

The Meaning and Purpose Network – MaPNet

Meaningful work

What is meaningful work and why does it matter? A guide for practitioners
Anna Lelia Sandoghdar and Catherine Bailey



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This literature review is part of a series of publications from the Meaning and Purpose Network (MaPNet) of employers and academics which was founded at King's Business School in 2020 with the aim of 'creating more ethical, inclusive and sustainable futures for organisations through partnership and knowledge sharing'.

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Meaningful work

What is meaningful work and why does it matter? A guide for practitioners

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a significant rise in interest in meaningful work. Studies have repeatedly shown that meaningful work has become one of the most sought-after job features for employees,¹ with a large proportion of individuals willing to sacrifice income and opportunities for advancement in favour of greater levels of meaningfulness.² This also applies to higher echelons in organisations, as research has found that 63% of board directors, 72% of middle managers and 69% of directors and senior managers are looking for meaningful work.³ Developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic,⁴ along with new business models that are associated with more precarious and uncertain forms of employment,⁵ provide a backdrop against which individuals are increasingly questioning the role that work plays in their lives and whether or not they find it meaningful.⁶

From the employer's perspective, there is growing pressure to ensure the employment that they provide meets the criteria for 'decent work' according to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.⁷ Allied to this, there is a body of evidence to suggest that employees who find their work meaningful are more engaged and productive than their peers, so consequently the impetus to consider how work satisfies employees' innate drive to meaning is increasing from both sides.⁸

However, for employers keen to adopt an evidence-based approach to raising levels of meaningful work, accessing and understanding relevant research findings can be a challenge, not least because of the rapidly-expanding and highly disparate literature in the field. The aim of this review is to summarise the latest thinking and evidence to meaningful work for a practitioner audience. We provide an overview of the concept and its definitions, explain the key factors that have been found to drive up levels of meaningfulness, and whether or not the evidence suggests that meaningfulness is associated with positive outcomes. We also consider how meaningfulness can be measured and evaluated in the workplace. In doing this, we draw in particular on previous reviews and syntheses of the meaningful work literature and focus on the main findings that are of relevance to practitioners in the field.

From the employer's perspective, there is growing pressure to ensure the employment that they provide meets the criteria for 'decent work'

What is meaningful work?

Meaning vs. meaningfulness

To understand meaningful work, it is first useful to be explicit about the difference between the 'meaning' of work and 'meaningful work'. The tendency to use these terms interchangeably has led to confusion in definitions and operationalisations within organisations as well as in research.⁹

The term 'meaning of' refers to what something signifies, implying a cognitive process through which an individual interprets and assigns meaning to their work.¹⁰ Deriving meaning from a situation entails forming mental representations of the world, which help people identify the relationships between different phenomena around them.¹¹ Meanings are associations that we attach to concepts, integrate into our mental frameworks and project onto the world.¹² Therefore, work can have a variety of meanings – both positive and negative – which vary depending on the individual's interactions with the world.¹³ For example, for one person, work might mean the way to fund a lavish lifestyle, to another, it might mean a vibrant social life or a stepping-stone to a new job, while for another it might mean hours of boredom doing a job they do not like. In contrast, 'meaningful' work is in general considered to be a positive experience, albeit in specific ways, as we discuss below.¹⁴

Conceptualisations of meaningful work

Research on meaningful work stems from a large variety of disciplines, ranging from management, human resource management and organisational psychology to sociology, philosophy and ethics.¹⁵ This has resulted in a fragmented field of knowledge and a lack of clear consensus that means there is no single agreed-upon definition of meaningful work.¹⁶ However, most definitions have focused on meaningful work from a psychological perspective as a subjective experience. In other words, meaningfulness is regarded not as inherent in particular types of work or occupation, but rather as a sense or a feeling that people develop in relation to their jobs at the individual level.¹⁷

A recent review showed that existing definitions can roughly be divided into four categories that emphasise different elements:¹⁸

- Definitions focusing on meaningfulness as the **positive significance and/or purpose of work**.
- Definitions that identify the **varying constituent components of meaningful work**.
- Definitions focusing on meaningfulness as the **fit between the individuals and their work**.
- Definitions focusing on meaningfulness as **finding fulfilment through work**.

Based on these categorisations, Table 1 provides an overview of a few examples of influential definitions used within the academic literature.

Table 1: Definitions of meaningful work

1. Positive significance or purpose	<p>Meaningful work is work that is experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals.¹⁹</p> <p>Meaningful work is work that is both significant and positive in valence. The positive valence of meaningful work has a eudemonic (growth- and purpose-oriented) rather than hedonic (pleasure-oriented) focus.²⁰</p> <p>Meaningful work is an individual subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of work.²¹</p> <p>Work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant.²²</p>
2. Constituent components of meaningful work	<p>Meaningful work is the subjective experience that one's work has significance, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good.²³</p> <p>Meaningful work is the discovery of existential meaning from experiencing positive emotion, finding meaning from work, and pursuing purpose or goals in the workplace.²⁴</p>
3. Fit between individuals and their work	<p>Meaningful work is an effect of the coherence between the characteristics one pursues and the characteristics he/she identifies in the work he/she does.²⁵</p>
4. Fulfilment	<p>Meaningful work is defined as aspects of one's job or work environment that facilitate the attainment of one or more dimensions of meaning.²⁶</p>

Despite the lack of consensus over the specific definition of meaningful work, there is nevertheless general agreement among many scholars that meaningfulness is:

- An assessment made by the individual in relation to their work.
- A multi-dimensional construct. In other words, it does not comprise one single element such as 'purpose' or 'significance', but several combined.²⁷
- Not specific to an individual occupation or line of work, in other words, any work can be considered meaningful if deemed to be so by the individual across all types of work and employment.
- Linked to a broader assessment made by the individual about the value of their work to others or to wider society.

Put simply, meaningfulness can be regarded as a subjective evaluation made by individuals concerning the extent to which their work is intrinsically valuable and worthwhile.²⁸ We next turn our attention to the different pathways through which such an evaluation may be made.

Pathways to meaningful work

How do individuals develop the sense that their work is meaningful? The first point to note is that researchers have argued that meaningfulness is not a continuous psychological state, but rather an evaluation of episodic experiences that people have at work that can be either meaningful or meaningless to them.²⁹ These experiences are likely to be marked with emotional responses (e.g. pride, satisfaction, or self-transcendence). Individuals then make retrospective, cognitive judgements concerning these experiences that rely on their memory of the events which, in turn, lead to an evaluation of whether the experience is or is not meaningful.³⁰ Therefore, fostering meaningful work experiences in organisations requires employees to have the chance to reflect on and integrate their experiences into their work beliefs.³¹

‘Meaningful experiences contribute to an overall belief system about whether or not one’s work has value.’³²

Multidimensional models of meaningful work describe a number of different pathways that lead to meaningful experiences and, consequently, bring about an individual’s understanding of work as meaningful.³³ What these models have in common is an emphasis on the interplay between the individual employee (the ‘self’) and those around them (the ‘other’ – which can include colleagues, line managers, the organisation as a whole or even wider society).³⁴

Figure 1 provides a simplified framework drawn from the authors’ original work which shows how the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ contribute to the overall experience of work as meaningful. Fundamentally, individuals strive to differentiate themselves from others and develop their abilities and skills (pursue agency), whilst also possessing a deep desire to connect with others, form attachments and feel united (pursue communion).

Experiences of meaningful work may differ depending on whether they are results of agency or communion. The pursuit of agency may lead to meaningful work by providing individuals with experiences of achievement and opportunities to develop one’s talents and pursue goals that help them prove their worth and competence. Agency directed towards others can lead to an increased sense of contribution, thus resulting in meaningful work.

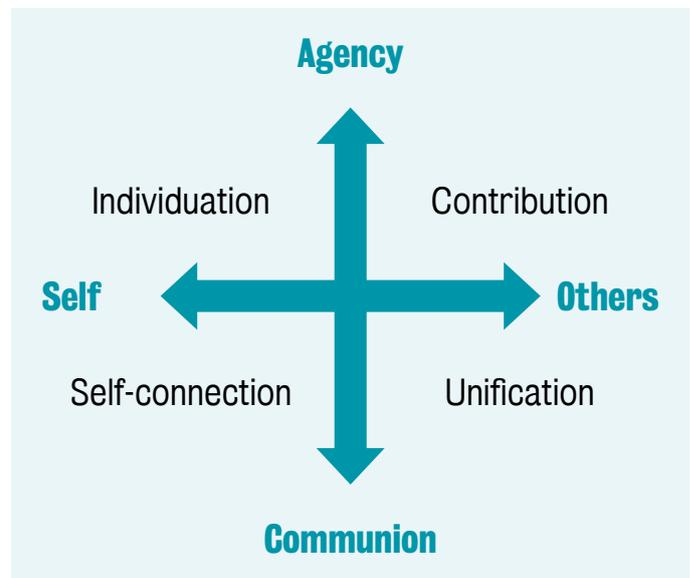
- **Pursuit of agency towards the self:** individuation, a sense that their self is valuable and worthy
- **Pursuit of agency towards others:** contribution, the feeling of serving a significant cause beyond the self and making a positive impact

In contrast, the pursuit of communion may lead to meaningful work by giving individuals a sense of belonging to a community at work or a sense of alignment with how they see themselves.

- **Pursuit of communion towards the self:** self-connection, meaningfulness that arises when certain actions bring people into closer alignment with their self-image
- **Pursuit of communion towards others:** unification, the feeling of harmony with others as a result of actions

Thus, it is important to recognise that meaningfulness stems from a range of sources and not just one – the greatest sense of meaningfulness arises from a combination of multiple sources.³⁵

Figure 1: a simplified adaptation of Rosso et al.’s (2010) theoretical framework



Fundamentally, individuals strive to differentiate themselves from others and develop their abilities and skills (pursue agency), whilst also possessing a deep desire to connect with others, form attachments and feel united (pursue communion)

Mechanisms of meaningful work

How do the four pathways lead to a sense of meaningfulness? Researchers have identified a range of psychological mechanisms via which these pathways operate.³⁶ An overview of these mechanisms is presented below.

Authenticity

Experiences of work become meaningful when an individual perceives their behaviours to be in alignment with their 'true' self.³⁷ A sense of authenticity can be a result of the degree to which individuals believe that they are behaving in line with their interests and values³⁸ and can activate certain personal identities at work that they value highly. For example, if someone regards altruism as important, having a job that enables them to behave altruistically by contributing to the welfare of other people makes it more likely for them to find their work meaningful. Moreover, when employees feel personally engaged and intrinsically motivated by their work, they may consider those activities important for developing their self-concept, or sense of who they are as a person, and in turn experience these as meaningful.³⁹

Self-efficacy

When individuals experience self-efficacy in their work, they feel as though they are competent and can control their environment.⁴⁰ Research has shown that perceiving oneself as autonomous and able to manage one's activities is meaningful, as it supports one's view of oneself as an agentic actor⁴¹ who can tackle challenges in and at work. In other words, people are strongly driven to see themselves as capable and in control, and having a job that enables people to experience this sense of self-efficacy drives up feelings of meaningfulness.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem, or the assessment of one's self-worth, can contribute to meaningful work by fulfilling individuals' desire to feel valuable and worthy through work experiences that produce feelings of accomplishment.⁴² When people receive signals from others, such as via positive feedback, that their work matters and makes a difference, this encourages a strong sense of self-worth which then raises levels of meaningfulness.

When employees feel personally engaged and intrinsically motivated by their work, they may consider those activities important for developing their self-concept, or sense of who they are as a person, and in turn experience these as meaningful

Purpose

A sense of purpose is a further mechanism underlying the construction of work as meaningful. Though the words 'purpose' and meaningfulness are often used interchangeably, the two concepts are distinct.⁴³ Several researchers have tried to define the boundaries of the two constructs, but empirical evidence is still scarce. Much of the research thus far has taken place within the 'meaning of life' literature, which has served to muddy the waters. In the meaning of life literature, purpose has been defined as a sense of directedness and intentionality in life.⁴⁴

In the domain of work, purpose is generally considered to be a future-oriented goal that is directed towards 'the world beyond the self'⁴⁵ and towards a larger system of shared values.⁴⁶ This means that the work has intrinsic value beyond the person in question – the work must serve some greater good or pro-social goal.⁴⁷ For example, though the purpose of working might be about getting a salary, people don't tend to say that their paycheck is what makes their work purposeful. Instead, people will often frame their salary as a means to an end, letting them serve something larger than the self (such as their families). In this way, work that has a purpose can raise levels of meaningfulness by enabling people to see a link between their daily work activities and their contribution to others.

Purpose may also contribute to meaningful work because of its ability to connect people's past experiences with anticipated future events or emotional states.⁴⁸ Empirical research has demonstrated that adopting a purpose that is specific to a set of circumstances and situation can enable employees to find and maintain meaningfulness during workload surges and changes in a work context.⁴⁹ Consequently, even during challenging times, a sense of purpose can help maintain a sense that one's work matters and is meaningful.

Belonging

Belongingness has been defined as the inherent desire to create and maintain 'lasting positive and significant interpersonal relationships'⁵⁰ and is a crucial mechanism in the construction of meaningful work experiences. Membership of a social group and feelings of close connection to others at work result in a shared sense of collective identity, which contributes to a sense of meaningful work.⁵¹ Having good quality interpersonal relationships also leads to a strong sense of reciprocal support, which can reinforce a sense of community and meaningfulness.⁵²

Fostering meaningful work

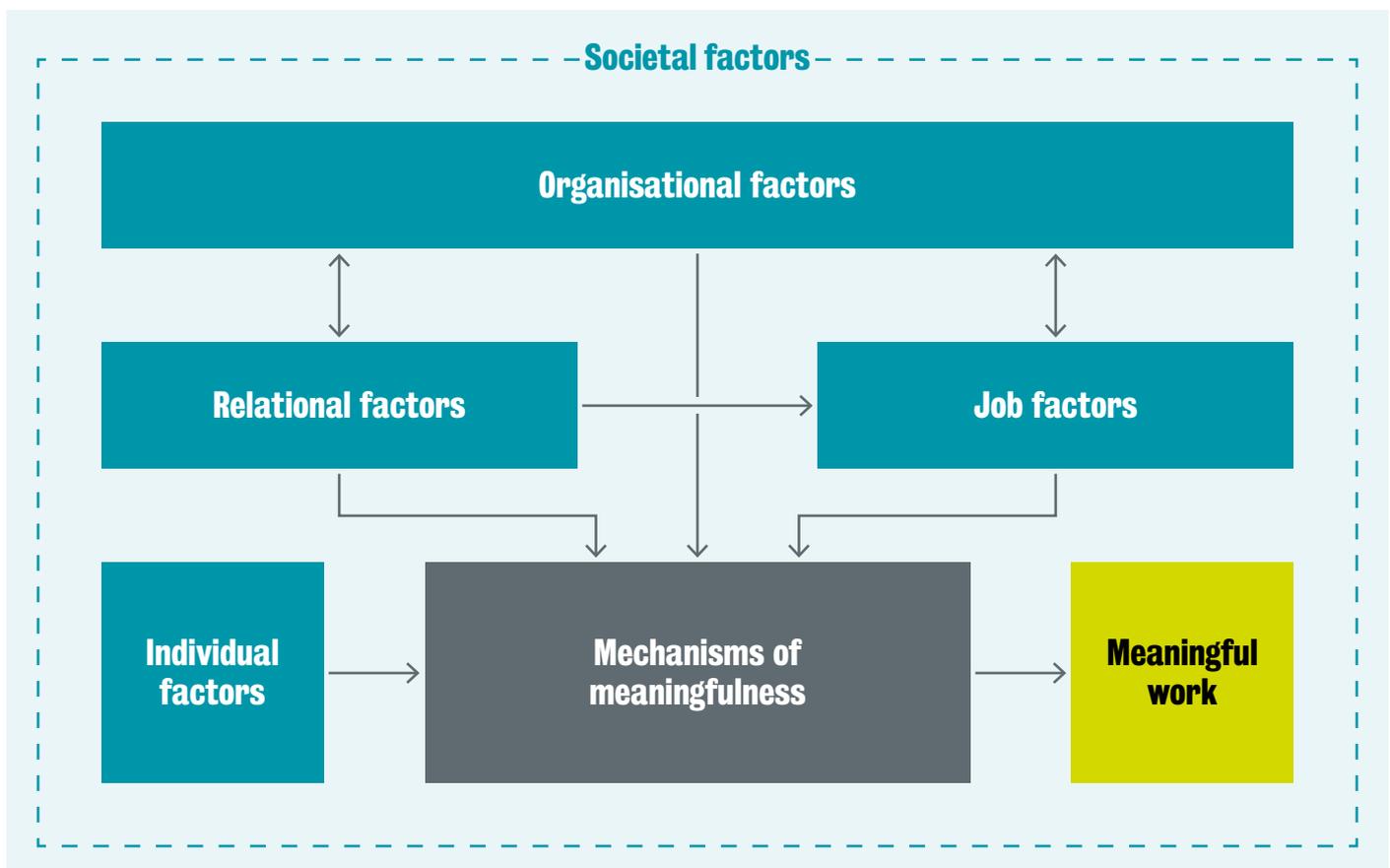
To understand how organisations may be able to foster their employees' experiences of meaningful work, it is useful to review its antecedents. Research has examined the influence of a wide range of factors on the experience of meaningfulness, including individual, job and organisational-level variables. These factors influence the mechanisms of meaningfulness, which in turn results in experiences of meaningful work (see Figure 2).

These sources of meaningfulness are interrelated across multiple levels,⁵³ however, for simplicity, the sources are presented in separate categories below. Most research has focused on the level of the job, examining how job features can enable employees to satisfy their needs for meaningfulness through their work. A much smaller body of research has examined how experiences of meaningful work are affected by social, cultural, or institutional norms regarding what work is considered valuable or worthwhile.⁵⁴

Relational factors

- **Interpersonal cues:** Interpersonal cues provided by other people at work signal crucial information about the worth of an individual's work, influencing the extent to which people experience their work as meaningful.⁵⁵ A recent qualitative study found that even ambivalent work events work can be experienced as meaningful if there are interpersonal cues signalling worth, care and psychological safety.⁵⁶ These cues might for example comprise positive feedback or respectful interactions with others.
- **Social networks:** An individual's social network at work will influence the likelihood of having opportunities that allow them to develop in the desired direction and achieve goals that they find personally meaningful.⁵⁷ The positivity of work relationships within the networks is also associated with increases in meaningful work experiences.⁵⁸ Thus, interpersonal relationships at work are important for higher levels of meaningfulness.
- **Leadership:** Studies investigating leadership have demonstrated positive associations between leadership styles, such as transformational leadership,⁵⁹ responsible leadership⁶⁰ and spiritual leadership styles⁶¹ and meaningful work. Leaders also contribute to increased experiences of meaningful work in their role as 'architects of meaning', building conceptual bridges between individuals' understanding of their work and its contribution to organisational goals and vision.⁶² On the other hand, leaders can inhibit experiences of meaningful work by mistreating employees⁶³ or disconnecting them from important social relationships.⁶⁴ Overall, research has shown that leaders play an important role in enabling employees to find their work meaningful.

Figure 2: An integrative overview of the factors that facilitate meaningful work



Job factors

Research on job-level factors has largely focused on exploring how job design features and conditions affect the meaningfulness of work. At the job level, human resource practitioners have a particularly salient role in creating working conditions that promote meaningful work for employees.

- **Job design:** Jobs with features such as skill variety, a strong sense that one's work matters, and high levels of autonomy have been found to produce a stronger sense of meaningfulness.⁶⁵ The relational aspect of jobs, meaning the extent to which a job is structured to include social interactions and opportunities to connect with others, also influences the extent to which employees find their work meaningful.⁶⁶ Providing employees with consistent opportunities to connect to the beneficiaries of their work, whether these are internal or external to the organisation, can increase people's sense of meaningfulness in their work. In contrast, jobs that result in feelings of disconnection and alienation from oneself, others or the organisation as a whole, can inhibit experiences of meaningful work.⁶⁷
- **Working conditions:** Studies have shown that the nature of the employment contract (such as being self-employed or a gig worker) and working conditions influence meaningful work experiences.⁶⁸ Job insecurity,⁶⁹ unfair compensation and heavy workload⁷⁰ are negatively associated with meaningful work. Digital gig work has also been found to inhibit individuals' experiences of meaningfulness.⁷¹



Studies have shown that the nature of the employment contract (such as being self-employed or a gig worker) and working conditions influence meaningful work experiences

Organisational factors

Organisation-specific factors that can influence meaningful work comprise organisational practices, climates, and cultures. Surprisingly, despite most meaningful work taking place in the context of organisations, research on the influence of the organisational setting is comparatively scarce.

- **Climate:** Several studies have found that particular work climates can be advantageous to fostering meaningfulness. For example, findings have demonstrated that learning-focused climates can have a positive impact on meaningful work experiences,⁷² as they provide employees with opportunities to develop themselves and express their potential. Organisations with a climate that is characterised by respect, trust, inclusivity, mutual support, cooperation and openness to criticism, have also been associated with increased meaningful work experiences.⁷³
- **Organisational Practices:** Studies have demonstrated that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices can enhance the sense that work is meaningful by providing people with an increased sense of contribution in their work.⁷⁴ CSR practices also signal to employees that their employer takes an ethical approach towards its stakeholders, which can result in feelings of pride and identification with the organisation.⁷⁵ Human resource practices also play a particularly important role, as perceptions of development and training are positively associated with meaningful work.⁷⁶ Furthermore, human resource practices that are strategically focused on raising levels of engagement will also have a positive effect on meaningful work experiences.⁷⁷ In general, the research shows that employees who find their work meaningful are also more highly engaged.
- **Organisational culture:** Research has found that organisational culture has a significant influence on meaningful work.⁷⁸ Innovative and supportive cultures fulfil employees' needs for control and belongingness, resulting in meaningfulness.⁷⁹ The relationship between organisational culture and meaningful work may be particularly strong when the elements of an ethical culture (characterised by an organisation-wide emphasis on values and integrity) are embedded within the organisation.⁸⁰

Societal factors

Looking more broadly outside the organisation itself, societal factors have been found to influence meaningful work both directly and indirectly. Society and culture can influence organisational life, the type of work individuals have access to, and also shape social discourse about meaningfulness, which can influence the type of work that individuals will perceive as significant and meaningful.

- **Decent work:** Access to decent work is a significant precursor which can influence the extent to which individuals experience meaningful work. Work is decent when individuals have working conditions that are physically and psychologically safe, time to rest and pursue non-work activities, fair compensation, access to health care and organisational values that support family and social values.⁸¹ The strong correlation between the concepts of decent and meaningful work has demonstrated that in most cases, the above-mentioned needs will need to be satisfied in order for meaningful work to be experienced.⁸²
- **Cultural norms and social discourse:** Although the search for meaningfulness itself is often considered an inherent human need,⁸³ cultural norms can determine the extent to which individuals seek this meaningfulness in the work domain. For example, depending on cultural norms, power and material success can be considered more important work features than meaningful experiences.⁸⁴ Furthermore, cultural norms also dictate what is considered to be meaningful: countries with more individualistic and capitalistic values may emphasise meaningfulness via personal achievement, whilst in more collectivist cultures individuals may find social contributions to their communities or families more important.⁸⁵ Findings also show that a sudden shift in social discourse within the same national context can result in a change in attitudes and behaviours in employees and what they consider to be worthy and meaningful.⁸⁶



Individual-level factors

Finally, though organisations have little control over individual-level factors that determine the extent to which meaningful work is experienced, it is important to offer an overview of the individual differences that have been found to influence meaningful work. This highlights the point that meaningful work is, in the end, a subjective experience that will differ depending on the individual.

- **Traits:** Out of the ‘big five’ personality traits, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness have demonstrated small to moderate correlations with meaningful work experiences.⁸⁷ Neuroticism, on the other hand, has been negatively associated with meaningful work.⁸⁸
- **Motivational profile:** Conceptual work has theorised that individual differences in the prioritisation of goals will influence the extent to which someone finds their work intrinsically motivating and meaningful. Depending on whether they are motivated by their drive for competence, relatedness, autonomy or power, employees will find different types of work and contexts meaningful.⁸⁹
- **Narratives:** Personal narratives and beliefs provide individuals with frameworks that help them make sense of their lives and establish a coherent life story, which can lead to an increased sense of meaningful work.⁹⁰ For example, research has shown that people who interpret their work as a calling have integrated their work deeply into their sense of identity and find it extremely meaningful.⁹¹ Furthermore, studies that have looked at how central work is to a person’s life compared to other domains (e.g. family, religion, leisure), demonstrate that the meaningfulness of work will depend on the weight that someone places on the importance of work⁹² compared with other areas of their life.
- **Values:** Though values are a product of social, cultural and institutional influences,⁹³ they are held at the individual level and influence what aspects of work a person may find meaningful. It has been suggested that values strongly influence the meanings that people attach to their work,⁹⁴ which consequently influences the extent to which they find their work meaningful.

Research has shown that people who interpret their work as a calling have integrated their work deeply into their sense of identity and find it extremely meaningful

Outcomes of meaningful work

A review of 71 empirical studies in the field of meaningful work demonstrated that meaningful work is related to a range of positive outcomes.⁹⁵ These outcomes are at the individual and organisational levels and include work-related attitudes and behaviours and performance. Individual outcomes include increased life satisfaction,⁹⁶ increased subjective wellbeing⁹⁷ and reduced stress.⁹⁸ Attitudinal and behavioural outcomes range from increased motivation⁹⁹ and engagement¹⁰⁰ to lower turnover intentions.¹⁰¹ Performance outcomes highlight the positive effects of meaningful work on knowledge sharing in organisations,¹⁰² organisational reputation,¹⁰³ and creativity.¹⁰⁴ More details can be found in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: An overview of the outputs of meaningful work

+ Positive association – Negative association

Individual outcomes

- + Positive evaluations of general life satisfaction¹⁰⁵
- + Subjective well-being¹⁰⁶
- + Feelings of accomplishment and personal growth, as well as experiences of happiness¹⁰⁷
- Stress¹⁰⁸
- Perceived interference between work and life¹⁰⁹

Attitudes and behaviours

- + Work motivation¹¹⁰
- + Employee engagement¹¹¹
- + Job satisfaction¹¹²
- + Affective commitment¹¹³
- + Organisational commitment¹¹⁴
- Turnover intentions¹¹⁵

Performance outcomes

- + Increased patient satisfaction in the healthcare sector¹¹⁶
- + Increased knowledge sharing¹¹⁷
- + Personal performance perceptions of employees¹¹⁸
- + Positive organisational reputation¹¹⁹
- + Creativity¹²⁰

Measures of meaningful work

Survey-based research relies on accurate questions being used to measure each construct of interest. The large number of definitions in the field of meaningful work has resulted in numerous researchers developing their own measures of meaningful work. Indeed, one study found that 28 different scales (i.e. sets of questions) measuring meaningfulness have been used within the existing literature,¹²¹ highlighting the fact that there is a lack of agreement on how to capture the subjective experience of meaningfulness¹²² and raising the question of whether those studies claiming to measure meaningfulness actually do so.

One analysis found that the majority of scales in the field measure constructs that are related to, yet distinct from meaningful work and fail to capture different dimensions of meaningful work,¹²³ which is disappointing. After comparing the various scales, the researchers recommended two that are currently in use. The two scales define meaningful work differently (see Steger et al. (2012) and Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) in Table 1), which has resulted in the scales capturing different aspects of meaningful work and therefore being suitable for different purposes.

The first, known as the Work as Meaning Scale (WAMI),¹²⁴ captures the experience of significance in meaningful work and should be used when trying to examine the relationship between the experience of meaningful work and a range of antecedents or outcomes. This can be helpful for practitioners who are trying to understand how meaningful work drives certain behaviours and attitudes in the organisation. The scale includes subscales which capture three separate dimensions of meaningfulness:

- **Positive meaning:** to capture the sense that people judge their work to matter and be meaningful.
- **Meaning-making through work:** capturing the broader life context of people's work.
- **Greater good motivation:** reflecting commonly held ideas that work is most meaningful if it has a broader impact on others.

The Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS)¹²⁵ investigates the fit between the individual and work features or experienced fulfilment of dimensions.¹²⁶ Therefore, this scale is useful for practitioners and researchers who are trying to understand the link between organisational practices and activities and meaningful work for employees. This contains seven subscales, four of which align with the four dimensions of meaningful work, as well as three additional ones:

- **Serving others:** to measure the extent to which employees feel they are serving the greater good.
- **Expressing full potential:** to capture meaningfulness from expressing talents, creativity and having a sense of achievement.
- **Unity with others:** to measure a sense of belonging.
- **Developing and becoming self:** capturing the extent to which the person feels they are who they want to be and developing into the desired direction.
- **Inspiration:** measuring the extent of hope, ideals and inspiration.
- **Reality:** capturing the extent to which someone is grounded in reality.
- **Balancing tensions:** capturing how an individual can balance the inherent tensions between the dimensions above.

Unlike proprietary measures used by consultancy firms, scales published in the academic literature are normally freely available for non-commercial use. This can be very helpful for smaller organisations who want to put together their own in-house staff survey.



The downside of meaningful work

With the plethora of positive associated outcomes that are listed above, it is perhaps tempting to view meaningfulness as a universally desirable attribute. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* went so far as to claim ‘meaningful work only has upsides.’¹²⁷ However, it is also important to bear in mind that meaningful work also has its downsides.

First, although meaningful work is primarily defined as a positive phenomenon, meaningful work experiences are not exclusively associated with positive emotions.¹²⁸ Studies have demonstrated that meaningful work can result in uncomfortable feelings and emotions,¹²⁹ for example, work can be simultaneously difficult, challenging or upsetting as well as meaningful. Meaningful work can also entail significant personal sacrifices¹³⁰ if people find their work so meaningful that they set aside other aspects of their lives to devote themselves to work.

A study of volunteers working in a German refugee shelter during the 2015 refugee surge showed that volunteers experienced exceptional levels of meaningfulness whilst the initial public debate around the welcoming of refugees was positive.¹³¹ However, when the debate started to shift in the opposite direction, volunteers started to experience their work as meaningless. In attempts to maintain a sense of meaningfulness, the volunteers started to reframe their work in dysfunctional ways that led to negative outcomes. Reframing refugees as ‘traumatised victims’ who needed their help sustained a sense of meaningfulness in volunteers but prevented refugees from being able to move out of their role as passive victims. It also significantly increased volunteers’ experiences of stress and burnout. Moreover, some volunteers started to display ‘us and them’ mentalities, engaging in condescending and paternalistic behaviours towards refugees, by justifying their work to be about ‘upholding national values’.

The case study above is a prime example of the delicate boundaries that need to be considered when ‘managing meaning’. From an ethical perspective, managing working conditions for meaningful work in organisations also raises questions about the intentions and responsibilities of employers. Organisations may justify manipulative and immoral behaviours in the name of meaningful work.¹³² The use of rhetoric around service to ‘higher causes’ can mislead employees about the nature of their work as well as the social value of the organisation, hiding a quest for profit maximisation.¹³³

The cult-like behaviours from co-founder and former CEO Adam Neumann at the global co-working space WeWork is an extreme example. Neumann regularly communicated his delusions about the power of the company, claiming that the firm’s influence on the earth would be so big that they would ‘solve the problem of children without parents’ and reduce world hunger. At the peak of the company’s financial success, employees were getting company logo tattoos, engaging in worship-like behaviours towards their charismatic leader, and were being encouraged to make WeWork their life by living with colleagues and finding a spouse within the company.¹³⁴ Shaping and influencing employees’ sense of self and identity by reinforcing strong organisational values and narratives has been considered by some to be the ‘colonisation of the individual’s consciousness’,¹³⁵ thus straying into territory that is highly personal.

Furthermore, active and overt efforts to manage the meaningfulness of work can have counterproductive effects when perceived as inauthentic by employees.¹³⁶ With this in mind, organisations should therefore reflect on the intentions behind their aim of fostering meaningful work and set out to provide an organisational environment where employees are not prescribed meaningfulness but, instead, have the opportunity to connect to and pursue their own personal sense of meaningfulness in their work. By doing so, employees will perceive the organisation’s efforts as authentic rather than manipulative

Conclusion

The review of the academic literature highlights the complex, multifaceted and disjointed nature of the field of meaningful work. We aimed to provide a holistic overview of the research evidence to enable practitioners to make informed decisions about how to foster meaningful work in their organisations. By taking into account the intricate inter-relationships between factors at the social, organisational, relational, job and individual levels, practitioners can form a nuanced understanding of positive outcomes related to meaningful work, whilst also considering what ethical limits they should set themselves.

As a large body of literature has focused on examining the role of individual needs and job factors that influence meaningful work experiences, research in the coming years should focus on expanding knowledge of the influences of social and organisational contexts. Moreover, with the rapid development of technology and its impact on the future of our work, more research is needed on new forms of employment that take place in non-traditional work contexts. The advancement of the field, both in academia and practice, will require organisations and academics to collaborate and engage in knowledge-sharing more than ever before.

From an ethical perspective, managing working conditions for meaningful work in organisations also raises questions about the intentions and responsibilities of employers

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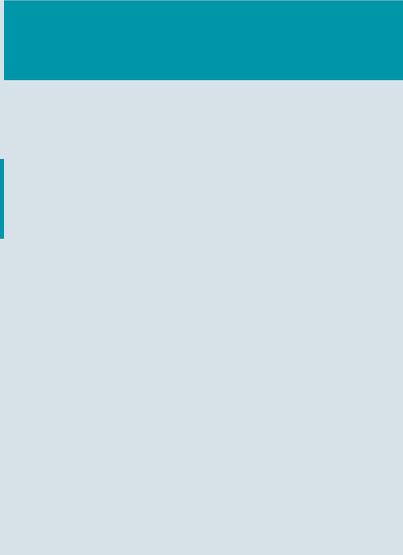
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