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Motivation and Career-Development Training Programs: Use of Regulatory Focus to Determine Program Effectiveness

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Abstract

Higgins (2005) developed a motivational theory that distinguishes between two foci: preventative and promotion. Individuals with a preventative focus are motivated to complete activities due to a necessity or expectation. However, those with a promotion focus find motivation from advancement, self-improvement, or social impact. Richmond (2009) highlighted that training is essential to the development of skill and competencies in complex and critical career paths. Project managers and consultants, particularly those tied to government projects, require a complex set of abilities in order to effectively complete projects on time and within budget. Without proper training programs (government training programs, corporate and contracted training programs, or higher education), these individuals are not able to perform at the highest level possible. To explore how a project manager or consultant's motivation can affect the effectiveness of training programs, this research study outlines the applicability of adapting career-development training programs to the learner's motivational focus. Responses regarding higher education were reliant on the participant's degree program, level of education, and delivery method.

Keywords: Training, program management, career development, regulatory focus, motivational focus

Introduction

Despite U.S. organizational leaders spending over $135 billion in training programs, most organizations are downsizing training programs to reduce operating costs (Kohn, 2009). Kohn (2009) also stated that training programs are vital to standardizing work processes for

organizations. The Partnership for Public Service (2012) revealed that results from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) showed a decline of job satisfaction by 3% in government organizations in 2012 while only having a 59.3% satisfaction rating for training and development programs. The general business problem is that any reduction of training programs can reduce an organization's work efficiency. The specific problem addressed in this study is that a lack of standardized training programs (government training programs, corporate and contracted training programs, or higher education) for government-focused project managers and consultants located in southern Texas creates nonstandard work processes that increase product end times and rework.

Literature Review

One of the authorities on motivation is Higgins. Higgins (2005) developed a motivational theory called regulatory focus that discusses how two factors play into each decision: prevention and promotion. Prevention refers to the concept of an individual acting in a way required for safety or security. Examples included a person performing a required safety training that is not appealing or having to pay a bill. Neither action is what a person wants to do, but the person understands that the action must be done. Promotion focuses on how a person acts when the activity has some meaning to the person. This focus includes enrolling in a university program because of an enjoyment in the topic or thoughts on how a degree will benefit the person long term. Higgins et al. (2010) discussed how this theory of regulatory fit also influences the interest in activities for individuals. The concept that the person may be motivated differently because of promotion versus preservation showed that the activity must be conveyed to match this regulatory focus.

Regulatory focus is how individuals focus their motivations based on the concept of regulatory fit. This regulatory focus of a person influences multiple characteristics and activities to include team dynamics. Halvorson and Higgins (2013) analyzed how having people mixed with different attitudes in different positions of power can lead to drastically different results. This concept ties into concepts of team building by Mankins, Bird, and Root (2013) as well as building teams for high performance. Moreover, motivation has a great deal to do with not only activities but also cohesion of individuals with differing motivational focuses. Thus, leadership must understand the motivational needs of employees to design a program that will be successful.

Motivation ties directly into perception of an employee. By using surveys or questionnaires, organizations can try to gauge the perception of an employee. Beausaert, Segers, and Gijselaers (2011) used data from this type of questionnaire to determine the development and validation of programs. By using a development plan such as this for an employee, organization leaders can see changes in the performance of an employee. Hameed and Waheed (2011) reviewed how organizations use the results of these types of perception surveys to develop strategic plans in programs within the organization. The connection of the two means that an organization can track the development of an employee and the motivation along with it.

Beyond helping an organization, government agencies require certain levels of training for certain professions or inherent job risks. Rodgers (2010) investigated the recent laws in Great Britain that required all vulnerable and high-risk employees to receive various vocational training. This training is required to obtain skills necessary for personal security. Hutchins, Burke, and Berthelsen (2010) found that most of these training transfer programs required trainers that provide exceptional training. The concept of having a competent trainer means the organization must have a training program in place to certify trainers. The need for competent trainers is important when leaders develop training program plans.

Overall, training programs are effective when the employee is involved, but the lack of written research on the correct way to implement training prevents organizations from standardizing programs. Common research themes are that employee motivation and involvement are key elements in training program success. Hardman and Robertson (2012) concluded from a literature review that successful training programs within an organization are private because of the desire for organizations to keep a competitive advantage. Freeman (2009) argued that training program success is dependent on the self-efficacy of a person to complete the training. Mayfield and Mayfield (2012) found leadership influence and self-efficacy both increase training program effectiveness more than the training program itself. All three studies showed that while organizational training plans are key components of the program's success, two of the vital factors to training success are the self-efficacy of the trainee and communication from the trainer and organizational leaders.

Methods

The study used a qualitative method and a phenomenological design using semistructured interviews. The purpose of the study was to focus on the relationship between career-development training programs and the motivation of employees. An interview script of open-ended questions was used to investigate the phenomenon experienced by the participants regarding training and motivation. The 20 participants in the sample were project managers and consultants from south-central Texas, all of whom have experience with governmental projects (Weide, 2014). Participants were recruited based on previous personal and professional relationships, some of which assisted in recruiting other study participants (2014). The interviews were carried out in locations accessible to both the interviewer and interviewee (2014).

Using a phenomenological design, two main components of the research design were the modified van Kaam method for exploration of experiences and the purposive selection of the participants. The van Kaam modified method allowed the clustering of similar topics and refinement of these clusters in order to create relationships and linkages between the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The purposive selection facilitated obtaining a diverse participant pool (Cilesiz, 2011). Using these two main components of the research design, the relationships between training and motivation were identified.

Results

Using the modified van Kaam method for coding and grouping themes from the interviews, demographic information and four themes surfaced from the data. Demographics of the participants showed a variety of project experience (Figure 1) but showed that many project leaders in this study having government experience lacked experience with nongovernment projects. The participants of this study were from various organizations, worked in various industries and programs, and had various experience and education backgrounds. Positions for participants ranged from project team managers and consultants to division-level managers. Even with this range of information, responses from the participants were similar for each of the four themes in this research study.

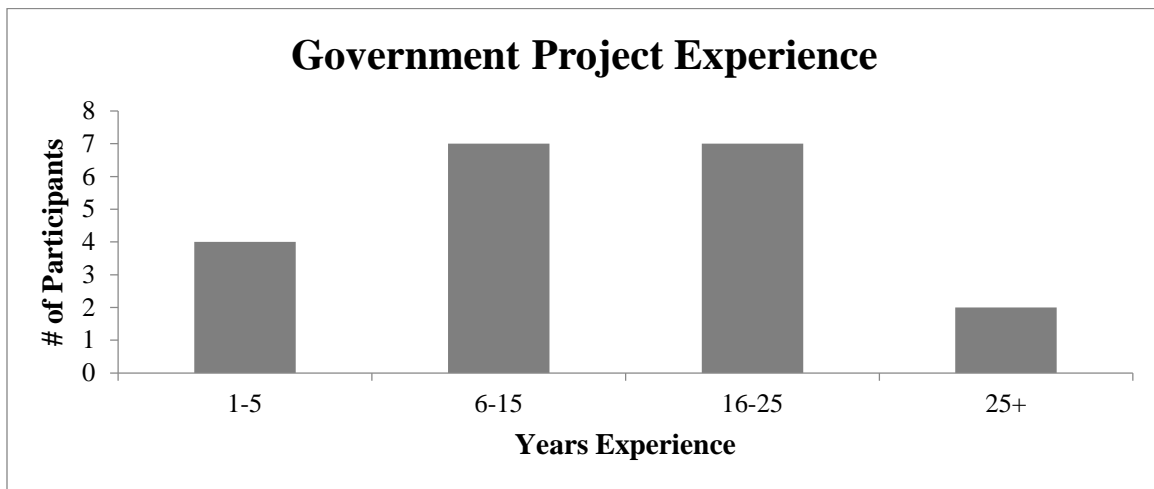
Figure 1. Government project experience chart.

Figure 1 highlights the distribution of experience that participants have with government projects. Experience is for any involvement in a consulting, project manager, or lead team position for the participant. The purposive sampling provided a good mixture of various experience levels to provide perceptions of training programs at every level.
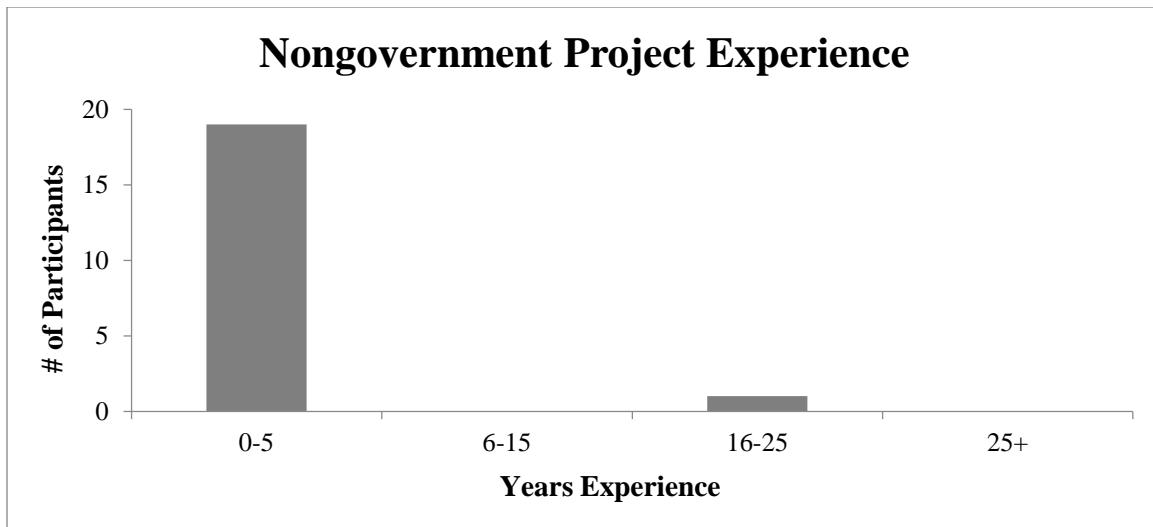
Figure 2. Nongovernment project experience chart.

Figure 2 represents the distribution of experience that participants have with nongovernment projects. Experience is for any involvement in a consulting, project manager, or lead team position for the participant on a project not associated with the government. It is notable that only one participant had more than five years of experience outside government projects. Of all participants, only five had experience in projects that were for a job. The other 15 participants led projects that were on a volunteer basis for various nonprofit or professional organizations.

While participants had a variety of positions and experience with projects, all participants had received two primary types of training: organizational required training and career-development training. Organizational training was typically a recurring training that was administered by computer-based training (CBT) programs or group briefings. Development training, however, could be focused on either the person's position or career field. Based on participant responses, hands-on delivery methods were the most effective in long-term learning and application post training.

Delivery methods also influenced how the participant viewed the training. Of the 20 participants, 19 stated that CBT or other mass-produced training programs were ineffective with multiple participants saying it was a "waste of time". Every participant understood the need for automated training due to costs of having the training completed by an instructor, but participants stated that training needed to perform a critical task should only be done with an instructor leading the material.

Each of the 20 participants expressed a need for interaction and purpose to adequately absorb long-term learning from training programs. Higgins (2005) explained that this is the promotion type of motivation in the regulatory focus theory and learning using this type of motivation has better results for extended periods after the training. Participants retained little information with training programs that were preventative in nature such as annual CBTs. This result also matched Higgins's theory that individuals do not fully engage in training while under a

preventative motivation type. Even with these confirmations, the evidence is that many organizational leaders still rely on a preventative motivation type for many training programs. This could explain why the study by the Partnership for Public Service (2012) showed only 59.3% of government employees had satisfaction with training and development programs within their agency and organization.

During interviews, participants were asked their perceptions of government training programs, corporate and contracted training programs, and higher education. Participants had all received each type of training, but not the same level of each or in the same industry. While corporate and contracted training program answers were similar, participants had various answers on the quality of government and higher education programs. All participants felt that corporate training had quality because there was typically a better understanding of the needs for training, a flexible budget to fund training as needed, and was more specific to the technical aspects of a job as a project manager or consultant.

Government training had the most different answers of the three areas of training. Ten participants felt that government training was inadequate or did not do a good job in providing learners with information with quality education. Major factors that people cited for this lack of quality included reliance on CBTs for delivery, outdated materials and information, multiple trainings due almost simultaneously, and lack of integration with corporate or academic programs. Participants that felt government training had good quality responded that the programs used contracted organizations to help develop the material, applied directly to their primary job responsibilities, had relevance to outside credentialing, and involved an interactive delivery model to include hands-on training and classroom instruction. One constant response for government training was that participants felt government training was good at focusing on regulations, requirements, and standards for learners that were more broad-based.

Higher education responses were reliant on the participant's degree program, level of education, and delivery method. Individuals involved with technical programs such as information technology or a focused business program felt more engaged, while participants with generalized degrees did not feel their higher education was relevant to the position as a project manager or consultant. Participants with undergraduate education only felt that the higher education was not as beneficial; however, individuals with any graduate education experience typically responded positively on how the education helped them prepare for leading teams and projects. Those that had some classroom experience, residencies, or team assignments to interact with others felt interaction with others prepared them for project management more than those that solely relied on distance learning programs.

Individuals of all experience levels, industries, and positions stated that effects on workplace productivity are substantial when poor quality training is in place. While factors of poor quality varied as shown in the third theme, all participants agreed on the potential effects on workplace productivity from poor training. Individuals responded that poor training often leads to the following issues:

- Increase in rework
- Increase in time spent on a project phases or tasks
- Decrease in worker motivation and confidence in work performance
- Increase in stress
- Increase in turnover

Based on interview responses, the findings of this study highlighted a concern from the participants that training programs have a major influence on workplace productivity and morale. One of the noticeable issues with determining training quality is the definition of training quality. Multiple factors influence the perceptions of training program quality. While these factors were closely related, an individual could weigh one factor more heavily than another based on personal experiences, industry, and culture. While these factors can influence what an individual perceives as a quality program, the effects of a poor training program on workplace productivity are consistent. So, these findings validate the second research question that the training program's quality can influence the workplace productivity.

Discussions

As shown in the findings of this study, workers on every level understand the importance of training in regard to productivity of an organization. The challenge is implementing training programs required for learning while not providing a low-quality product. Maddox and Markman (2010) stated that learning is influenced by Higgins' theory of motivation but not every learning program must match the prevention-promotion foci. Rules-based training is a program where the learner must remember and understand a concept that cannot change. Organizational leaders must have the global incentives of an organization that match the motivation of the learner for rules-based training to be effective. If organization leaders want employees to perform better with information-integration learning programs, then leaders benefit from not having the global incentives match the motivation of the learner. The benefit from mismatching motivation to incentives is due to learners questioning concepts in the training and being able to bring out their own ideas. Organizational leaders often do not expend the amount of effort required to create training like this and likely leads to a decrease in the quality of training.

Conclusions

Training programs are vital to an organization's success. Unfortunately, organizational leaders often look to training programs to help offset costs in an organization with reduced operational budgets (Kohn, 2009). This is despite the facts that training programs are vital to employee development and workplace productivity (Farooq & Khan, 2011). Findings from this study showed that not only does the workplace productivity decline from the changes in a training program, but employee motivation is altered as well. During the interviews and analysis of answers, the researcher found the following areas were highlighted as concerns:

1. Organizational leaders need to understand the needs of employees for incentives and training. Not understanding both can lead to a mismatch that ultimately leads to the demise in the program's success.

2. Organizational leaders must be willing to adapt to changes for training programs when possible. While government training is mandated because of regulations or direction of a senior leader, delivery method and how the program is presented to employees can change.

3. Employees must have and exercise the freedom to provide honest feedback on training programs and how to improve them. Typically, training in the classroom has feedback forms filled out while online programs do not. When a learner does not feel empowered, credibility and engagement of the training is reduced.

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