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Self-Determination Theory in Online, Case-Based Law Enforcement Training: Basic Psychological Needs as Predictors of Intrinsic Motivation

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Research Article

Keywords: self-determination theory, mandated training, intrinsic motivation, online training, case-based instruction, law enforcement

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Abstract

Mandated training is a common performance intervention, yet organizations rarely know what sustains learners' motivation when participation is compulsory. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT), we examined whether satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence predicted intrinsic motivation among 100 U.S. law enforcement officers who completed self-paced, online, case-based training, and whether years of experience moderated these relationships. Together, the three needs explained 46% of the variance in intrinsic motivation; autonomy and relatedness were unique predictors, and competence was not. Years of experience did not moderate the relationships, although the test could detect only small-to-medium or larger effects. For performance improvement professionals who design or evaluate mandated online training, the findings point to two priorities: build meaningful autonomy into courses even when attendance is required, and do not treat relatedness as optional in self-paced designs.

Keywords: self-determination theory, mandated training, intrinsic motivation, online training, case-based instruction, law enforcement

Pull Quotes

1. "When training is mandated, choice is removed at the door; our findings suggest that designers need to give some of it back inside the course."
2. "Relatedness is not a luxury reserved for cohort-based courses: even in self-paced training, officers who felt more connected reported more interest in what they were learning."

Self-Determination Theory in Online, Case-Based Law Enforcement Training: Basic Psychological Needs as Predictors of Intrinsic Motivation

Organizations in many sectors rely on mandated training to maintain certifications, satisfy regulators, and protect the public. Law enforcement is an especially clear case. Officers complete academy training and then a recurring number of continuing education hours set by state and federal requirements (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Yet officers often describe mandatory training as uninteresting and report little motivation to engage in it (Honess, 2020). For performance improvement professionals, this is more than a satisfaction problem. Motivation to learn is a consistent antecedent of learning and of the transfer of training to the job (Blume et al., 2010; Colquitt et al., 2000; Gegenfurtner, 2011). A program that complies with a mandate but fails to engage learners may therefore produce hours on a transcript rather than changes in performance.

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a precise account of the conditions that sustain motivation. According to SDT, motivation lies along a continuum from amotivation, through increasingly internalized forms of extrinsic motivation, to intrinsic motivation, and it is supported when the environment satisfies three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Research in work organizations shows that need satisfaction is associated with more autonomous motivation, higher-quality performance, and greater well-being (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Mandated training complicates this picture because it removes the choice to participate, a condition SDT would expect to thwart autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Training is also moving online (Belur & Bentall, 2024), where the interaction that supports relatedness can be scarce (Salikhova et al., 2020). Experience may matter as well: veteran officers bring an extensive library of cases to

training, and years of mandated courses may shape how they respond to new ones (Kolodner et al., 2004; Stewart, 2021).

One design response is to situate learning in authentic contexts through case-based instruction (CBI), in which learners work through scenarios representative of the problems practitioners face (Jonassen, 2010; Kolodner et al., 2004). Proponents argue that well-designed cases can foster engagement and motivation by making content relevant, connecting learners to the experiences of others, and building confidence (Hirumi et al., 2012). Little is known, however, about which needs underlie officers' intrinsic motivation in online, case-based training, or whether those relationships differ for novice and veteran officers. In this study we asked two questions:

RQ1. In an online, case-based training experience, to what extent do perceived autonomy, relatedness, and competence predict law enforcement officers' intrinsic motivation?

RQ2. Do officers' years of experience moderate the relationships between perceived autonomy, relatedness, and competence and intrinsic motivation?

We treat intrinsic motivation as an evaluation outcome as well as a psychological state. In Kirkpatrick's terms, learners' interest and enjoyment sit at the reaction level (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016), but this reaction has well-documented links to learning and transfer (Colquitt et al., 2000; Gegenfurtner, 2011). Understanding what drives it gives designers and evaluators of mandated training an actionable diagnostic.

Review of the Literature

Mandated Training as a Performance Intervention

From a human performance technology perspective, training is one intervention among many and is warranted when a performance gap stems from a lack of knowledge or skill.

Mandated training is often prescribed by statute or policy rather than by front-end analysis, so learners may arrive without a felt need for the content. Gilbert's (1978) behavior engineering model distinguishes environmental supports (information, resources, and incentives) from individual repertoires (knowledge, capacity, and motives). Motivation therefore appears on both sides of the model: organizations cannot install motives directly, but they shape the conditions under which motives operate. SDT specifies what those conditions are.

The transfer literature makes the stakes clear. Baldwin and Ford's (1988) model positions trainee characteristics, including motivation, alongside training design and the work environment as inputs to transfer. Meta-analytic evidence supports this view: training motivation predicts learning outcomes beyond cognitive ability (Colquitt et al., 2000), and motivational variables are positively related to transfer across professional training contexts (Blume et al., 2010; Gegenfurtner, 2011). Designing mandated training so that it sustains motivation is therefore a performance concern, not only a matter of learner satisfaction.

Law Enforcement Training and Tenure

Law enforcement training supports effective policing, policy change, and officer safety (Honess, 2020). Historically delivered in classrooms with real-time expert support, it is increasingly delivered online because of budgetary constraints, a shift accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when many police organizations moved training online almost overnight (Belur & Bentall, 2024). The demands of the job also matter. High work-related stress places officers at greater risk of burnout and lower well-being (Basińska & Dåderman, 2019), and burnout is associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (Gong et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2020). Rehman et al. (2020) further found that learning motivation mediated the relationship between burnout and psychological well-

being, and a recent meta-analysis linked officers' need satisfaction to their job satisfaction (Abner et al., 2024).

Tenure has rarely been examined as a boundary condition in SDT research, and there are reasons to expect it to function as one. Expertise develops through accumulated experience (Jonassen, 2010), and experienced officers bring an extensive case library to training (Kolodner et al., 2004). Authentic cases may therefore feel less novel to veterans and offer smaller gains in perceived competence; the same cases may also feel more personally relevant, strengthening perceived autonomy. Repeated exposure to mandated training may, in turn, foster cynicism that weakens the link between need satisfaction and interest. Officers' engagement and burnout also differ by role and career stage (Stewart, 2021). Meta-analytic work shows that satisfaction of the three needs is consistently associated with autonomous forms of motivation (Howard et al., 2021; Vasconcellos et al., 2020), but whether the strength of these associations varies with experience is unknown. Because the plausible mechanisms point in different directions, we examined tenure as a moderator without a directional prediction.

Online and Case-Based Approaches

Online training reduces constraints such as inconvenient scheduling and budgetary limits (Kidd, 2010; Li & Moore, 2018), but it can also increase feelings of separation and reduce the interaction that supports relatedness (Kentnor, 2015; Salikhova et al., 2020). Recent reviews identify motivation, interaction, and collaboration as key factors shaping online learning engagement and find SDT among the most frequently used frameworks for studying it (Hu & Xiao, 2025; Pan, 2023). Officers describe much mandatory training as uninteresting and of limited relevance (Honess, 2020), and online courses frequently rely on "talking head" lecture

video that underuses video's capacity for narrative and demonstration (Hustad et al., 2019). In response, designers have explored case-based approaches.

Case-based reasoning (CBR) frames cases as interpreted versions of an individual's experiences; as experience accumulates, learners build a well-indexed case library to draw upon when encountering new situations (Kolodner et al., 2004). Applied to instruction, cases situate learning and can catalyze affective outcomes, including learner interest, because stories show how knowledge is used in real settings (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002; Suliman et al., 2019). Compared with lecture-based approaches, CBI can positively affect intrinsic motivation (Gaffney & Kercsmar, 2016; Raza et al., 2020).

Self-Determination Theory

SDT explains intrinsic motivation in terms of how learners experience their environment relative to the basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Autonomy is "a sense of initiative and ownership in one's actions" (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 2); relatedness is "a sense of belonging and connection" (p. 2); and competence "concerns feelings of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow" (p. 2). As learners move toward intrinsic motivation, they internalize the value of the material, a process promoted by satisfying these needs. A substantial body of research shows that need satisfaction predicts positive affective outcomes, including higher-quality motivation and well-being (Martin et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of SDT-based interventions further indicates that deliberately designing learning environments to support the three needs reliably strengthens learners' perceived autonomy and competence, with more modest effects on intrinsic motivation (Wang et al., 2024).

SDT, Mandated Training, and Law Enforcement

Because law enforcement training is assigned to meet mandates, it constitutes a controlling condition that conflicts with the need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Studies of other professions with mandated continuing professional development illustrate the tension. Tjin A Tsoi et al. (2016) found that relative autonomous motivation was positively associated with pharmacists' participation in continuing education, although the training environment did not appear to stimulate intrinsic motivation. Yang (2021) found that competence was a major factor in teachers' engagement in professional development. Within law enforcement, Honess (2020) reported that most officers were dissatisfied with current training and not intrinsically motivated to undertake it. Gong et al. (2021) found that officers with stronger psychological empowerment, including self-determination and competence, reported lower burnout, and Gillet et al. (2013) found that officers' perceptions of organizational and supervisor support were associated with more self-determined work motivation, which in turn predicted engagement, including during a training session. A systematic review confirms growing interest in SDT within military and police organizations (Loverre et al., 2025), yet a recent scoping review of police education and training concludes that the field remains under-researched and identifies the design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction as key blind spots (Frade & Walsh, 2026). We address one of those blind spots by testing whether need satisfaction predicts intrinsic motivation in online, case-based training and whether tenure moderates that relationship.

Method

We used a predictive correlational design, which is appropriate when examining whether a set of predictor variables predicts a criterion variable and permits the inclusion of a moderator (Gall et al., 2015; Warner, 2012).

Participants and Setting

Participants were sworn law enforcement officers from agencies across the United States whose departments subscribed to an online training program offered through a national training organization. The courses examined were part of a 40-hour, scenario-based training program available as an optional add-on for agencies using the organization's learning management system (LMS). The program consisted of 15 online courses on a range of law enforcement topics, all developed with a consistent story-based, case-based instructional design framework aligned with story-centered approaches to online course design (Hirumi et al., 2012).

During the data collection period, 890 eligible course completions occurred across the 15 courses. After completing an eligible course, officers were invited to complete a voluntary survey about their learning experience, and 100 did so, a response rate of 11.2% of eligible completions. Because participation was voluntary, the study used a convenience sample. Because the survey was anonymous, we could not determine whether any officer responded after more than one course. Repeat responses were possible.

The final sample exceeded Green's (1991) recommendation of at least 50 participants plus eight per predictor for testing the overall model (74 participants for three predictors). It fell short, however, of Green's recommendation for testing individual predictors (104 plus the number of predictors) and of the 106 participants the overall-model rule implies for the seven-predictor moderation model. A sensitivity power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $N = 100$) indicated that the Step 2 test of the three interaction terms could detect effects of $f^2 \geq .11$; the moderation test was therefore powered only for small-to-medium or larger interaction effects.

Course Design

The 15 courses were self-paced and designed to satisfy continuing education and state training requirements. Although topics and required instructional hours varied, the instructional design was consistent across courses: each was delivered as a single online learning experience built on the same case-based framework.

Each course incorporated authentic, scenario-based cases drawn from the subject matter expert's (SME's) professional experience to contextualize concepts and demonstrate their practical application. Where appropriate, real photographs from actual incidents were incorporated to enhance authenticity. Learning objectives followed a logical progression, and embedded knowledge checks reinforced comprehension before learners moved on. At the end of each course, participants completed the required assessment to receive training credit. Courses were authored in Adobe Captivate, met accessibility (ADA) standards, and were delivered through the organization's LMS; learners completed them asynchronously and could pause and resume using the platform's bookmarking feature.

The design was intended to support the three basic needs. Learner-controlled pacing and bookmarking were intended to support autonomy; the sequencing of objectives, embedded knowledge checks with feedback, and the end-of-course assessment were intended to support competence; and authentic cases presented by an experienced officer were intended to support relatedness by connecting learners to the experiences of a peer in their profession. Because the courses included no peer or instructor interaction, support for relatedness was indirect, and control over pacing offers only limited autonomy within mandated training.

Instrumentation

The survey included five demographic questions and 31 items measuring autonomy, relatedness, competence, and intrinsic motivation. We selected the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS) and the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) because both are grounded in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

Basic psychological needs. We measured need satisfaction with the 24-item BPNSFS (Chen et al., 2015; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020), which contains four satisfaction and four frustration items for each need. We adapted items to refer to the training course For example , "During this course, I felt a sense of choice and freedom in the things I undertook". Items were rated from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*). Frustration items were reverse scored and averaged with satisfaction items to form a composite for each need, so that higher scores reflected greater need satisfaction. Because SDT treats need frustration as distinct from low need satisfaction (Chen et al., 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020), we return to this decision in the limitations.

Intrinsic motivation. We measured intrinsic motivation with the seven-item Interest/Enjoyment subscale of the IMI (McAuley et al., 1989; Ryan, 1982), rated from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). This subscale is the IMI's primary self-report measure of intrinsic motivation and has shown acceptable reliability and construct validity (McAuley et al., 1989).

Internal consistency in this sample was good to excellent for autonomy (α = .87), competence (α = .80), and intrinsic motivation (α = .95) but questionable for relatedness (α = .65); findings involving relatedness should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Procedures

After institutional review board approval (institution blinded for review), the survey was embedded at the end of each eligible course. Participants completed it immediately after finishing the course. Electronic informed consent was obtained before the survey, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and responding had no bearing on course credit.

Data Analysis

We used standard multiple regression to address RQ1. Because each need was also evaluated as an individual predictor, we applied a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha (.05/3 = .017) to individual predictor tests. To address RQ2, we conducted a hierarchical moderated multiple regression, entering the three needs in Step 1 and the three need × years-of-experience interaction terms in Step 2, and evaluated the change in R^2. Predictors and the moderator were mean-centered before interaction terms were computed (Cohen et al., 2003). Before the analyses, we tested the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of residuals, absence of multicollinearity, and absence of extreme outliers. No responses had missing data. Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27).

Results

Most respondents were male (n = 91) and White (n = 82, 82.0%); most were 36 to 55 years old (n = 74, 74.5%), and the largest role group was patrol officers (n = 26, 26.5%). This profile is consistent with the composition of large U.S. police departments (Wilson & Grammich, 2022). Years of experience averaged 17.71 (SD = 9.79).

Descriptive Statistics and Assumption Testing

Table 1 presents descriptive and psychometric statistics, and Table 2 presents bivariate correlations. Intrinsic motivation correlated most strongly with autonomy (r = .64, p < .01).

Subscale	Instrument	*M*	*SD*	Items	*α*
Autonomy	BPNSFS	3.57	0.82	8	.87
Relatedness	BPNSFS	3.17	0.66	8	.65
Competence	BPNSFS	4.09	0.54	8	.80
Interest/Enjoyment	IMI	4.02	1.56	7	.95
Years of experience	—	17.71	9.79	1	—

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency for Study Variables (N = 100)

Note. BPNSFS = Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (1–5 scale); IMI = Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (1–7 scale). Means reflect item-level averages.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Intrinsic motivation	—			
2. Autonomy	.64**	—		
3. Relatedness	.38**	.32**	—	
4. Competence	.33**	.60**	.31**	—

Table 2

Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 100)

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Scatterplots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values showed no discernible pattern or funneling, supporting linearity and homoscedasticity. A normal probability plot of standardized residuals approximated the diagonal, and skewness and kurtosis for all variables fell within ±2.0. Tolerance values exceeded .40 and variance inflation factors were below 2.0 (autonomy = 1.62; relatedness = 1.13; competence = 1.59). No standardized residual exceeded ±3.3, and no Mahalanobis distance exceeded the critical value ($\chi^2(3) = 16.27$, $p < .001$), so no cases were removed. The same checks on the centered moderation model revealed no violations.

Research Question 1: Prediction of Intrinsic Motivation

The model containing autonomy, relatedness, and competence significantly predicted intrinsic motivation, $R^2 = .46$, adjusted $R^2 = .44$, $F(3, 96) = 27.12$, $p < .001$. Autonomy ($\beta = .65$, p

< .001) and relatedness (β = .20, p = .014) made significant individual contributions at the Bonferroni-adjusted alpha; competence did not (β = −.11, p = .247; Table 3). Squared semipartial correlations indicated that autonomy uniquely accounted for 26.8% of the variance (sr^2 = .268), relatedness for 3.5% (sr^2 = .035), and competence for 0.8% (sr^2 = .008); the remaining explained variance was shared among the predictors. The 95% confidence intervals for the unstandardized coefficients were [0.89, 1.61] for autonomy, [0.10, 0.86] for relatedness, and [−0.86, 0.22] for competence.

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	95% CI for *B*
Autonomy	1.25	0.18	.65	6.90	< .001	[0.89, 1.61]
Relatedness	0.48	0.19	.20	2.50	.014	[0.10, 0.86]
Competence	−0.32	0.27	−.11	−1.16	.247	[−0.86, 0.22]

Table 3

Standard Multiple Regression Predicting Intrinsic Motivation (N = 100)

Note. R^2 = .46, adjusted R^2 = .44, $F(3, 96) = 27.12$, p < .001. Individual predictors were evaluated at a Bonferroni-adjusted α = .017. CI = confidence interval.

Research Question 2: Moderation by Years of Experience

Adding the three interaction terms explained an additional 1.6% of variance, a nonsignificant increment, $\Delta F(3, 93) = 0.96$, p = .42 (Table 4). None of the individual interaction terms reached significance (p values from .27 to .57).

Model	*R*	R^2	Adj. R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF	*p*
1. Basic needs	.68	.46	.44	.46	27.12	< .001
2. + Interactions	.69	.48	.44	.02	0.96	.42

Table 4

Hierarchical Moderated Multiple Regression Predicting Intrinsic Motivation

Note. Step 2 added the autonomy × years, relatedness × years, and competence × years interaction terms. Model 1 df = (3, 96); Model 2 Δdf = (3, 93).

Discussion

We examined whether the basic psychological needs predicted intrinsic motivation in online, case-based law enforcement training and whether tenure moderated those relationships. Need satisfaction explained nearly half of the variance in intrinsic motivation, with autonomy and relatedness as unique predictors, and tenure did not moderate the relationships. These findings align with SDT's claim that need satisfaction supports intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020) and suggest that the claim holds even when participation is mandated. Because we examined a single case-based program without a comparison condition, the case-based design should be understood as the context of these findings rather than a tested cause of them.

Autonomy Under Mandate

Autonomy was by far the strongest predictor, uniquely accounting for roughly a quarter of the variance in intrinsic motivation. This is notable because the training was mandated and the courses offered only modest autonomy support (control over pacing). Officers who nonetheless experienced the course as something they had chosen and endorsed were much more likely to find it interesting. When training is mandated, choice is removed at the door; our findings suggest that designers need to give some of it back inside the course. SDT research indicates that autonomy can be supported within required tasks by providing a meaningful rationale, acknowledging that the task may not be appealing, and offering choice where possible (Deci et al., 1994).

Relatedness in Self-Paced Courses

Relatedness also predicted intrinsic motivation, although its unique contribution was small and its measurement less reliable. Relatedness is often identified as a primary barrier in

online environments (Zhou et al., 2021), and because the courses included no peer or instructor interaction, officers' sense of relatedness likely reflected connection to the SME and the officers depicted in the cases, or to colleagues facing similar situations. Relatedness is not a luxury reserved for cohort-based courses: even in self-paced training, officers who felt more connected reported more interest in what they were learning. This interpretation is consistent with design-based work showing that online courses structured around SDT principles can strengthen learners' perceived competence and relatedness (Shank et al., 2025). The modest reliability of the relatedness composite (α = .65) suggests that its items may not have functioned uniformly in a self-paced context, so this finding warrants replication with stronger measurement.

Competence

Competence did not contribute uniquely. Its negative, nonsignificant weight, despite a positive zero-order correlation with intrinsic motivation (r = .33), reflects its overlap with autonomy (r = .60): once autonomy was controlled, competence added little unique variance (sr^2 = .008). Competence scores were also high and relatively homogeneous (M = 4.09, SD = 0.54), which may have restricted their association with intrinsic motivation. Experienced officers completing continuing education on familiar topics may simply feel competent regardless of course design. Competence may also operate differently across roles, but with only 26 patrol officers in the largest role group, subgroup analyses were not feasible; future studies could compare patrol officers and investigators.

Moderation by Tenure

Although prior research links career stage to differences in engagement and burnout (Stewart, 2021), tenure did not moderate the relationships between the basic needs and intrinsic motivation. We treat this result as inconclusive rather than as evidence that tenure plays no role.

The moderation test could detect only small-to-medium or larger interaction effects ($f^2 \geq .11$), whereas interaction effects in field studies are often smaller, and without a comparison condition we cannot determine whether the case-based design narrowed differences between novice and experienced officers.

Implications for Performance Improvement Practice

For practitioners who design, purchase, or evaluate mandated online training, the findings suggest four priorities.

Restore choice within the mandate. Designers can offer meaningful choices that do not compromise compliance: which case to work through first, which jurisdiction or assignment a scenario reflects, or which optional extension to complete. A brief, credible rationale that connects the content to officers' work and acknowledges that the course is required can also support autonomy (Deci et al., 1994; Gagné, 2018).

Design for relatedness, even in self-paced courses. Cases told by experienced officers appear to offer a starting point. Designers might test whether peer-contributed cases, prompts that invite learners to compare a case with their own experience, or a short follow-up debrief with a field training officer or supervisor strengthen relatedness further (Capon-Sieber et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). Supervisor involvement is also a well-established lever for transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010).

Add need satisfaction to reaction-level evaluation. Many organizations collect Level 1 satisfaction ratings that offer little guidance for redesign (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). A short set of need-satisfaction items would tell evaluators not only whether learners were engaged but why, and which design elements to revise.

Keep front-end analysis in the loop. Mandates set the minimum, but they do not diagnose the gap. Where possible, performance consultants can use front-end analysis to tailor mandated content to agencies' actual performance problems, which increases its relevance and, in SDT terms, its perceived value (Gilbert, 1978; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the response rate was 11.2%, and officers who chose to complete an optional survey may have been more engaged than nonrespondents, which could inflate means and restrict variance. Second, all measures were self-reported in a single post-course survey, raising the possibility of common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, responses were nested within 15 courses, and because the survey was anonymous, we could not account for course-level variation or rule out repeat responses from the same officer.Fourth, we combined need satisfaction and reverse-scored need frustration items into single composites, although SDT treats frustration as distinct from low satisfaction (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Fifth, we measured only the interest/enjoyment facet of intrinsic motivation and did not assess the full range of regulatory styles. Sixth, the program was offered by an organization with which the first author was previously affiliated; data were collected anonymously through the LMS, but readers should weigh this relationship. Finally, the correlational, post-only design with no comparison condition precludes causal inference.

Future research should link need satisfaction to learning, on-the-job behavior, and transfer, which would establish whether the motivational benefits documented here translate into performance. Designs comparing course versions with and without cases, or with and without added autonomy and relatedness supports, could isolate the effects of specific design features.

Larger samples would permit adequately powered moderation tests and role-based comparisons, and refined measurement of relatedness in self-paced contexts is needed.

Conclusion

Law enforcement officers are a distinctive learner population for whom training is mandated and increasingly online. In this study, satisfaction of the basic psychological needs predicted officers' intrinsic motivation in online, case-based training, with autonomy and relatedness as the strongest individual predictors, and tenure did not moderate the relationships. For performance improvement professionals, the message is practical: a mandate guarantees attendance, not engagement. Designing mandated online training to restore choice and foster connection offers a promising path toward training that officers find worth their time and that is more likely to change what they do on the job.

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[Author names, professional titles, 25–30 word biographies, and email addresses are provided on the separate coversheet to preserve blind review.]