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## Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation – An Evaluation

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### ABSTRACT

*Motivation is the driving force behind all human efforts and is essential to all human achievements. As an aspect of management it occupies a very important place. Many theories on motivation in business management have emerged. Expectancy Theory as proposed by Victor Vroom is one of the process theories of motivation. It looks at the cognitive processes that effect motivation of people working in organizations. In this brief paper attempt has been made to look into this theory, bring out its characteristics, merits and demerits in context of business management. It has also been concluded that despite its weaknesses the Expectancy Theory is useful in many respects.*

**Keywords:** *Motivation, Valence, Instrumentality, Expectancy*

### OBJECTIVES

1. To spell out the dominant characteristics of Expectancy Theory, and
2. To understand the merits and advantages and the limitations and weaknesses of the Expectancy Theory.

### SOURCES OF SUBJECT MATTER

1. Books on Organizational Behaviour, Management and related areas,
2. Articles and papers on the Expectancy Theory of Motivation.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a theoretical research based on secondary sources. The nature of the research is descriptive, explanatory and analytical.

### INTRODUCTION

In any business organization motivation is necessary whether a private or public enterprise. Humans are basically psychological beings and need inspiration whether extrinsic or intrinsic for achieving organizational as well their personal objectives and goals. In the modern world when competition, both among the individuals as well as the business organizations has assumed such high importance, motivation has become all the more necessary. Hence, the art and science of motivation has emerged as an important part of business management. Dictionaries explain a theory as ideas that explain facts or events and general principles that relate to a particular subject. Theories of motivation explain what motivation is and what are its causes and processes.

Motivation has been defined and explained by many experts of management, psychology. The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology defines it as a willingness to make an effort in the pursuit of a goal.<sup>1</sup>

There are various theories of motivation. These theories can be divided into two broad groups which are Content theories that focus on individual needs and Process theories that focus on cognitive processes (that occur in the minds of employees) which motivate them. Examples of Content Theories



are -Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, Herzberg's two Factor Theory and McClelland's Theory of Needs. Examples of Process Theories are - Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Reinforcement Theory Goal Setting Theory, Equity Theory and many others.

In this paper the focus will be on the Expectancy Theory of Motivation which was propounded by Victor Vroom. It is one of the Process Theories of motivation.

According to Stephan Robbins Expectancy Theory is a theory that says that the strength of a tendency to act in a certain way depends on the strength of an expectation that the act will be followed by a given outcome and on the attractiveness of that outcome to the individual.<sup>2</sup>

The Expectancy theory provides a sort of a mechanism for finding out motivation through a certain type of calculation.

The way in which the Expectancy theory works is as follows:

Employees have personal goals which they like to achieve and for this reason they work in organizations. These personal goals can be fulfilled by organizational rewards or work outcomes. Therefore, the relationship between organizational rewards or work outcomes and personal goals is important i.e. to what extent organizational rewards fulfil an employee's personal goals and how attractive are those rewards to the employee. This relationship can also be expressed as the value the employee gives to the work outcomes. Secondly, organizational rewards or work outcomes are dependent on the individual performance of the employee. The level of belief that the individual employee has that his/her performance will result in achievement of organizational rewards/work outcomes is also important. And thirdly, the perception of the chances by the individual employee that personal effort on his/her will lead to high performance is again important. Therefore, there are four variables for an employee that matter him/her in motivation. These variables are:

1. Individual effort
2. Individual performance
3. Organizational rewards/work outcomes
4. Personal goals

Similarly, there are three relationships based on these variables:

**1. Relationship between Efforts and Performance. This is known as Expectancy (E).**

Expectancy explains the subjective probability of the effort resulting in an outcome (called the first level outcome).<sup>3</sup>

The value of expectancy will vary between 0 and 1. 0 level of expectancy means that our maximum effort will also not result in any change in performance. In other words the probability of improvement in performance is nil. An expectancy of the level of 1 means that our effort will lead to highly successful or the best performance. In other words the probability of improvement is 1.

**2. Relationship between Performance and Rewards/Work Outcomes. This relationship is called Instrumentality (I)**

The instrumentality is the perception of an employee of the probability that performance will lead to organizational rewards or outcomes like superior salary, bonuses, promotion etc.

The value of instrumentality is also between 0 and 1.

According to Fred Luthans, another major input into the valence is the *instrumentality* of the first level outcome in obtaining a desired second level outcome.<sup>4</sup>

For example an employee would be motivated towards achieving better results or superior performance because of desire of getting higher bonuses. The better results or superior performance or the first level outcome will therefore be instrumental in getting higher bonuses or a second level outcome.



### 3. Relationship between Rewards/Work Outcomes and Personal goals. This is known as Valence (V)

The valence measures the attractiveness, preference, value or the liking of the rewards or work outcomes for the employee. Its value can be from -1 to +1.

The Valence of an outcome to a person is a monotonically increasing function of the algebraic sum of the products of the valences of all other outcomes and his conceptions of its instrumentality for the attainment of these other outcomes. (Vroom 1964, 17)<sup>5</sup>

Work outcomes can be stress or fatigue. But they can also be pay raise or promotion. Stress or fatigue can have somewhat negative valences but pay raise or promotion can have strongly positive valences. But for motivation it is important that sum total of valences must be positive.

The Valence may vary from one person to another person.

Therefore, The expectancy theory says that:

$$\text{Effort or motivation} = E \times I \times V$$

Further, in order to understand the Expectancy theory better let us look at some combinations of *valence, expectancy and instrumentality* and the resultant motivations from these combinations.

SITUATION	VALENCE	EXPECTANCY	INSTRUMENTALITY	MOTIVATION
1	High positive	High	High	Strong Motivation
2	High positive	High	Low	Moderate Motivation
3	High positive	Low	High	Moderate Motivation
4	High positive	Low	Low	Weak Motivation
5	High negative	Low	Low	Weak Avoidance
6	High negative	High	Low	Moderate Avoidance
7	High negative	Low	High	Moderate Avoidance
8	High negative	High	High	Strong Avoidance

Source: Newstrom John W, Davis Keith, *Organizational Behavior, Human Behaviour at Work, Tenth Edition, Tata McGraw Hill Company New Delhi 1999, p. 148*

The table given above is self-explanatory. Thus, it is obvious that motivation is a result of high levels of expectancy, instrumentality and valence. If any of these is zero the motivation will also be zero.

### NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EXPECTANCY THEORY

The Expectancy Theory of motivation as developed by Victor Vroom is a process theory of motivation and it finds an important place in the literature of motivational theories. The Expectancy Theory looks at motivation in a more comprehensive and realistic than some of the other theories. Although it is a more complex theory of motivation, it is based on common sense psychology of employees and says that they will be motivated to act when there is an expectancy – their behaviour can result in achievement of desired outcomes.

Underpinning expectancy theory is perception and the anticipation of the likely consequences of behaviour. Individuals will aim to predict what consequences of their action may be. <sup>6</sup>

In simpler words the Expectancy Theory can predict if an employee will work for extra hours for career advancement, maintain superior inter-personal relations, project a more ethical image and do similar other things.

The theory emphasizes some very important aspects or variables of management that are efforts, performance, rewards and personal goals. It establishes relationships between effort – performance – rewards and personal goals and tries to synthesize all these into one theory of motivation.

It provides a sort of quantitative formula to finding out the motivation of employees.



It lays emphasis on the value of individual perceptions of what the reality is in the process of motivation.

It focuses on utilitarianism (or hedonism), as the goal of the employee is to maximize advantage/self-interest/pleasure and avoid negative consequences/pain.

Expectancy theory also implies that job satisfaction results from superior performance and not the other way round.

The Expectancy theory is based on the Contingency Model and it recognizes that all employees are not motivated by the same things and in the same way.

### **MERITS OF THE THEORY**

Many experts in the field of organizational behaviour hold the view that Expectancy theory is one of the most acceptable theories of motivation and there is substantial evidence to support the theory.

Numerous studies have been done to test the accuracy of Expectancy Theory in predicting employee behaviour and direct tests have been generally supportive.<sup>7</sup>

The managers can be benefitted from the expectancy theory as it helps them to understand the psychological processes that cause motivation. The thinking, perceptions, beliefs, estimates of chances and probabilities and other such factors of employees strongly influence their motivation, performance and behaviour. It makes the process of understanding the organizational behaviour easier.

The Expectancy Theory seems to be intuitively appealing and is based on common sense. It explains the gamut of motivation by breaking it down into separately recognizable stages. It brings forward the linkages between efforts and performance, performance and rewards and rewards and personal goals.

Therefore, the managers can create a work environment, climate and culture that will increase the motivation levels of employees by understanding the factors that motivate and demotivate individual employees.

The model reflects Theory Y assumptions about people as capable individuals and in this way values human dignity.<sup>8</sup>

The Expectancy Theory is more scientific than some other theories on motivation. It explains many of the phenomenon related to employee efforts, work performance, employee motivation etc. that are observed in organizations.

If organizations actually rewarded individuals for performance rather than seniority, effort, skill level, and job difficulty, expectancy theory might be much more valid. However, rather than invalidating it, this criticism can explain why a significant segment of the workforce exerts low effort on the job.<sup>9</sup>

According to Koontz and Weihrich, the expectancy theory recognizes the importance of various individual needs and motivations. It thus avoids some of the simplistic features of Maslow and Herzberg approaches. It does seem more realistic. It helps to harmonize individual goal with organizational objectives. And it is consistent with the system of managing by objectives.<sup>10</sup>

Another important aspect of this theory is that it understands the subjective differences that cause differences in motivation of different individuals.



Expectancy theory does not specify exactly which rewards will motivate particular groups of workers. In this sense, the theory allows for the fact that the rewards and their link with performance are likely to be seen as quite different in different cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Managers who have applied this theory have generally been positive about the practical utility of this theory.

According to Cole and Kelly, it has led to improvements in work redesign, where emphasis has been laid on intrinsic job factors, such as variety autonomy, task identity and feedback.<sup>12</sup>

“It is of value in understanding organizational behaviour. It can clarify the relationship between individual and organizational goals. .... The VIE theory recognizes the complexities of motivation”.....<sup>13</sup>

Expectancy theory allows for certain dynamic features of people’s makeups and it implies that managers must pay attention simultaneously to a number of factors in dealing with employees.<sup>14</sup>

According to some experts this theory will work better in case of higher level employees and in case of major and more complex job-related decisions.

### **WEAKNESSES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE THEORY**

Expectancy theory is not complete and all comprehensive. Like all other theories it also has a point of view and an angle. But it is better on many accounts and more realistic than many other theories of motivation. Managers may not rely only on the Expectancy Theory alone and use other theories as well, yet it is one of the most important theories of motivation. We must also understand that all theories in social sciences are limited and the Expectancy Theory is no exception. The value of a theory lies in its ability to explain with high probability what it purports to explain. It must also be understood that human nature, behaviour, attitudes and of course motivation are more subjective than objective and can never be completely objectified or theorized. Therefore all theories of motivation suffer from this limitation.

Again the theory is complicated and involves many variables. Practical applicability of the theory therefore might be a little suspect. In fact a few experts believe that complexity of the theory makes it difficult not only to test but also to implement.

All employees may not have the time, willingness, favourable situation, resources or even the adequate ability to calculate motivation in the way this theory assumes.

Similarly, the managers also may be lacking one or more of the above parameters to take a decision of what motivates a particular employee.

Quantitative measures of expectancy, instrumentality and valence that are suggested in the theory may not at times be possible or may be too difficult to calculate. Also whether the formula suggested for motivation can in realistic terms calculate and be applied to motivation is a subject of controversy.

Shermerhorn and Hunt are of the opinion that although the theory has received substantial support, specific details, such as the operation of the multiplier effect, remain subject to some question.<sup>15</sup>

Experts have also suggested that reliable measures of valence, expectancy and instrumentality need to be developed.<sup>16</sup>

Some critics suggest it has only limited use and is more valid where individuals clearly perceive effort– performance and performance–reward linkages. Because few individuals do, the theory tends to be idealistic.<sup>17</sup>



“It does not provide specific solutions to motivational problems. ....the model also assumes..... that people are rational and logically calculating. Such an assumption may be too idealistic..... The expectancy model attempts only to mirror the complex motivational process. It does not attempt how motivational decisions are actually made”.....<sup>18</sup>

On similar lines it can also be said that all motivational decisions that individuals take are not as exact or as conscious as this theory would like us to believe.

The model faces a problem when the same incentives are given to different employees who may have different reasons for superior performance.

The theory also seems lacking when it fails to come to grips with the fact that some employees may be more interested in intrinsic rewards and not extrinsic rewards.

Another potential weakness of the expectancy theory is that it assumes all necessities are in place, which is not always the case. Employees need to have the ability, the resources and the opportunity to perform their job well. An example of this would be the role genetics can play as a biological limiting factor of performance (Walker, 2003).<sup>19</sup>

According to some experts this theory will not be very fruitful in predicting the motivation of employees in simpler, typical, routinized and lower level jobs and employees in organizations.

Other experts believe that this theory might work better in some cultures and countries than in others.

Research has suggested that Expectancy Theory is more likely to explain motivation in United States than in other countries. People from the US tend to be very goal oriented and tend to think they can influence their own success. But different patterns may exist in different countries.<sup>20</sup>

Questions have also been raised regarding the hedonistic assumptions underlying the Expectancy Theory and their validity and applicability.

## CONCLUSION

Attempts to validate the Expectancy Theory have been complicated by methodological criterion and measurement problems. As a result many published studies that purport to support or negate the theory must be viewed with caution.<sup>21</sup>

Mitchell (1974) in his comprehensive review of the expectancy theory, suggests that the relationship suggested in the expectancy model are not clearly understood and that greater understanding of the underlying theoretical components is required.<sup>22</sup>

If organizations actually rewarded individuals for performance rather than according to such criteria as seniority, effort, skill level and job difficulty, then the theory's validity might be considerably greater.<sup>23</sup>

Managers also must take account of the fact that people and their thoughts, feelings behaviour and motivators change with time and experience. The same factors or goals that motivate a person today may not motivate him/her at some other time in the future.

Many updations and improvements in the Expectancy theory have been introduced since it was proposed by Victor Vroom in 1964. One of these models is the Lawler's Model of the Expectancy Theory.

Edward Lawler claims that the simplicity of expectancy theory is deceptive because it assumes that if an employer makes a reward, such as a financial bonus or promotion, enticing enough, employees will increase their productivity to obtain the reward.<sup>24</sup>

In a chapter entitled "On the Origins of Expectancy Theory" published in *Great Minds in Management* by Ken G. Smith and Michael A. Hitt, Vroom himself agreed with some of these criticisms and stated that he felt that the theory should be expanded to include research conducted since the original publication of his book.<sup>25</sup>



The model also needs to be made more complete while still remaining practical enough for managers to use. Recent indications are that some additional factors can be added to it to better explain employee behaviour. For example there are often several different rewards available to employees. The valence of each reward must be assessed, related and combined with the valences of other rewards to estimate the total motivational force for each employee.<sup>26</sup>

It may therefore be stated that we can see that the Expectancy Theory like all its predecessors and successors has a mixed response both theoretically and practically. As the theory was put to practical tests the limitations of this theory were realized and modifications and improvements were made.

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