

A Validation of Edwin Locke's Goal Setting Theory: Implications for Organizations

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Abstract

Edwin Locke's Theory of Goal Setting (1968), states that an individual's goal-attainment improves if he has specific goals, receives specific feedback about his performance, is committed to achieve the goal, is sufficiently motivated and is confident of achieving the goal. The key focus of this research is on assessing the effectiveness of individual-organizational goal-mapping. The authors aim to validate the constructs and examine organizational implications of Edwin Locke's Goal Setting Theory. The research question aims to identify the key driver that boosts employee motivation towards better performance. As today, organizations need employees who perform to achieve organizational goals, 'individual target setting perfectly aligned with organizational goals', has gained a lot of impetus. Organizations are on the look-out for better ways of higher employee motivation which result in higher performance. One of the plausible ways to do that seems employee-goal setting. This exploratory research is based on Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on the topic. The study has been restricted to secondary data consisting of relevant research articles in the specific area of the theory of Goal-setting. The authors reviewed research articles for four decades, from 1968 to 2012. The presence of the constructs of the theory like goal-specificity, commitment, appropriate feedback, motivation and self-efficacy are found to operate and boost employee-performance. It has been observed that the theory has its wide applications in fixing of Key Result Areas (KRAs) in the continuous performance management system, Management by Objectives (MBO), achieving departmental targets, achieving company goals.

Keywords: Goal Setting, Edwin Locke, Theories of Motivation, KRA.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Goal-achievement, completing targets, performance on KRAs, feedback on performance viz a viz goals, underperformance on KRAs- the organizational space is abuzz with such reminders and jargons. One may be perplexed to observe and notice that organizations are heavily task-oriented towards its own vision and objectives. For achieving this vision and objectives, the organization is dependent on teams or department in the form of departmental targets. Departments

and teams depend on individual members of the teams in the form of their goals. Therefore goal-attainment by an individual employee is related to the achievement of goals by the organization and hence is extremely relevant in the organizational context.

Goal Setting theory by Edwin Locke is an his deftness at achieving the goals specified for him by the organization. Hence goal-setting and goal achievement gains equally extreme relevance for individual employees too. Hence the Goal-setting

theory, propounded by Edwin Locke (1966) is an extremely important theory even in today's organizational context characterized by the value-system of millennials and Gen Z workforce. The theory begins with fixing of a goal and then developing an action-plan to achieve that goal. The goal motivates and guides the individual or the team to achieve the goal. For goal-setting certain rules facilitate goal-achievement like SMART criteria (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound), challenge involved in goal-achievement, continuous feedback received about performance and the like.

Essence of Goal-Setting Theory

The goal-setting theory which is a theory of motivation, presents the most simple explanation as to why do some people perform 'better' than others. The reason is the essence of Edwin Locke's goal-setting theory is fourfold:

1. Specific and moderately/ highly difficult goals lead to 'better/higher' performance than no goals, abstract goals, general goals or easy goals urging people to do their best. Goal specificity can be increased by making the goal (i) measurable (quantification)e.g. increase in production by 40% rather than productivity; (ii) defining all relevant tasks that must be necessarily completed for achieving the goal (enumeration).
2. Goal-commitment (ability is a constant in this theory). The higher the goal is fixed, the higher the achieved performance. People, when committed to specific goals, perform better. Commitment is influenced by external factors; for example who has assigned the goal and setting performance standards. Individual compliance depends on that. Role models (external factor) and participation to achieve the goal (internal factor), appear superior to others (internal factor) or feeling of accomplishment (internal factor). If goals are made known, open and broadcasted, there are

more chances of attainment by the individual-employees. Also if goals are set by self rather than designated, the chances of achieving become higher.

3. Feedback, praise and involvement of people in decision-making propels towards fixing up and being committed to a quite difficult and specific goal.
4. With the "three mechanisms of motivation (choice, effort, persistence)", goal-setting also has a 'cognitive' element. This 'cognitive element' can affect the three mechanisms to find ways to attain the goal. Choice narrows down attention and directs efforts towards the goal; goals make people put in more effort and persistence makes people keep trying to achieve the goal even through setbacks. Cognition directs the person to change his strategy or behaviour to achieve the goal.
5. Self-efficacy of the person that is his confidence that he will be able to do it affects goal-attainment positively.

To understand, Edwin A. Locke's goal-setting theory has put forth that "more ambitious goals lead to more performance improvement than easy or general goals". 'Specificity of goals' and 'time constraints' boost performance. Acceptability of goals triggers performance rather than unacceptability. Individual's ability to attain the goal, rather than inability is a factor for better focus on the goal. Conflicting goals can bring down performance as focus will get diverted. Medium to high level of goal-difficulty is associated with task performance.

Development of Goal Setting Theory

Edwin Locke started examining the theory of 'goal-setting' in 1960s and the research went on for more than 30 years. He took the idea for the theory of 'goal-setting' from 'Aristotle's form of final causality'. Aristotle observed that if there is a

purpose, the purpose can cause action. Edwin Locke started his research on the 'impact' that goals have on 'human activity'. He published his first article in 1968- 'Towards a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives'. The article establishes a clear-cut, "positive relationship between clearly identified goals and goal-performance."

Goal Performance Relationship

In goal-performance relationship (i) importance of expected outcomes of goal attainment, which refers to Expectancy theory of motivation (ii) self-efficacy level (iii) promises which are made to others also play an important role (Locke and Latham, 2002). Self-efficacy can also be understood as Self-efficiency. Self-efficiency is the self confidence of the individual and his belief that he has the potential of achieving the goal specified. Higher is the level of self-efficacy or self-efficiency, greater will be the effort-level, and higher probability of achieving the goal rather than in the opposite situation where the level of self-efficacy or self-efficiency is lower, lesser efforts will be put in by the individual-employee and he may even quit thinking that he is unable to meet challenges.

II. OBJECTIVES

The present study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. To validate the constructs of Edwin Locke's goal -setting theory
2. To study the organizational implications of the theory

III. METHODOLOGY

A 'systematic review methodology' was adopted for carrying out a literature review of Edwin Locke's theory of motivation. The process of systematic literature review involves two steps:(i) to fix the 'inclusion criterion'and (ii)'the selection

of articles and databases'. The literature review includes the duration of 1968 to 2012.

Inclusion Criteria

The research papers included in this criterion were published during 1968 – 2012 in 'peer-reviewed and refereed journals'. Sources like reports, working papers, textbooks, dissertations, thesis, government-publicationsand similar such paperswere excluded.

Database and Article Selection

A step by step process was followed for selection of databases and journals. Firstly, an exploration was done for articles and papers in prominent databases, including JSTOR, Emerald Insight, Elsevier, Sage and Springer publications. The rationale primarily being the authorised access to the databases. The databases mentioned above claim to have a repository of over 35 million research articles in 'diverse academic disciplines'. The papers were selected from different sections of the databases, including keywords, titles and abstracts. The keywords which were used were: Goal Setting, Edwin Locke, Theories of Motivation and KRA.

IV. CHRONOLOGICAL THEMATIC REVIEW

Locke, E. A. (1968) observed that an individual's "conscious ideas regulate his actions". The researcher further observed that challenging goals produce a higher level of performance and a higher level of output. Role of "behavioural intentions in regulating choice-behaviour" was also observed by Locke, E. A. (1968).

Locke, E. A. (1978) positioned goal-setting as an important theory to govern work-motivation as every theory recognizes that "rational human action is goal-directed". The theory was found to be applicable in scientific management, expectancy theory, management-by-objectives,

human relations, practised organizational behaviour and cognitive growth.

By Locke, E. A., Shaw, K. N., Saari, L. M., & Latham, G. P. (1981), it was established that “specific and challenging goals lead to higher performance than easy goals”. It was further established that goals do affect performance by “directing attention, mobilizing effort, increasing persistence and motivating strategy-development”. Role of “specificity of goals, sufficient challenge, involvement, ability and feedback” was also emphasized in the study. “Need for achievement and level of self-esteem” were found to operate as variables of individual-differences (Locke, E. A., Shaw, K. N., Saari, L. M., & Latham, G. P., 1981).

Mitchell, T. R. (1982) laid emphasis on the “internal, unobservable aspects of motivation and performance” and suggested that “the long-run objective should be a contingency type model of motivation”. Campion, M. A., & Lord, R. G. (1982) conducted a study which was directed at attempting to explain why goal-setting works and to integrate goal-setting with other theories of motivation. The study looked at goal-setting as “a dynamic process in which both ‘self-set goals’ and ‘environmental feedback’ were incorporated into a system that was expected to monitor performance relative to a desired state and was also expected to adjust subsequent goals, behaviors, and strategies”.

By London, M. (1983), motivation was observed as “a multidimensional construct” and the researchers found that its components comprise “individual characteristics (career identity, career insight and career resilience domains), corresponding career decisions and behaviors”.

Bandura, A. (1988) observed that people guide their own actions through ‘anticipatory forethought’ about the “likely outcome of their prospective actions” and they accordingly set

goals for themselves and plan actions to achieve the targets fixed for themselves.

A study by Schunk, D. H. (1990), highlighted the importance of “self-observation, self-judgment and self-reaction” in goal-setting and self-efficacy. The study further highlighted when individuals perceive satisfactory progress towards the goal, they feel capable of improving their skills; hence self-efficacy becomes higher and goal-attainment easier. This results in fixing of “more challenging self-set goals, processing of feedback and conceptions of ability”. The key thus lies in “setting realistic goals and evaluating progress”. Katzell, R. A., & Thompson, D. E. (1990) found that endogenous processes explain “motivation” and exogenous causes as “levers for improving work-motivation”. Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1990) combined “goal setting, expectancy, social-cognitive, attribution, job characteristics, equity, and turnover-commitment” and suggested “the model of high performance cycle” which begins with “organizational members being faced with high challenge or difficult goals”.

Tubbs, M. E., & Ekeberg, S. E. (1991) argued that ‘intention’ is a broader concept than the ‘goal’ and so ‘intentions’ affect the process by which assigned goals influence human behaviour. Schunk, D. H. (1991) validated the role of “self-efficacy with related constructs (perceived control, outcome expectations, perceived value of outcomes, attributions, and self-concept), person variables (goal setting and information processing) and situation variables (models, attributional feedback, and rewards) on self-efficacy and motivation”. Locke, E. A. (1991) prescribed goal-theory for “validation of the core premises; demonstrations of generality; identification of moderators; conceptual refinement and elaboration; and integration with other theories”. Latham, G. P., & Locke, E. A. (1991) focussed on “self-regulatory effects of goal setting”. Their research-study discussed how

people can use goals as a “self-management techniques”. (Latham, G. P., & Locke, E. A., 1991).

Zimmerman, B. J., Bandura, A., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1992) studied the causal role of self-efficacy and setting higher goals in self-motivation and observed a positive link between the two.

Barrick, M. R., Mount, M. K., & Strauss, J. P. (1993) observed that individuals “high in conscientiousness are more likely to set goals and are more likely to be committed to goals, which in turn is associated with greater job performance”.

Elliot, A. J., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1994) studied the interactions and evaluative effects of ‘achievement orientation’ and ‘specificity of assigned task-goals’ on ‘intrinsic motivation’ of employees; and observed that “the effect of mastery-focused goals on intrinsic motivation varied as a function of achievement orientation”.

Dickinson, L. (1995) stressed that “autonomous and initiative-taking learners” are more motivated and also emphasized that autonomy is related with better performance. The research done on academic-achievement also increasingly started focussing on students’ goals (“task-goals” and “ability-goals”). The significance of achievement goal-theory cannot be side-lined in any environment where performance is important (Urdan, T. C., & Maehr, M. L., 1995).

Relationship between “conscious performance goals and performance on work-tasks” has been studied by Locke, E. A. (1996) and a positive relationship is observed between ‘conscious-goals’ and ‘performance’. “The capacity to plan activities and proximate goals that intervene between one's present state and the desired ultimate, distant goal” was explored by Seijts, G. H. (1998). Klein, H. J., Wesson, M. J., Hollenbeck, J. R., & Alge, B. J. (1999) propounded that “Goals are central to current treatments of work motivation” and hence “goal

commitment is a critical construct in understanding the relationship between goals and task performance”.

Covington, M. V. (2000) revealed the role of “interaction between goals, the motivating properties of these goals and prevailing reward structures” in the quality of learning and will of learning. A study by Dörnyei, Z. (2000) focussed on portraying on motivational processes as they happen in time rather than a stable motivational state; emphasizing the “dynamic development of motivation”.

While discussing achievement motivation, Elliot, A. J., & Thrash, T. M. (2001) noted that “Goals and their antecedents combine to produce competence-based self-regulation”. The paper emphasized that motivation is a dynamic process and motivation fluctuates over time. Erez, A., & Judge, T. A. (2001) found “self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy and neuroticism” as constituents of “core self-evaluations”, a trait hypothesized to be related to work-motivation and performance.

After thirty five years of empirical research, Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002) discussed the ‘mechanisms by which goals operate’. They have also discussed “moderators of goal-effects”, “relation of goals and satisfaction” and the “role of goals as mediators of incentives”. Validity and practical implications of the goal-setting theory are explained at great length by the researchers. The research by Thompson, L. F., Meriac, J. P., & Cope, J. G. (2002) proved that individuals who have goals produce more than individuals with no goals at all. The research found that goal-setting proves to be an effective method of increasing productivity. Judge, T. A., & Ilies, R. (2002) suggested that “the Big 5 traits are an important source of performance motivation”.

Siebert, R. J., & Taylor, W. J. (2004) observed the role of “rehabilitation and social cognition” in goal-setting process. The relevance of “affective

feelings at work” in “work-motivation” and “behavioural outcomes” has been propagated by Seo, M. G., Barrett, L. F., & Bartunek, J. M. (2004). Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2004), while specifying to create “a boundaryless science of work motivation”, emphasized the importance of both “subconscious as well as conscious motivation”. Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005) emphasized the role of “self-determination” in work motivation.

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2006) studied the effects of “affect” with respect to goal-achievement where the special relevance of specific goals, difficult goals, self-set goals, self-efficacy and goal-choice have been highlighted. Steel, P., & König, C. J. (2006) constructed a “Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT)”. The theory is consistent with the findings of behaviourism and Psychobiology. Potential implications of this theory are found to affect the understanding of the concept of ‘goal-setting’. Latham, G. P., & Locke, E. A. (2007) noted that the Goal setting is built on inductive findings based on empirical research, and is an “open” theory. The research discusses “the role of goals as mediators of personality effects on performance”, “high performance cycle” “ways in which priming affects the impact of a goal”, “interrelationship between goal setting and affect”, “results of goal setting by teams” and the like. The study suggested “potential directions for research on goal setting in the workplace”. These suggestions are with regard to “goal-abandonment”, “subconscious goals”, and “the relationship between goals and knowledge”.

Ordóñez, L. D., Schweitzer, M. E., Galinsky, A. D., & Bazerman, M. H. (2009) found that setting specific and challenging goals can drive behaviour towards the goals but the study highlighted the damaging role of “narrow focus that neglects non-goal areas, distorted risk preferences, a rise in unethical behavior, inhibited learning, corrosion of organizational culture and reduced intrinsic

motivation”. Ordóñez, L. D., Schweitzer, M. E., Galinsky, A. D., & Bazerman, M. H. (2009) observed goal setting “as a benign, over-the-counter treatment for motivation”.

Lunenburg, F. C. (2011) emphasized on the importance of goal-setting theory in affecting performance positively. The research supported that when goals are specific, challenging, linked to feedback, deadlines, and successfully create commitment/ acceptance to the goal; effective performance results. The theory proved the moderator-role of “ability” and “self-efficacy”. Lunenburg, F. C. (2011) also observed, “A learning goal orientation leads to higher performance than a performance goal orientation”. The researcher further observed “group goal-setting is as important as individual goal-setting. Lunenburg, F. C. (2011) found that self-efficacy determines which tasks one would choose to learn and goal one will set for self in addition to determining the level of effort, degree of persistence while performing difficult tasks.

The theory by Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2012) found that “all motivation does not stem from ‘physiological needs’ (e.g., ‘curiosity, self-efficacy’); all kinds of deprivation does not result in an ‘increase in drive’ (e.g., certain ‘vitamin-deficiencies’); and if a ‘partial satisfaction of a need’ takes place, it sometimes results in an increased drive’ (e.g., as ‘when the appetite’ is ‘whetted’). As per the theory “people often are motivated to engage themselves in activities that decrease tension”.

V. CONCLUSION

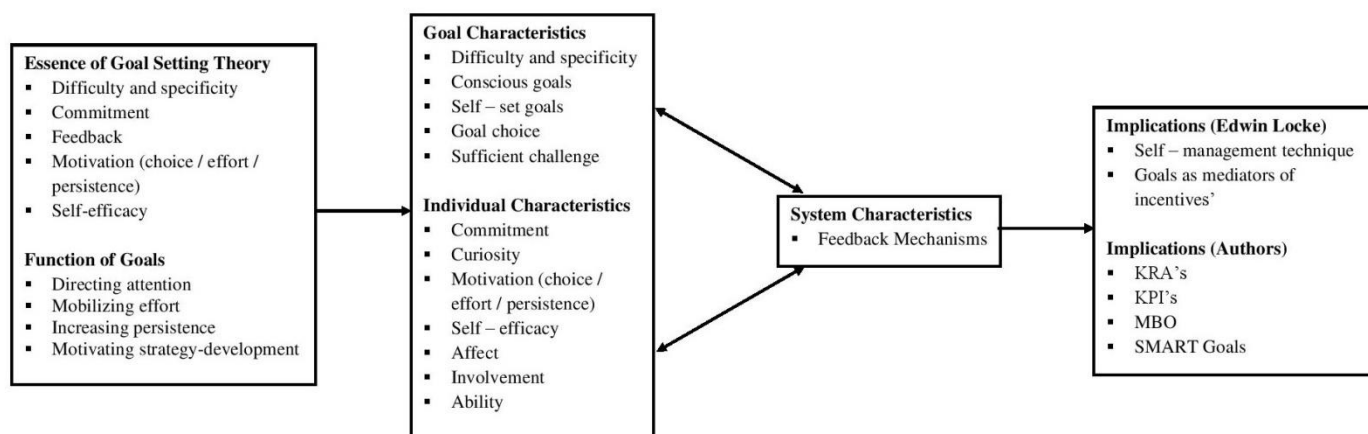
The theory of goal-setting, propounded by Edwin Locke in 1968 and developed over the next three decades does have and will continue to have an impact on individual employee’s performance in various ways. This theory will continue to be referred to, time and again in the area of organizational behaviour, goal-attainment strategy, performance management and employee

participation. So long as individual-goals are aligned with organizational-goals, the theory will continue to be relevant in the organizational context; and so long as individual performance matters for the individual, the theory will be relevant in the context of the individual too. The theory works effectively towards goal-attainment with (i) difficult and specific goals, (ii) goal-commitment, (iii) feedback (iv) motivation (choice, effort, persistence) and (v) self-efficacy.

Latham, G. P., & Locke, E. A.(1991) discussed that the ‘goal-setting theory’ can be used (i) as a “self-management technique” and Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002) highlighted the importance of goal-setting theory (ii) with respect to “role of goals as mediators of incentives”. The applications of the theory are evident in organizations when (iii) KRAs and KPIs are fixed to channelize performance. These KRAs are directly linked with

departmental targets which cascade down from the organizational goals. (Individual goals, as a rule, should cascade down from organizational goals.) (iv) The theory of goal-setting seems to be the foundation-brick of the practice of MBO or Management by Objectives. The team-member and team-leader together decide and fix the targets for the team-member based on mutual discussion and agreement. (v)The concept of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound) goals seems to be having its roots in the goal-setting theory as smart goals become achievable.

The finery of Edwin Locke’s goal-setting theory and its implications can be understood with the help of a model depicting the interplay among constructs of the theory, functions of the goal, characteristics (goal, individual and system); and implications of goal setting and goal-attainment.



Model showing ‘Conceptual Framework of Goal setting Theory’

VI. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on psychological implications of Edwin Locke’s goal-setting theory on individual employee well-being needs a detailed analysis. The application of the theory should be studied in organizational-setting to uncover its existence in varied organizational phenomena and processes.

Cultural implications of the theory also need to be uncovered.

Limitations of Goal-setting theory

At times, there is a conflict between organizational and individual goals which is detrimental to performance. Very complex and difficult goals may result in risky employee-behaviour. Role of learning new skills cannot be

negated for goal-achievement. In want of required skills, the individual may fail in achieving the specified goals.

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