

**Research on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation is Alive, Well, and
Reshaping 21st-Century Management Approaches:
Brief Reply to Locke and Schattke**

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Over the past two decades organizational researchers, human resources (HR) professionals, and corporate managers have increasingly embraced *self-determination theory* (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) as an approach to understanding and facilitating employees' motivation and engagement. Leaders at companies from Apple to Zappos have endorsed these new principles, as have organizational gurus such as Pink (2011) and Doshi and McGregor (2015). This growth in the use of SDT stems from its provision of an evidence-based approach to supporting the basic psychological needs of employees, which in turn drives high-quality motivation and the key performance indicators that stem from it, with meta-analyses, careful empirical reviews, and intervention studies continually confirming these ideas (e.g., Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Güntert, 2015; Hardré & Reeve, 2009; Olafsen, Halvari, Forest, & Deci, 2015; Slemp, Kern, Patrick, & Ryan, 2018; Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, & Rosen, 2016).

It thus came as a surprise to find an article in *Motivation Science* by Locke and Schattke (2019) suggesting that this generative and evidence-supported work is “seriously inadequate,” confusing, and in need of radical redefinition (p. 277). To support this, Locke

and Schattke offer no new evidence, nor a systematic review. Rather they translate extant theories, especially SDT, in unexacting ways and then criticize their own construal of them. Notably, their critiques are also not new; the gist of them can be found in the first author's work nearly 30 years ago (Locke & Latham, 1990). Across these decades, Locke and colleagues have assembled no meaningful empirical support for these assertions. In the meantime, hundreds of studies have piled up in support SDT, and its practical value has been repeatedly proven.

We have been granted only a few pages to respond to Locke and Schattke's (2019) comments, and within those confines there is no way to summarize decades of careful research and theorizing or to properly address each of the many confusions or misinterpretations of SDT apparent in their article. Thus, in what follows we address but a few salient points with the hope of encouraging readers to engage the actual theory and evidence base of SDT rather than relying on Locke and Schattke's account. We also hope to shed at least a little light on why there is so much growth in the application of SDT to organizations, as 21st-century managers shift from old-school ideas focused on contingent incentives and top-down control toward practices that effectively sustain high-quality employee engagement and performance.

On Intrinsic Motivation

Although they do not cite any programmatic research on intrinsic motivation to support their views, Locke and Schattke (2019) nonetheless assert that the field needs to be redefined in ways that seem to us counterproductive. For example, contrary to every major theory in the area, they argue that intrinsic motivation can flourish in activities where people do not care about competence. In claiming this, they contradict a plethora of empirical evidence showing that perceived competence is critical for sustaining intrinsic motivation, a consistent finding not only within SDT but also achievement goal theory (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002),

flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005), and developmental psychology (e.g., Harter, 2012).

The main evidence Locke and Schattke (2019) provide for their assertion is an anecdote from the first author's tennis club experiences. Therein he suggests that he loves playing tennis but doesn't care how he does at it. Yet we would hypothesize that if he really had ongoing experiences of incompetence, he would find that game less and less enjoyable. Where the anecdote, and their theorizing, goes wrong is in defining the experience of competence as requiring that one aspire to, or attain, greatness. In SDT, feelings of competence rather entail a sense of effectance (White, 1959) at the level in which one is engaged. But the larger point is that we need not rely on anecdotes at all. Literally hundreds of studies in sport and physical activity (Standage & Ryan, 2019) as well as work, education, games, and other domains have confirmed the importance of both competence and autonomy for intrinsic motivation. This is even shown in tennis players (e.g., De Muynck et al., 2017). Locke and Schattke would also limit the definition of intrinsic motivation to "pleasure gained" from an activity (p. 277), confusing it with hedonic activities more generally, but even in making this point, they overlook research showing that among the primary factors that make intrinsically motivated activities fun are experiences of competence and autonomy (e.g., Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006).

Autonomy is not seriously considered at all in Locke and Schattke's (2019) understanding of what supports intrinsic motivation, or work motivation more generally. They basically claim that if people are in a job, they have "chosen" it and have thereby exercised their autonomy (p. 279). But in the real world, employees vary in how autonomous they feel on their jobs, and a great many do not feel choice about quitting. It is this variation in experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work that SDT addresses (e.g.,

Ryan, Bernstein, & Brown, 2010), because these so powerfully influence commitment, effort, vitality, and performance.

On Achievement Motivation

Locke and Schattke (2019) claim that SDT confounds achievement motivation with intrinsic motivation, but again they provide no empirical evidence of confounding, and they fail to accurately review SDT's position on this topic. What SDT research actually shows is that motives for achievement can vary considerably. People have different reasons for seeking excellence, some of which are controlled in nature (e.g., external pressure, introjection) and some more autonomous (e.g., value, interest), resulting in different outcomes. For example, recent studies of achievement motivation have revealed that the impact of performance goals is substantially accounted for by motives as assessed within SDT and their relative autonomy (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014).

On Extrinsic Motivation

Locke and Schattke (2019) state that studies on extrinsic motivation in SDT have narrowly focused on the undermining effects of withdrawing incentives, decry the view that extrinsic motivators are so often depicted as controlling, and call for a more differentiated framework. In actuality, SDT is not narrowly focused on this issue and has long recognized multiple forms of extrinsic motivation; its differentiated taxonomy of autonomous and controlled extrinsic motivations has existed for over three decades. Within SDT, extrinsic motivation is already understood as all instrumental motivation, a definition Locke and Schattke introduce as if it were contrary, but what they miss is that whether instrumental motivation is controlled or autonomous has huge functional implications. This is not merely speculative; supportive findings are plentiful (Gagné, Deci, & Ryan, 2018).

Locke and Schattke (2019) further suggest that SDT demonizes money (p. 282), but this is another yet another inaccurate characterization. SDT details both when and how financial incentives can be structured to support, maintain, or undermine intrinsic motivation and high-quality autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Multiple studies in SDT have shown how, far from demonizing money, having income and resources supports basic psychological need satisfactions and therefore well-being (e.g., Di Domenico & Fournier, 2014). Yet SDT also recognizes that money has some darker sides: It can be used to push people around and compromise their autonomy. Poorly designed incentive systems in organizations can backfire precisely because they do not take stock of this (e.g., Kuvaas, Buch, Gagné, Dysvik, & Forest, 2016; Olafsen et al., 2015). Going more deeply, SDT also details how people can push themselves around in pursuit of money—it can become a controlling as well as liberating influence within one's life. Again, this isn't just conjecture: SDT has many studies on how financial aspirations can affect people, for better or worse (e.g., Sheldon & Krieger, 2014).

A Call to Action

Ultimately Locke and Schattke (2019) suggest that the field should undertake more research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and this is a call with which we can concur. It is an exciting and important field of study, and it affects people's lives. There is also much more to learn. Yet rather than rely on Locke and Schattke's commentary for direction, we encourage readers who would heed this call to do so by focusing on current evidence rather than conjecture. This is why we have emphasized herein the ever-growing empirical base behind SDT, which is yielding practical knowledge relevant to management styles (e.g., Slemp et al., 2018), compensation strategies (e.g., Kuvaas et al., 2016; Olafsen et al., 2015), and the creation of ethical company cultures that maximize employees' autonomy, commitment, and purpose (Rigby & Ryan, 2018).

Among the reasons SDT has grown so rapidly, both in citations and in its use by managers and HR professionals, is because it is grounded in careful theorizing and strong evidence and thus can prescribe practices that are truly effective in transforming companies. This is also why 21st-century organizations have increasingly turned away from models based in mere goal-setting and incentivizing from above to being additionally concerned with the psychological needs of employees. It is SDT's position that applied motivational science in organizations needs to move away from reliance on anecdotes, airport books, and armchair assertions and toward the application of tested theories, with greater focus on the issues that matter most to employees. Those issues, as it turns out, involve not only well-designed incentive programs but also supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work.

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