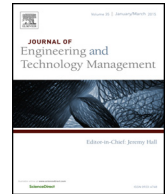


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## Motivation to perform in a multiple-project environment: The impact of autonomy, support, goal clarity, and opportunities for learning

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### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the impact of autonomy, support, goal clarity, and learning opportunities on the motivation to perform of project managers and team members in multiple-project environments. Even though the motivation literature is rather extensive, the motivation of personnel in multiple-project environments is underexplored. As management of multiple projects becomes very common in industry, the understanding of what motivates project managers and team members who work on multiple, simultaneous projects is crucial. Such an understanding should guide management to create conditions that support multiple-project management, reduce burnout, and help retain project personnel. In addition, the findings from this study extend the application of motivation concepts to multiple-project management and shed light on future research opportunities.

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## 1. Introduction

In our contemporary organizations, project personnel typically work in a multiple-project environment, in which many projects are simultaneously managed. In this environment, some project personnel are routinely assigned to work on multiple, simultaneous projects. This arrangement is typically a result of resource limitation either at the project manager or project team level or both. In the literature, the term “multiple-project manager” is used to refer to these managers and the term “management of a group of multiple projects (MGMP) is used to refer to such a management condition (Patanakul, 2013).

Working in a multiple-project environment can be challenging. For the project team members, in addition to the heavy workload and extensive coordination with various members of different projects, confusion over task priority often occurs. Such confusion can lead to stressful working conditions, work-related conflict, and loss in morale and productivity. For the project managers, the challenges from managing multiple projects include leading multiple teams for projects with markedly different objectives, parameters, or constraints; facing resource insufficiency and unsustainability issues for projects that are small in size and are of a tactical nature; and being forced to switch contexts from project to project

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repeatedly throughout the day (Fricke and Shenhar, 2000; Patanakul, 2013). These challenges can decrease the level of motivation of project personnel and, over time, lead to workplace burnout. That is, the well-known scholar Christina Maslach (1982, 1993) viewed burnout as a natural consequence arising from a continuous imbalance of forces (resources versus demands) acting on an individual over time, with progressively more calamitous effects by first promoting emotional exhaustion, which in turn leads to depersonalization, and finally, reduced personal efficacy.

Given the unique challenges experienced in the specific context of project-based work, surprisingly little research has directly addressed the factors that impact motivation (both positively and negatively) for managers and/or their team members. Notable exceptions include Dwivedula and Bredillet (2010) and Seiler et al. (2012), who suggested some important antecedent factors related to motivation. Although these studies have led to some interesting findings and offer support for the complexity of the challenge involved in workplace motivation for project managers and their teams, some unanswered questions remain. In particular, there is embedded conceptual confusion in the above-referenced studies where they define specific factors as “motivational” that have not historically been viewed as motivators. This includes factors such as job security, compensation, and general working conditions that have traditionally been classified as “hygiene” factors (“de-motivators”) in Herzberg's et al. (1959) two-factor model. Thus, this research conflated a variety of elements, some of which may be viewed as motivators and others that are not. Additionally, the motivational factors identified in these studies were not specifically applied to project personnel who simultaneously work on more than one project at a time. Given the increased use of multiple project personnel across a wide variety of organizations and industrial settings, it is fair to ask whether these earlier studies were sufficiently comprehensive to determine the causes of workplace motivation in all settings and for all project work conditions.

The objective of this study is to identify the sources of motivation to perform for project personnel in multiple-project environments. This study differs from other research on motivation in project management in several ways. *First*, it focuses on the motivation of *multiple-project managers and team members working on multiple simultaneous projects*, as actively participating in multiple projects is becoming more common in several project-based industries. While other, previous studies (e.g., Dwivedula and Bredillet, 2010; Seiler et al., 2012) have addressed project workers and motivation to perform, they did not specifically focus on the multiple-project setting. *Second*, this study focuses on the motivation to perform and measures this construct based on the perception that such motivation is an alternative state to the symptoms of workplace burnout (Brummelhuis et al., 2011). That is, the motivation to perform is measured based on whether or not the multiple-project personnel (managers and team members) are interested and enthusiastic about their job and are looking forward to continue performing their tasks. In previous studies (e.g., Dwivedula and Bredillet, 2010; Seiler et al., 2012), researchers did not measure the level of motivation itself. Their intention was to identify factors influencing motivation using data reduction techniques. It should be noted that the literature also suggests that “engagement” represents an alternative state to workplace burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2008) defined engagement as “an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that enhance one's sense of professional efficacy”. Conceptually, this poses something of a definitional conundrum, as motivation, in the social psychology literature, is defined as the process that “initiates, guides, and maintains, goal-oriented behaviors (Mitchell, 1997).” Thus, motivation is typically associated with both “energy” and “directedness”, similar to the Maslach and Leiter conceptualization. *Third*, this study focuses on identifying the factors predicting motivation using regression analysis. Even though we explored several factors suggested in the studies of Dwivedula and Bredillet (2010) and Seiler et al. (2012) as our conceptual foundation, we deliberately focused on their set of *motivator* factors; that is, for this study we eschewed use of constructs that have been viewed historically as hygiene factors mentioned prior. In particular, we attempted to understand the impact of such factors as work-related support from superiors; team member support; decision autonomy; clarity of goals; and opportunities for learning. Arguably, these factors can be considered as intrinsic sources of motivation for project personnel (see e.g., Gibson et al., 2012 for definition).

The results of this study should contribute to the literature by extending the applications of motivation theory to the multiple-project environment. In addition, the research results should provide meaningful implications for practitioners as the understanding of which organizational enablers are the sources of motivation of multiple-project personnel should help management create organizational conditions that support multiple-project management.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Motivation

A number of competing and complementary models of motivation have been proposed over the years as heuristics, models for teaching and learning, and to address the challenge of motivation in the workplace. Among the well-known content-based models applied in teaching and research are Maslow's Need Hierarchy, Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness, and Growth Theory, Herzberg's Two-Factor theory, and McClelland's Learned Needs Theory (see Gibson et al., 2012, for example). These theories seek to identify the factors that can positively affect motivation; hence, the term “content”. In addition, they suggest various sources of motivation, including a sense of belongingness, esteem, self-actualization, and growth. Alternatively, process-based models view motivation as a dynamic process influenced by factors across time. Among the more widely used process models are: Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964), Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), and Locke's Goal-setting Theory (Locke, 1968).

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