sense of belonging and being accepted. In the context of the workplace we see this in the camaraderie that develops among coworkers, and the sense of corporate identity and pride that people often share in business or project groups.

Level 4 addresses *esteem or status*. It is not enough simply to be accepted by our peers, to be “one of the group.” People have an innate longing to be considered competent, to be admired, to be respected. Professional accolades, promotions, and awards can be a way of meeting this need. So can simple recognition of a job well done by peers, supervisors, and subordinates.

Level 5 in the hierarchy is *self-actualization*—that is, becoming everything that one is capable of becoming. We need more than just the respect of others. We need also to pursue our full potential. Once again, the workplace is an important part of this for many people. Professional development is an important vehicle that we can use to express our creativity, expand our capabilities, and grow as people.

In general, we fulfill the lower order “deficiency” needs first, and then our motivation shifts to the levels further up the hierarchy, ultimately toward the “growth needs” at the top level. However, this is not necessarily a rigid sequence. We can and often do function at multiple levels in the hierarchy simultaneously.

Providing for our survival needs and those of our families lies on the first and second levels of the hierarchy. We generally satisfy these needs with the material fruits of our labors, and this certainly provides one of the key motivations for work. However, we can fulfill these most basic objectives in any number of different ways, and the needs at Level 1 and Level 2 do not fully answer the question I asked in the Eastern Transvaal—how and why we choose our jobs. We need to look further to find a more complete solution to the puzzle.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Maslow’s hierarchy is Level 5, self-actualization, and this requires more explanation. Most earlier psychology researchers (notably Freud and his school) focused on clinical cases, and they drew their generalizations from these studies. Maslow observed that this necessarily resulted in a psychology of mental illness rather than mental health. By contrast,

what Maslow set out to do was to study the scope of human potential, and to do so, he sought subjects who demonstrated the highest levels of attainment—“self-actualizing” people. His list of subjects included a number of historical figures, as well as public figures of his own time, among them Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Albert Schweitzer. Based on his research (which included interviews where possible, as well as a study of public documents and historical records) he was able to determine characteristic drives or needs of these overachieving people, as summarized in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 Characteristic Needs or Drives of Self-actualizing People**

Truth	Individuality
Goodness	Perfection
Beauty	Order
Completion	Simplicity
Justice	Richness
Playfulness	Effortlessness
Self-sufficiency	Meaningfulness

Maslow noted that there was a measure of consistency between his findings and the views of certain classical Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, who defined “the good life” in terms that are similar to the list in Table 1. Moreover Aristotle, like Maslow, had an interest in the full realization of human potential. He taught that this could be achieved, together with true happiness, through activities that are “consistent with the basic nature of humanity.”<sup>43</sup>

There is also a significant overlap between Table 1 and virtues espoused within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Furthermore, and of great importance to our present discussion, many of the items in Table 1—Level 5 drives and needs—are major motivators in the workplace. We will examine this in more detail later.

## JOB SATISFACTION

The conversation in the Eastern Transvaal continued between mouthfuls of South African beef and Mozambique prawns, and the

subject shifted just a little. “So why are you in the specific job that you are doing now?” I asked.

With the more open atmosphere that now prevailed one of the quieter members of the group spoke out, summarizing his conclusions in a single word: “Satisfaction.”

The conclusion my colleague reached echoes the wisdom of the ancients. King Solomon (ca. 900 BC) admonishes us: “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.” (Ecclesiastes 2:24a) It also ties in with a great deal of contemporary research. For example, in a survey of chemical engineers in Britain and America<sup>4</sup> one respondent commented, “I’d work for free if I could afford to.” Another stated, “Interesting, challenging work is what makes you get up in the morning.” Money is still important, of course, and in the survey salary ranked third among the sources of job satisfaction, behind “interesting and challenging work” and “personal fulfillment.” Human interactions also featured prominently, both positively and negatively, as key factors in job satisfaction. The top seven sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction from the survey are summarized in Table 2.

More recent studies have identified similar findings. For example, *Time* magazine had a feature on the science of happiness in January 2005. This included an article on happiness in the workplace,<sup>5</sup> which referenced the following finding from a Gallup survey:

... [Gallup] says many companies are simply misreading what makes people happy at work. Beyond a certain minimum level, it isn’t pay or benefits. It’s strong relationships and a supportive boss.

**TABLE 2 Top Seven Sources of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction Reported by Engineers**

Greatest Sources of Satisfaction	Greatest Sources of Dissatisfaction
1. Interesting and challenging work	1. Low career advancement potential
2. Personal fulfillment	2. Recognition from management
3. Salary	3. Job security
4. Autonomy on job	4. Financial resources
5. Job security	5. Salary
6. Career advancement potential	6. Work overload
7. Recognition from coworkers	7. Lack of support staff

It is also informative to see what can cause dissatisfaction or, worse, serious psychological problems in a professional working environment. All professions have characteristic difficulties. However, in reality the list of woes for teachers, social workers, and pastors is not too dissimilar to the problems encountered by doctors, scientists, engineers, and other professionals. Amy Stevens reports on a study that identified a wide range of factors as leading to severe depression, anxiety, insomnia, and related maladies among American lawyers.<sup>6</sup> These include:

- ***Mismatch between personality and job requirements.*** In particular, “introverted, thinking-type” people are often required to do “extroverted-type” things, like generating business.
- ***Lack of feedback on work.*** This problem is particularly acute for junior lawyers in large firms. They are often required to do a great deal of painstaking work for senior partners without any acknowledgment and without ever knowing the outcome of the labors. We need to know that we are significant, and that the work we do makes a difference.
- ***Inability to separate self from work.*** If we are too closely identified with the work we do we tend to take any work-related problem personally. This can be very damaging to self-esteem.
- ***Poor public perception of lawyers, leading to negative self-image.*** People tend to internalize the qualities projected on them by others. American society tends to portray lawyers as vicious sharks, and that can lead to deep internal conflicts for lawyers who really want to be “good boys and girls.”
- ***Conflicting demands placed on junior lawyers by senior lawyers.*** The lines of authority in law firms tend not to be very clear. Often many senior partners make conflicting demands on a junior partner at one time, creating enormous stress.
- ***Obsessional detail in the work.*** Legal work can be detail-oriented and dull. This can cause severe frustration for those who practice it.

Next time you meet a lawyer, be nice to him or her. They have their problems, too!

However, work can also be a source of great satisfaction and fulfillment. It provides that satisfaction and fulfillment in a number of ways:

**Attainment.** The sense of accomplishment that we have when we can look back at the end of a day, a week, a month, a year, a decade or a career, and review with pride the things that we have done.

**Challenge.** The sense of adventure when we see daunting tasks before us and embrace them.

**Recognition.** The sense of personal worth, which is a vital contributor to self-esteem. In part this comes from the salary we receive, but it also grows with the trust that people place in us day to day as we work.

**Camaraderie.** The sense of belonging with the people with whom we work.

**Security.** Not only because our work provides income but also because it can offer us a consistent and stable environment for many of our activities.

**A creative outlet.** A way to express our imagination and abilities.

Work really does give us a reason for getting up in the morning. Many people decline rapidly after retiring, especially if they have no hobbies or outside interests to keep them busy. The explanation is simple: work—no matter how much we may complain about it—provides a major incentive for living.

Losing a job can be a devastating blow to self-esteem. As President Harry Truman put it, “It’s a recession when your neighbor loses his job; it’s a depression when you lose yours.” The reasons for this reaction to losing a job go beyond the financial implications of joblessness. If you ask most working people the question: “What are you?” or “What do you do?” they will answer in terms of their job or profession: “I am a secretary, an engineer, a dentist,” or “I work at a car factory, I mend household appliances, I drive a truck.” Losing a job, therefore, can lead to a loss of personal identity, because in a very real sense my job is what I am. Arguably it should not be so, but for most of us it is.

Work can also be dangerous, for it can become all consuming, even addictive. For some, work can become a hiding place, a means of escaping from family or other responsibilities, or avoiding unpleasant issues that need to be addressed outside the workplace.

Even for those who do their best to balance the needs of career and family, work demands inevitably intrude into family life in potentially negative ways at certain times. Extended absences due to business “on the road” during critical stages of family development, conflicting needs in two-career households, or simply dealing with sick children while holding down a full-time job: These are the realities of life. A *Wall Street Journal* article a few years ago described several examples of families dealing with these types of problems.<sup>7</sup> It concludes with the following observation: “There is, many would say, no right or wrong way to integrate work and family. There are only more or less costly ways in terms of career, relationships, or health.” We do well to pay attention to the problems and dangers, and to balance our career development with the other aspects of our lives. Sometimes we also have to make hard choices.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1.1.** Compare Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1) and the top seven sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction reported by engineers (Table 2). Complete the table below by matching each source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction against the most appropriate level in Maslow’s hierarchy. (*Note:* Some items may fit in more than one level.)

MASLOW LEVEL	SOURCE OF SATISFACTION OR DISSATISFACTION
Level 1: Physiological	
Level 2: Safety	
Level 3: Love, belongingness	
Level 4: Esteem, status	
Level 5: Self-actualization	

At which level or levels do the largest number of items appear?

- 1.2. Do you agree with the need levels that Maslow proposes? Is it always necessary to satisfy the lower levels before proceeding to higher levels?
- 1.3. What are the greatest sources of satisfaction in your work?
- 1.4. What are the greatest sources of dissatisfaction in your work? What can you do to correct them?

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