

This Week's Citation Classic

Locke E A, Saari L M, Shaw K N & Latham G P. Goal setting and task performance: 1969-1980. *Psychol. Bull.* 90:125-52, 1981.

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This literature summarizes research on the relationship between goal setting and task performance, conducted between 1969 and 1980. These studies identified the relationship of goal attributes to level of performance, moderators such as feedback, goal acceptance and supportiveness, and individual differences in responses to goal setting. [The *SSC*[®] and the *SCF*[®] indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 395 publications.]

Goal Setting Theory

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In 1964, Locke, inspired by the work of T.A. Ryan,¹ C.A. Mace,² and others, completed his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the relationship between goal difficulty and specificity and task performance. He found that goals which were both specific and difficult led to better task performance than goals that were easy or vague (such as "do your best"). This dissertation was the beginning of contemporary goal setting research that led, over 25 years later, to an inductively based theory of goal setting.³

A few years after Locke's dissertation, G.P. Latham, working independently of Locke, verified the importance of goal setting in his research with loggers and truck drivers at Weyerhouser Co.⁴ This work was especially useful in showing that goal setting, which had been studied by Locke solely in the laboratory, was applicable to the real world of work.

The first summary of the early research on

goal setting was summarized in another *Citation Classic*.⁵ This work inspired other researchers to study goal setting, and the overwhelming majority of these studies obtained positive results, thus encouraging additional studies. This was followed by two later review articles (in 1974⁶ and 1975⁷), but goal setting research proliferated so rapidly that another review was needed by 1981, resulting in this *Classic* Locke and Latham, by this time, had begun a life-long collaboration and were aided in the review by their two doctoral students, Karyll N. Shaw, who worked with Locke, and Lise M. Saari, who worked with Latham.

The timing of this article was ideal in that it coincided with the time period in which the field of psychology concluded that behaviorism (the doctrine that human action could be understood without reference to consciousness) was dead as an intellectual force. This ended any lingering doubts among scientists about the suitability of a cognitive approach to motivation. This development, plus the positive findings obtained in early goal setting research, led to a further proliferation of goal setting studies. By the time Locke and Latham's book was published,³ the number of goal setting studies had exceeded five hundred—and more studies are still being conducted today. Goal setting theory is now generally accepted as among the most valid and generalizable motivation theories in industrial-organizational psychology, human resource management, and organizational behavior.

We, and other researchers, are continuing to expand goal setting research into new areas. Recent examples are: the relation of goals to expected satisfaction and to the instrumentality of goal outcomes; goals as mediators of the effects of monetary incentives; goals as mediators of the effects of charismatic leadership; the effects of goal conflict on performance; the relative effectiveness of process versus end result goals; the effectiveness of goal setting on complex tasks; and the relative validity of predictions of behavior based on conscious goals versus subconscious motives.

1. Ryan T A. *Intentional behavior*. New York: Ronald, 1970. (Cited 70 times.)

2. Mace C A. *Incentives: some experimental studies*. Industrial Health Research Board (Great Britain), Report No. 72, 1935. (Cited 30 times.)

3. Locke E A & Latham G P. *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990.

4. Latham G P & Yukl G. Assigned versus participative goal setting with educated and uneducated woods workers. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 60:299-302, 1975. (Cited 70 times.)

5. Locke E A. Toward a theory of task motivation and incentives. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Perform.* 3:157-89, 1968. (Cited 355 times.)

[See also: Locke E A. Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* 14(16): 16, 19 April 1982. Reprinted in: *Contemporary classics in the social and behavioral sciences*. (Smelser N J, comp.) Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1987. p. 338.]

6. Steers R M & Porter L W. The roll of task-goal attributes in employee performance. *Psychol. Bull.* 81:434-52, 1974. (Cited 85 times.)

7. Latham G P & Yukl G A. Review of research on the application of goal setting in organizations. *Acad. Manage. J.* 18:824-45, 1975. (Cited 145 times.)

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