

**MCGREGOR'S THEORIES X AND Y: ASSESSING THE POSSIBLE WAYS OF  
APPLYING THEM IN THE WORK PLACE STUDYING THE ROLES.**

By

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores Douglas McGregor's Theories X and Y, focusing on their relevance and application in contemporary workplace settings. It examines how managerial assumptions about employee behavior influence leadership styles, organizational roles, and overall productivity. By assessing the distinct characteristics of both theories—Theory X's control-driven approach and Theory Y's empowerment-oriented model—the study identifies practical strategies for applying these frameworks to enhance role clarity, employee engagement, and performance outcomes. Emphasis is placed on contextual adaptability, suggesting that effective management requires a balanced application tailored to organizational culture and workforce dynamics. The study concluded that the effective application of these theories demands context-sensitive leadership, where roles are clearly defined, communication is prioritized, and motivational strategies are aligned with the psychological and operational needs of employees. The study also recommended that managers should regularly assess employee motivation levels and working styles to decide when a Theory X or Theory Y approach is most appropriate. Tailoring leadership strategies based on individual and team assessments enhances effectiveness.*

**KEYWORD: McGregor's Theories X and Y, Work Place, Roles**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Douglas McGregor's Theories X and Y have long provided a foundational framework for understanding managerial assumptions about employee motivation and behavior. Introduced in the 1960s, these theories distinguish between two contrasting views: Theory X, which assumes that employees are inherently lazy and require strict supervision, and Theory Y, which posits that workers are self-motivated and thrive under autonomy and participative management. These paradigms are not just theoretical constructs—they shape real-world management styles, influence leadership behavior, and affect organizational culture (Ramteke & Burghate, 2023). In the evolving dynamics of modern workplaces, revisiting these theories through contemporary lenses is essential to enhance leadership effectiveness and employee engagement.

Contemporary studies suggest that applying McGregor's theories can significantly impact workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, productivity, and organizational commitment. For instance, the managerial approach that aligns with Theory Y—fostering open communication, empowerment, and trust—has been linked with improved employee performance and lower turnover rates, especially in knowledge-driven or hybrid environments

(Tello Hernández, 2024). Conversely, Theory X-driven environments may still be relevant in task-intensive or crisis-driven settings where structure and control are imperative. These dichotomous frameworks serve as diagnostic tools, helping managers assess which approach best suits their team composition and organizational context.

Critically assessing the application of Theories X and Y involves understanding not only their theoretical underpinnings but also their real-time adaptability in varied roles and work cultures. Managers play pivotal roles in translating these theories into action—whether by fostering participative decision-making, promoting accountability, or exercising tighter control depending on situational needs. The growing emphasis on adaptive leadership and emotional intelligence further reinforces the relevance of McGregor's model in guiding role expectations and behavioral management in today's workplace. As scholarly discourse continues to evolve post-2020, these frameworks remain instrumental in aligning organizational goals with human capital development.

### **CONCEPT OF THEORY X OF MCGREGOR'S THEORY**

Douglas McGregor's Theory X, introduced in his seminal 1960 work *The Human Side of Enterprise*, presents a management perspective rooted in a pessimistic view of human motivation. This theory posits that employees are inherently lazy, lack ambition, and require strict supervision to be productive. According to this theory, the average worker inherently dislikes work and will avoid it whenever possible. As a result, employees need to be closely supervised and controlled through strict policies, rules, and punishments. McGregor argued that many managers operate based on the assumptions of Theory X, especially in traditional or bureaucratic organizational settings (McGregor, 1960). Recent studies reaffirm this notion. For instance, Ahuja (2024) observed that Theory X-oriented leadership often leads to a breakdown in the psychological contract between employees and employers, resulting in lower trust and commitment.

Despite its wide use in the mid-20th century, Theory X has been criticized for its oversimplified and demotivating view of human behavior. Modern research shows that employees tend to be more motivated, creative, and productive when they are trusted and empowered characteristics more aligned with McGregor's alternative, Theory Y (Wiyono et al., 2021).

In educational settings, the application of leadership theories significantly influences teacher performance and institutional outcomes. Busa, Shamsudden, and Ekpo (2024) reported that the implementation of Theory X characterized by authoritarian control, close supervision, and a general mistrust of employee initiative often leads to diminished teacher motivation and restricted creativity. This is largely because the rigid structure and focus on compliance suppress autonomy and professional judgment, which are crucial for innovative teaching and sustained engagement. As a result, educational institutions that rely heavily on Theory X may struggle to foster a collaborative and dynamic learning environment, thereby limiting both staff development and student achievement.

### **CONCEPT OF THEORY Y OF MCGREGOR'S THEORY**

Douglas McGregor's Theory Y remains one of the most influential management theories in organizational behaviour and leadership studies. Introduced in his seminal 1960 work, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, Theory Y presents a positive view of human nature, positing that employees are self-motivated, seek responsibility, and can contribute meaningfully to

organizational goals when provided with supportive conditions. While developed decades ago, Theory Y continues to shape contemporary management practices and remains highly relevant in today's dynamic, knowledge-based work environments. Recent literature underscores its significance in enhancing employee engagement, creativity, and organizational performance, especially in the context of participative and transformational leadership.

Theory Y assumes that individuals are not inherently lazy or disinterested in work, as suggested by the more pessimistic Theory X, but rather are capable of self-direction and self-control when committed to objectives. McGregor argued that work can be as natural as play if the conditions are conducive, and that people will exercise creativity and ingenuity in solving organizational problems when properly empowered (McGregor, 1960). These principles align with modern concepts such as intrinsic motivation, psychological empowerment, and participative management.

In today's knowledge-driven economies, where innovation and adaptability are essential, the principles of Theory Y have gained renewed significance. Recent studies support the notion that employee autonomy, recognition, and participatory decision-making core elements of Theory Y contribute significantly to motivation and performance. For instance, Akinlade and Kolawole (2021) examined managerial philosophies in Nigerian service industries and found that Theory Y-oriented approaches, such as delegation of authority and open communication, were strongly associated with higher employee satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Moreover, the rise of remote work and flexible job structures in the post-pandemic era has necessitated trust-based management. Employees are increasingly expected to self-manage, requiring organizations to adopt Theory Y assumptions to maintain productivity and engagement. According to Chen, Zhang, and Vogel (2022), organizations that adopt autonomy-supportive leadership closely aligned with Theory Y are more likely to foster innovative behaviours and proactive engagement among remote employees.

There is a strong conceptual overlap between Theory Y and transformational leadership, both of which emphasize trust, empowerment, and employee development. Transformational leaders seek to inspire employees through vision, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation practices that align with McGregor's optimistic view of human motivation. A study by Alghamdi and Bach (2023) found that transformational leadership styles significantly increased employee engagement and intrinsic motivation in Saudi Arabian public sector organizations, suggesting that Theory Y principles are effective across cultural contexts.

Beyond the corporate sphere, Theory Y has also been applied in education and public sector management. In educational settings, it promotes a collaborative and motivational atmosphere where teachers and staff are encouraged to participate in decision-making and professional development. As noted by Busa, Shamsudden, and Ekpo (2024), when educational leaders adopt Theory Y approaches, they foster greater teacher motivation, creativity, and job satisfaction, in contrast to the rigidity of Theory X, which relies on surveillance and strict control.

Despite its strengths, Theory Y is not without limitations. It assumes that all individuals will respond positively to autonomy and responsibility, which may not hold true in all contexts or cultures. Some employees may prefer structure, routine, or closer supervision, particularly in roles with high levels of repetition or safety risk. Additionally, implementing Theory Y requires

a significant cultural shift in traditionally hierarchical organizations, which can be challenging to achieve without strong leadership and supportive policies (Lee & Raschke, 2020).

## **CONCEPT OF PRODUCTIVITY IN WORK PLACE**

In a workplace, productivity refers to the efficiency and effectiveness with which employees contribute to organizational goals. It's essentially about how much work is accomplished within a given timeframe, focusing on output compared to inputs like time, effort, and resources. A higher level of productivity means completing more tasks with less time or effort, while maintaining or improving the quality of work.

According to Wikipedia (2025), stated at, Workforce productivity is the amount of goods and services that a group of workers produce in a given amount of time. It is one of several types of productivity that economists measure. Workforce productivity, often referred to as labor productivity, is a measure for an organization or company, a process, an industry, or a country. It also refers to the efficiency and effectiveness of individuals and teams in accomplishing tasks and achieving goals within a given timeframe (Asserted Team, 2025). It encompasses factors such as time management, communication, collaboration, and motivation. By improving workplace productivity, organizations can enhance their bottom line and gain a competitive edge in their industry. To boost productivity in the workplace, businesses can implement strategies such as setting clear goals, providing adequate resources and training, fostering a positive work environment, and leveraging technology and automation. For instances, companies' productivities can be best described as the amount of work that can be executed over a specific period. Work productivity indicates how well employees work to support key business goals and overall performance. Workforce productivity measures the total output produced by a group of workers within a specific period. It is commonly quantified as output per worker or output per hour worked, serving as an indicator of organizational efficiency (OECD, 2017).

## **FEATURES OF THEORY X**

- **Work is Inherently Disliked by Employees**

Theory X assumes that the average person inherently dislikes work and will avoid it if possible. Managers who hold this belief think that employees must be forced, controlled, or threatened to get them to work effectively. According to Iqbal. (2022), this view promotes a rigid, compliance-focused work environment where employee autonomy is minimized. Such environments often prioritize efficiency over engagement or creativity.

- **Authoritarian Leadership and Centralized Control**

Managers operating under Theory X tend to adopt authoritarian leadership styles, relying on centralized decision-making and tight supervision. This means that all key decisions are made at the top, and employees are expected to follow orders without question. Abbas & Afshan (2021) observed that this approach was effective during crisis management, especially during COVID-19, where quick decision-making and tight control were crucial.

- **Employees Lack Ambition and Avoid Responsibility**

Theory X holds that most workers prefer to be directed and are generally not ambitious. They avoid responsibility whenever possible and seek job security above all else. Managers, therefore, do not encourage employee empowerment or decision-making. This assumption leads to limited opportunities for employee growth or innovation (Zhang, 2023).

- **Motivation through External Rewards and Punishments**

According to Theory X, workers are primarily motivated by external means—such as monetary rewards, job security, and the avoidance of punishment—rather than intrinsic satisfaction. This model leads to the use of performance-based incentives and disciplinary systems to maintain productivity. While effective in certain high-control settings, it often results in lower job satisfaction and creativity (Zhang, 2023).

- **Resistance to Change and Innovation**

In Theory X environments, change is typically imposed from the top without employee input. Since workers are not trusted to embrace or initiate change, innovation is stifled. This rigid control structure can slow organizational adaptability and responsiveness to market shifts (Iqbal, 2022).

## **FEATURES OF THEORY Y**

- **Work is a Natural and Fulfilling Activity**

Theory Y assumes that work is as natural as play or rest when the conditions are favorable. Employees can enjoy their tasks and derive satisfaction from their efforts, especially when they are intrinsically motivated. Unlike Theory X, which sees work as a burden, Theory Y posits that people will engage in meaningful work voluntarily when given the right environment (Iqbal, 2022).

- **Employees are Self-Motivated and Self-Directed**

According to Theory Y, individuals do not need close supervision because they are capable of self-direction and self-control. When employees are committed to objectives, they can manage their own performance. This belief encourages delegation of authority and participative management. Research by Kamal. (2021) showed that organizations that implement participatory leadership aligned with Theory Y principles report higher levels of employee satisfaction and engagement.

- **Commitment is linked to Achievement**

Theory Y emphasizes that commitment to goals is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement—especially intrinsic rewards such as personal growth, recognition, and fulfillment. Employees are more productive when they feel their work is meaningful and when they see personal value in organizational goals (Ali & Anwar, 2020).

- **Creativity and Ingenuity are Widely Distributed**

One of Theory Y's core beliefs is that creative problem-solving and innovative thinking are not limited to managerial positions. All employees possess the potential for creativity, and given the right environment, they can contribute ideas and improvements. Organizations embracing Theory Y principles often develop team-based innovation strategies to harness this potential (Zhang, 2023).

- **Empowerment, Participation, and Decentralization**

Theory Y encourages decentralized decision-making and employee empowerment. Managers are facilitators, not controllers. Employees are trusted to participate in decision-making, which

fosters loyalty and a sense of ownership over their work. A study by Boateng. (2021) found that empowerment initiatives, such as participative budgeting and team decision-making, significantly improved performance and morale.

### **IMPACT OF THEORY X ON WORKERS' PRODUCTIVITY**

Theory X, developed by Douglas McGregor, is a management theory that assumes workers are inherently lazy, lack ambition, avoid responsibility, and must be closely supervised and controlled to be productive. Under Theory X, managers believe that employees require external motivation—such as monetary rewards or punishment—to perform effectively. While this approach can lead to some short-term gains in productivity, its broader and long-term effects on workers' performance and organizational morale are more complex and, in many cases, negative. Here's a list of the impacts of Theory X on workers' productivity:

- \* **The increased control and supervision:**

One immediate impact of Theory X on workers' productivity is the increased control and supervision that can lead to short-term compliance. Managers using this approach may achieve higher output initially because employees fear disciplinary action or job loss. The structured environment minimizes mistakes and ensures tasks are completed according to specific instructions, which may be beneficial in low-skill or repetitive job settings. A criticism of the Theory X in this is that it limits employees to having the opportunity to satisfy higher-level social needs of self-esteem and self-actualization (Mansaray, 2019).

- \* **Low Intrinsic Motivation:**

Over time, Theory X often leads to decreased intrinsic motivation among employees. When workers feel distrusted or undervalued, they may become disengaged and put in minimal effort—just enough to meet expectations. This lack of personal investment in work can stifle creativity and innovation, ultimately reducing the overall productivity of the organization.

- \* **High employee turnover and absenteeism:**

Constant supervision, lack of autonomy, and a punitive environment can create job dissatisfaction. Prime (2025) stated that Theory X managers believe their employees lack ambition and must be closely monitored. Workers may frequently call in sick, seek employment elsewhere, or become mentally disengaged while remaining physically present. This not only reduces individual productivity but also increases recruitment and training costs for the company.

- \* **Team cohesion and communication:**

Theory X can damage team cohesion and communication. When employees are treated as untrustworthy or unmotivated, it discourages collaboration and mutual respect. Workers are less likely to share ideas or take initiative, leading to inefficiencies and a lack of responsiveness to challenges. This culture of mistrust can foster conflict and reduce collective performance.

- \* **Stagnation and resistance to change:**

A workforce that operates under constant control and lacks decision-making power is less adaptable and responsive to evolving business environments. This inflexible structure may cause

the organization to fall behind competitors who adopt more empowering, participative management styles that encourage innovation and continuous improvement.

### **IMPACT OF THEORY Y ON WORKERS' PRODUCTIVITY**

Theory Y, developed by Douglas McGregor in the 1960s, is a management theory that presents a positive view of human nature. Unlike Theory X, which assumes employees are inherently lazy and need constant supervision, Theory Y suggests that workers are self-motivated, enjoy their work, and can be trusted to take responsibility. This theory is based on the belief that, under the right conditions, employees will seek out responsibility and be innovative in solving problems. Organizations that apply Theory Y principles aim to create a more participative and collaborative work environment, encouraging employees to achieve both personal and organizational goals. Below are outlined the Impact of theory y on workers' productivity:

#### **\* Increased Motivation and Job Satisfaction**

One major impact of Theory Y on workers' productivity is increased motivation and job satisfaction. When employees feel trusted and valued, they are more likely to enjoy their work and remain committed to their roles. Theory Y managers have a good attitude toward their employees and employ a decentralized, participatory management style. This fosters a more collaborative and trusting connection between managers and employees (Galani, & Galanakis, 2022). This internal motivation often leads to higher energy and better performance because workers are not driven solely by external rewards but by a genuine interest in their tasks and a desire to contribute to the company.

#### **\* Greater Creativity and Innovation**

Theory Y encourages management to give employees the freedom to make decisions and take initiative. This autonomy can foster a culture of creativity and innovation. Workers who are not micromanaged often feel more empowered to suggest improvements, develop new ideas, and find more efficient ways to perform tasks, all of which can lead to greater productivity and competitiveness for the organization.

#### **\* Improved Teamwork and Collaboration**

By promoting open communication and shared decision-making, Theory Y fosters a cooperative workplace culture. Employees are more likely to collaborate and support one another when they feel their input is respected. This team-oriented atmosphere enhances problem-solving and efficiency, as workers are encouraged to work together to meet common goals. According to Ahuja (2024) Theory Y principles are inclined to foster a participative management style, encourage employee empowerment, and emphasize intrinsic rewards such as autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Within this context, the psychological contract tends to be more relational, characterized by mutual trust, shared values, and a commitment to employee well-being and professional development

#### **\* Lower Turnover and Absenteeism Rates**

Workplaces that adopt Theory Y practices often experience lower employee turnover and absenteeism. When workers feel engaged and appreciated, they are less likely to seek

employment elsewhere or miss work unnecessarily. This stability not only reduces hiring and training costs but also maintains a consistent and productive workforce.

**\* Stronger Organizational Commitment**

Employees in a Theory Y environment tend to develop a stronger sense of loyalty and commitment to their organization. Because they are involved in decision-making and feel their work matters, they become more aligned with the company's mission and values. Theory Y managers trust that their employees can handle more responsibility and so encourage them to learn and develop as they work. Channell (2025) mentioned that they will encourage their employees to participate in collaborative projects, trusting them to deliver on their objectives. This sense of ownership can significantly increase effort, responsibility, and productivity across the workforce.

**\* Development of Leadership Skills**

Finally, Theory Y impacts workers' productivity by encouraging the development of leadership skills. As employees are given more responsibility and encouraged to take initiative, they build confidence and gain experience in leadership roles. This not only prepares them for future positions within the company but also improves current team performance through peer leadership and self-management.

## **WEAKNESS OF THEORY X**

**• Low Employee Motivation and Engagement**

Theory X assumes that employees inherently dislike work and must be closely supervised and controlled. This can result in a lack of motivation, creativity, and personal investment in tasks, especially in modern workplaces where autonomy is valued. According to Asencio and Mujkic (2022), such top-down, authoritative management approaches often lead to disengagement, burnout, and reduced performance over time.

**• Stifles Creativity and Innovation**

Because Theory X focuses on rigid control and close supervision, it discourages employees from thinking independently or proposing new ideas. This limits organizational adaptability and innovation, especially in dynamic sectors like technology or creative industries. Research by Zaman. (2021) confirms that overly controlling environments hinder knowledge sharing and creative thinking.

**• High Employee Turnover**

When employees are micromanaged and distrusted as assumed in Theory X it leads to dissatisfaction and higher attrition rates. Workers prefer organizations that foster trust, autonomy, and professional growth. According to Oruh and Dibia (2021), authoritarian management models contribute to toxic work environments and high labor turnover.

**• Erodes Trust and Morale**

Theory X is rooted in a belief that workers must be coerced or threatened to perform. This suspicion erodes trust between management and employees, reducing organizational morale and loyalty. Empirical evidence by Alavi. (2021) demonstrates that trust-based leadership

outperforms control-based leadership in fostering long-term commitment and organizational citizenship behavior.

- **Incompatibility with Modern Work Environments**

Contemporary work environments prioritize emotional intelligence, collaboration, and shared leadership. Theory X, with its rigid, mechanistic assumptions, is increasingly seen as outdated and incompatible with digital-age, knowledge-based organizations. According to Saleem. (2020), Theory X leadership is not suitable for agile organizations that require adaptive thinking and distributed decision-making.

## **WEAKNESS OF THEORY Y**

- **Overestimation of Employee Motivation**

Theory Y assumes that employees are inherently motivated, enjoy work, and will self-direct if given the opportunity. However, this assumption may not hold true for all individuals or cultural contexts. In organizations where intrinsic motivation is lacking, the Theory Y approach may fail. As observed by Aboramadan. (2020), not all employees are equally driven by autonomy or responsibility—some require structured guidance and incentives.

- **Risk of Reduced Control and Accountability**

When managers adopt a fully hands-off approach based on Theory Y, it may result in inadequate supervision, poor accountability, and inconsistent performance. Some employees may exploit the freedom for personal comfort rather than productivity. As highlighted by Babalola. (2021), without adequate oversight, employees can underperform or diverge from organizational goals.

- **Requires High Managerial Skill**

Theory Y requires that managers be emotionally intelligent, strategic, and skilled in coaching-style leadership. However, not all managers possess these traits. Without proper training, even well-meaning Theory Y leaders may struggle to inspire teams or manage conflict effectively. Al Khajeh (2021) noted that the success of participatory leadership styles depends heavily on the competence and awareness of leaders.

- **Potential for Role Ambiguity**

Emphasizing freedom, self-direction, and flexibility can sometimes blur organizational boundaries and expectations. Employees might be unclear about their responsibilities, deadlines, or reporting structures. Research by Ocampo. (2020) suggests that too much autonomy without structural clarity can cause confusion, decreased productivity, and job dissatisfaction

- **May Be Culturally Inappropriate in Some Contexts**

Theory Y is based on assumptions that are more common in individualistic and egalitarian cultures. In hierarchical or collectivist societies, such as many in Africa or Asia, employees may be more responsive to structure and authority. As revealed by Hofstede-insight-based studies (Nguyen, 2021), participative management may not yield the same positive outcomes in high power-distance cultures.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, McGregor's Theories X and Y offer enduring insights into managerial philosophy and employee motivation, providing a dual framework that managers can adapt based on organizational needs and workforce dynamics. While Theory X may suit environments requiring high control and predictability, Theory Y aligns more with contemporary expectations of empowerment, autonomy, and participatory leadership. The effective application of these theories demands context-sensitive leadership, where roles are clearly defined, communication is prioritized, and motivational strategies are aligned with the psychological and operational needs of employees. By strategically integrating these theories, organizations can enhance performance, foster employee satisfaction, and cultivate a more resilient and adaptable workplace culture.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Managers should regularly assess employee motivation levels and working styles to decide when a Theory X or Theory Y approach is most appropriate. Tailoring leadership strategies based on individual and team assessments enhances effectiveness.
2. Organizations should strive to create a culture that supports Theory Y by promoting trust, open communication, and employee autonomy. This includes encouraging innovation and involving employees in decision-making processes.
3. It establish continuous improvement loops where leadership evaluates the effectiveness of their management style through employee feedback and adjusts based on shifting needs or challenges.

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