

Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to Employee Management: A Case Study of Google

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Abstract—This paper examines the practical use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory in employee management and emphasizes its significance in current research on organizational behavior. It employs a case study approach in qualitative analysis, focusing on three key levels of needs within a high-performing technology company: physiological needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs, exemplified by Google. This paper aims to highlight how employees can strengthen their organizational identity by achieving respect and self-actualization once their basic needs are satisfied. It was found that although Maslow's theory offers a useful framework for motivating employees and enhancing organizational performance, there are limitations to its application in today's diverse and competitive professional environment. Additionally, it is argued that leadership models should be integrated with classical motivational theories to better address the challenges faced by global organizations.

Keywords—Maslow, Google, organizational behavior, employee needs, qualitative analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

During the mid-20th century, the post-war boom in industrialization and urban development fueled corporate expansion, prompting businesses to become more interested in their workforce's welfare (Marens, 2013). As concerns about employee mental health gained attention, the role of psychology in addressing societal needs became more evident. It was during this time that Abraham Maslow introduced his groundbreaking hierarchy of needs—a pioneering framework for understanding human motivation that remains influential today. Maslow (1943) argued that psychological well-being is closely linked to meeting fundamental human needs. His hierarchy outlines five distinct levels: survival needs, security, belonging, recognition, and personal fulfillment. This framework suggests a natural progression where fundamental requirements must be satisfied before individuals can focus on more advanced aspirations. Maslow believed that meeting these hierarchical needs is crucial for personal development and mental stability. His model provides valuable insights into workplace dynamics, demonstrating how understanding these motivational drivers can enhance management strategies and organizational effectiveness. This analysis uses Google's leadership approach as an example to explore the practical application of Maslow's principles in corporate environments. Google has rapidly become one of the world's leading technology giants, and its quick progress is largely due to its effective use of top talent. The company not only pursues innovation but also creates a workplace culture where employees can thrive, placing equal importance to people management and cutting-edge technology. By creating an

environment that enables employees to perform at their best, Google ensures its teams are operating at optimal operating conditions (Duhigg, 2016). Google's sustained success has increased job pressures, offering a practical framework to examine Maslow's theory. This paper is divided into two main sections. The first section explains the theoretical framework—Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)—while also reviewing key scholarly works on the subject. The second section provides a case study of Google, exploring how employee needs are addressed through managerial practices and organizational culture. While Maslow's model provides valuable insights into mental health, its limitations become clear when applied to today's workplace, as it does not account for the social and environmental factors influencing modern management practices (Kanfer, 1990).

B. Research Aim and Questions

This study's aim is to explore how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory can be applied to employee management in high-technology companies. The study seeks to understand the hierarchy of needs at different levels within a competitive and globalized environment. Additionally, this paper includes two main questions:

What is the importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory in managing employees at Google, and how is it applied?

What are the limitations of Maslow's framework in the modern business environment?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

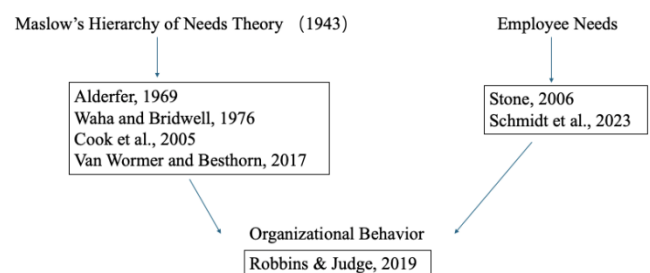


Fig. 1. Diagram of literature covered.

A. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory stems from the growing recognition that society often ignores mental health, and this neglect weakens an individual's motivation to pursue personal and professional success. Over time, Maslow came to understand that satisfying a series of increasingly advanced needs could enable people to reach their full potential and attain psychological well-being. Since then, his framework has reshaped the way we understand human motivation,

establishing itself as one of the most widely accepted theories of what drives our behavior (Alderfer, 1969).

Nonetheless, this theory faces some challenges. Scholars argue that human needs do not always follow a strict hierarchy (Waha and Bridwell, 1976); some individuals may pursue higher-level needs even if their basic needs have not yet been satisfied, and the model may have limited cross-cultural relevance due to its Western-centric assumptions (Cook *et al.*, 2005).

B. Application in Organizational Management

In organizational management, employee behavior and leadership models are central to management research. Organizations tend to focus on emphasizing structural efficiency and task division, such as Taylor's scientific management and Mayo's Hawthorne experiments. While these theories increase productivity, they often overlook employees' psychological needs (Robbins & Judge, 2019). With the development and integration of organizational behavior and psychology, scholars have started paying attention to how individual needs influence organizational behavior and have argued that Maslow's theory can be applied to organizational management.

Van Wormer and Besthorn (2017) note that Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory has broad and far-reaching connections across various social structures and can even extend to organizational frameworks. This psychological model is especially valuable in corporate and workforce research, offering insights that can improve management practices. The theory can serve as a practical tool for optimizing workplace policies and systems by examining employee behavior, psychological drivers, and motivational factors.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is depicted as a five-tier pyramid and has become a cornerstone of management thought (Maslow, 1943). The most basic level includes physiological needs—fundamental human necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing—that employees require to survive, e.g., Fig 2. However, once these basic needs are satisfied, employees will naturally seek other forms of fulfillment. The second level usually centers on workplace safety, which often relates to social protections like health insurance, retirement plans, and unemployment benefits. These safeguards, mandated by law, represent the company's obligation to provide essential benefits to employees (Stone, 2006). After meeting their basic needs, employees generally pursue meaningful social connections. To foster team camaraderie, companies should create environments that promote collaboration, eliminate barriers between departments, and boost team spirit. Simple initiatives like team-building retreats or casual coffee breaks can significantly strengthen interpersonal bonds (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023). After all, people tend to thrive when they feel part of a close-knit group at work. The next level is the need for esteem, which includes the organization's respect for workers' insights and contributions. This addresses their thirst for recognition, bolstering their feelings of accomplishment. Lastly, we have the need for self-actualization. Employees can assess their own worth in relation to their professional trajectories, while the company supports this by providing valuable resources, like career development programs. This, in turn, fortifies their

commitment to the organization.

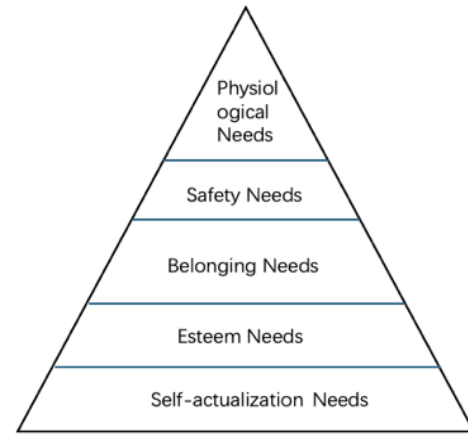


Fig. 2. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Adapted from Maslow, 1943).

In conclusion, when organizations fulfill their employees' fundamental needs, they see enhanced work attitudes, increased motivation, and superior performance among staff. Nevertheless, Maslow's theory does not apply to contemporary social team management. While motivation based on Maslow's theory can enhance employee efficiency, it affects individuals differently (Ihensekien and Joel, 2023). Maslow's theory does not completely account for the intricate dynamics of the corporate environment and the distinct needs of employees, highlighting certain limitations in its analytical framework (Maslow, 1958).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a case study approach in a qualitative methodology to explore the hierarchy of employees' needs in the work environment in conjunction with Maslow's theory. The study uses a single case study design with Google Inc. as the primary case. Moreover, the case study methodology is suitable for in-depth analysis of complex and dynamic social phenomena in organizations (Fiss, 2009).

Google has a highly internationalized network of operations around the world and a multicultural workforce, which is of special interest in terms of leadership patterns and employee working environments (Hamilton *et al.*, 2009). This study combines three of Maslow's representative theories of needs to provide an in-depth look at the work environment of employees and the limitations of Maslow's theories in the modern work environment.

The data were mainly derived from secondary data, which included Google's official website, HR policies, media interviews, and relevant academic literature. The integration of all the information facilitates the acquisition of more comprehensive information in the absence of empirical studies in the context. Whilst a single case study approach can be limiting in terms of conclusions, the integration and validation of multiple pieces of information can increase the credibility of the research as well as provide a foundation for future enterprise research.

IV. CASE STUDY: GOOGLE EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT

As one of the world's leading technology companies, Google boasted a workforce of 183,000 employees by 2023. Handling such a massive number of staff comes with considerable HR complexities, particularly when balancing

mental well-being with the demands of corporate hierarchy. Yet, despite these hurdles, Google has set the gold standard for employee management in the tech sector. Research by West (2016) highlights how the company has cultivated a unique workplace culture designed to recruit top-tier talent from across the globe. Google operates on the principle that exceptional people are the cornerstone of its achievements, treating its workforce as its most valuable resource. This philosophy extends to both the physical workspace and the intangible aspects of company culture. For this reason, three key tiers of Maslow's hierarchy—physiological needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization—serve as the framework for understanding Google's approach to employee satisfaction.

A. Physiology Needs

Google has never spared no effort to meet the basic physiological needs of employees. In addition to providing competitive salaries, there are more measures. They have carefully deployed and adopted an overall strategy to fit the core principles of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Employees at Google enjoy top benefits, starting with three free meals a day, and a variety of snacks, drinks and high-quality coffee on weekdays, not to mention a cozy afternoon tea break. But this is just the beginning. On Google's headquarters campus, the company's flagship campus, employees can use a state-of-the-art fitness center, stylish lounge, playroom filled with games, and even a resort-style pool for relaxing. This is not only a workplace, but also a way of life. Employees are completely free to arrange personal rest time during lunch breaks. Employees at Google enjoy unique benefits, including hairdressers, dry cleaning services and even massage therapists. Google is a pioneer in implementing flexible working hours policies. Employees can choose their own working hours as long as the working hours reach 8 hours a day. This working time arrangement is very user-friendly and gives employees space to arrange rest and free time, thereby improving their work efficiency. The core of human motivation lies in meeting basic physiological needs. Google has mastered this principle. It comprehensively meets the basic requirements of employees and allows employees to devote themselves to professional tasks. Dul and Ceylan (2014) suggest that the technology giants carefully crafted working atmosphere that ensures comfort and provides intellectual stimulation is a catalyst for innovation. Though Google's primary objective revolves around boosting organizational creativity and productivity, its approach simultaneously satisfies employees' natural preference for agreeable working conditions. As Tran (2017) observes, Google's remarkable achievements largely derive from its employee-centric philosophy, which has given rise to an unparalleled corporate culture centred on meeting staff needs.

B. Esteem Needs

Google places a high value on acknowledging its employees' contributions, a principle deeply embedded in its workplace culture and operational policies. For instance, the company fosters a transparent and inclusive environment where both staff members and clients are encouraged to share their ideas openly. This approach ensures that every

employee, no matter their rank, has a voice in shaping key decisions (Tran, 2017). Few workplaces truly foster an environment where staff feel empowered to voice their ideas and concerns, but Google sets itself apart by making this a cornerstone of its corporate culture. At their weekly team gatherings, workers are actively encouraged to speak up—whether to offer suggestions or raise questions—with specialized teams standing by to provide thoughtful responses. This level of commitment to employee engagement remains rare in the business world. Through its annual Googlegeist surveys (Isac *et al.*, 2021), the tech giant demonstrates its genuine dedication to listening to its workforce, treating employee feedback with the utmost importance and giving staff a real voice in company operations.

Zulfan *et al.* (2020) observed that Google fosters a workplace culture where employees are encouraged to grow from their errors rather than be chastised for them. The company prioritizes a mindset of experimentation—rather than assigning blame when things go wrong, the focus shifts to identifying the root cause and implementing swift, effective solutions. This approach strengthens team unity, making employees feel their contributions genuinely matter within the organization. By promoting a dynamic, enthusiastic, and transparent atmosphere, Google ensures its staff can thrive without undue stress. This forward-thinking leadership style is expected to attract more top professionals to the company in the coming years.

C. Self-actualization Needs

According to Maslow's Pyramid Theory of Basic Human Needs, Google is known for prioritizing meeting the basic needs of its employees. The continuous pressure of excessive pursuit of performance and strict performance indicators may hinder employees' efforts to meet their self-realization pursuits. Strictly following Maslow's needs the progressive level also has its own series of limitations. Employees desire to leap towards self-realization, give full play to their potential and innovative capabilities, while ensuring that their basic needs are met.

Although Google is known for creating a comfortable workplace and an open atmosphere, the company does not shy away from putting pressure on employees. They set high standards and strict requirements for employees, set challenging Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) every month and arrange heavy work tasks. This corporate culture of pursuing high achievements really puts employees under pressure and has an impact on their physical and mental health. A Payscale.com study shows that nearly half of employees leave due to excessive work pressure. Of course, completing those projects well may bring immediate rewards such as a raise or promotion to a senior position, but it also makes it difficult for employees to pursue their personal dreams and plan their career paths. At Google, team members have brought up at meetings how the intense pressure and expectations can make it tough to see the big picture for their futures. To sum it up, Google needs to beef up its dedication to its staff and fine-tune its human resources so that every department is properly manned. With these improvements, Google could truly become the golden child of workplaces in the eyes of its workers.

V. DISCUSSION

This study reveals the significance of psychological needs for modern business management and employees by examining a case study of Google's employee management and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Although Google meets the basic needs of its employees based on Maslow's theory of needs, this study still has limitations in practice. Firstly, Maslow's theory of needs must be fulfilled according to the hierarchy of needs. However, in reality, employees often do not follow this order. For instance, employees can still pursue self-actualization goals and aspirations even when they feel insecure, which is not entirely consistent with Maslow's theory. Secondly, while Google provides employees with good salaries and a positive work environment, the demanding nature of the job and performance expectations mean that the company still faces issues related to brain drain. This situation also suggests that the satisfaction outlined in Maslow's theory of needs alone is insufficient for resolving deeper management problems.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper delves into the application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in the realm of management, with a specific focus on Google's management practices as a case in point. Although the article comprehensively explores only three levels of requirements, it cleverly illustrates the relevance of Maslow's framework in the corporate world. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory has proven to be extremely influential in the field of management. This framework highlights the key role of employee mental health and emphasizes that companies must proactively meet basic needs to increase employee engagement and cultivate loyalty. Leadership and companies recognize the needs of a diverse workforce as critical. Instead of enforcing strict instructions, they should implement tailored strategies that truly support and empower the team. Despite this, when it comes to contemporary management practice, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory has many drawbacks. Future researchers could explore how Maslow's theory can adapt to modern times by taking a comprehensive approach from employees' perspectives to enhance the integration of Maslow's theory with management practices.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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